

The Front Page

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Reviewing the Year in Books

by Jesse Monteagudo

Since I began reviewing gay books eight years ago, I have made an annual "Book of the Year" selection. To qualify, a book must be well-written, of outstanding importance, and deal with lesbians or gay males in a positive manner. For the record, here are the Books of the Year for 1978-1985:

1978 *Dancer from the Dance*, by Andrew Holleran.

1979 *Now the Volcano: An Anthology of Latin American Gay Literature*, edited by Winston Leyland

1980 *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, by John Boswell

1981 *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, by Vito Russo

1982 *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, by Evelyn Torton Beck and *Faultline*, by Shiela Ortiz Taylor

1983 *A Boy's Own Story*, by Edmund White

In 1984, I decided instead to honor a writer who dominated the gay male literary scene with the quality and variety of his books. John Preston was the Author of the Year, in particular for *I Once Had A Master And Other Tales of Erotic Love*, and *Sweet Dreams* (the first in a series called "The Mission of Alex Kane").

Looking back over the list of books published in the last 12 months, one finds a remarkable literary output in 1985.

Surprisingly enough, the AIDS epidemic did not affect gay writing as much as one would have expected, except indirectly by encouraging an increase in erotic fiction. Two of last year's better gay male novels dealt with AIDS to a large extent: *The World Can Break Your Heart* by Daniel Curzon (Knights Press) and *Facing It: A Novel of AIDS* by Paul Reed (Gay Sunshine Press).

Curzon's novel is the fictional autobiography of Benjamin Vance, whose life is a constant struggle against diverse odds. As a boy, Benjy had to deal with his parents and with the Catholic Church; as a youth Ben is forced into an unhappy marriage; as a gay man Benjamin has to deal with a failed career and with the onslaught of AIDS. His is a bitter world without faith, hope or love, and suicide is never far from his thoughts.

The narrative is broken with imaginary letters Ben sent to people in his past, which provide a running commentary on the plot. At the end, having lost everything, Benjamin realizes that writing his book has provided the saving grace in his life. Daniel Curzon is



incapable of writing a bad book, and *The World Can Break Your Heart* is an excellent one.

Facing It was the first novel to treat AIDS with taste and understanding. It is the story of Andy Stone, a young man whose bout with the disease greatly affects his life and those around him, including his faithful lover, estranged parents and heterosexual doctor. Combining an interesting story with factual information, *Facing It* is the perfect AIDS book for those who find medical books boring. It is recommended.

There were several non-fiction treatments, some good, some opportunistic, and all immediately outdated: the best of these, *A Strange Virus of Unknown Origin* by Dr. Jacques Leibowitz (Aries Press) is the story of the French physician's discovery of the LAV (HTLV-III) virus.

Fiction reigned during the past year, as if authors were seeking to escape from a harsh reality. Among the year's best novels were *The Blue Star* by Robert Ferro (Dutton), *The Swashbuckler* by Lee Lynch (Naiad Press), *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows* by Paula Gunn Allen (Spinsters, Ink), *Dancer Dawkins and The California Kid* by Willyce

Kim (Alyson, reviewed in TFP, September 24, 1985) and *The Beat* by Simon Payne (Gay Men's Press).

Having written one masterpiece (*The Family of Max Desir*), Robert Ferro went on to write another in *The Blue Star*, which offers an exciting plot, believable characters and a marvelous use of the English language. The main thread of the story involves Peter and Chase, two gay men who meet in a Florentine pensione and become friends. Peter (the narrator) falls in love with a humpy Italian who (alas) goes on to marry and raise a family. Chase, the scion of a old American family, is induced to marry (for money) the daughter of an even older Italian family in order to keep it from becoming extinct.

The second thread involves Chases's great grandfather, a Masonic Grand Master, who in the 1850's hired famed architect Frederick Law Olmstead to secretly build a masonic temple underneath New York City's Central Park. Ferro deliberately keeps the two threads apart until the end of the book where he weaves them together in a way which seems incredible at first but, in hindsight, appears perfectly natural.

The Swashbuckler, by Lee Lynch, deserves

a high place in Naiad's catalog of lesbian fiction, just below *Faultline* and alongside *Daughters of a Coral Dawn*. Inspired by Ann Bannon's classic novels of a quarter-century ago, *The Swashbuckler* does an excellent job in recreating a way of life that is now all but dead. The lesbian colonies of early sixties New York live again in these pages. The women who populate this book, whether black, white, Puerto Rican, butch or femme, are true to life. Several chapters are especially memorable; the description of Provincetown in Chapter 2 is one of the best I've read anywhere, while Chapter 10 has one of the best-written pieces of lesbian erotica. All in all, *The Swashbuckler* is Lee Lynch at her best, which is saying a lot.

In *The Woman Who Owned The Shadows*, Paula Allen deals in fictional form with those themes which form the basis of her poetry and essays. Ephanie Atencio is a Pueblo Indian whose struggle to find fulfillment results in disappointment and tragedy. Not finding what she was looking for in the outside world, Ephanie finds it by looking within — and back of the traditions and legends which Native American women have transmitted to their daughters for eons. American tribal culture was more feminist than ours, as shown by the score of women — identified Indian legends Allen uses throughout her book.

The Beat, an amazing first novel by an Australian author, deals with the mysterious death of a queer basher who we find out was murdered by six gay men who've had enough. Payne looks into the lives and minds of each of the men and tries to determine what drove them to do what they did. A vivid tale of gays fighting back, *The Beat* is also a good introduction to gay life Down Under.

Although not one of the better novels of 1985, *Clenched Fists, Burning Crosses — A Novel of Resistance* (Crossing Press) is at least of local interest. The author is Chris South, a writer who lives in Durham. It is the story of Jessie, a Southern lesbian who ekes out a living as a feminist printer and who is the sole witness to the murder, by several Ku Klux Klansmen, of an anti-Klan activist. In order to keep Jesse quiet, the Klan subjects her to harassment, vandalism and rape.

While the story is forceful enough, it is marred by South's valuing, rather vehemently, "political correctness" over good writing. Needless to say, the male characters are one dimensional. South does better with her women — whether besieged lesbian or

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