

# Best Selling Books

## January 1995

### Women's Books

1. [1] **The Case of the Good-For-Nothing Girlfriend**, by Mabel Maney (Cleis Press, trade paperback, \$10.95). Nancy Clue and Cherry Aimless, R.N. set out to clear housekeeper Hannah Gruel of murder charges
2. [2] **Painted Moon**, by Karin Kallmaker (Naiad Press, trade paperback, \$9.95). An architect and a famous artist find love in a snowbound cabin
3. [5] **Hollywood Lesbians**, by Boze Hadleigh (Barricade Books, clothbound, \$21.95). Interviews with Moorehead, Stanwyck, and more
4. [9] **The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories**, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (Penguin, trade paperback, \$13.95). Great brief fiction by and for Lesbians
5. [8] **Murder at Monticello**, by Rita Mae Brown (Bantam, clothbound, \$19.95). Troubles begin when Harry and her pets look into a 200-year-old murder
6. [3] **Body Guard**, by Claire McNab (Naiad Press, trade paperback, \$9.95). The sixth mystery for Australian sleuth Carol Ashton
7. [-] **The Case of the Not-So-Nice Nurse**, by Mabel Maney (Cleis Press, trade paperback, \$9.95). Nancy Clue shoots her father, battles evil priests, and meets Nurse Cherry Aimless
8. [-] **Edith Ann: My Life So Far**, by Edith Ann as told to Jane Wagner (Hyperion, clothbound, \$15.95). Reflections on the nature of life as seen by Lily Tomlin's much-loved character
9. [4] **Serving in Silence**, by Margarethe Cammermeyer (Viking, clothbound, \$22.95). The basis for the TV movie produced by Babs.
10. [-] **Sister & Brother**, ed. by Joan Nestle and John Preston (HarperCollins, clothbound, \$22). Gay men and Lesbians write about the dynamics of their interrelationships

### Men's Books

1. [1] **The Unofficial Gay Manual**, by Kevin DiLallo and Jack Krumholtz (Doubleday, trade paperback, \$12.50). How to be a stereotype on \$100,000 a year
2. [2] **B-Boy Blues**, by James Earl Hardy (Alyson, trade paperback, \$9.95). "Girlfriendz" in the hood
3. [5] **Out in America**, by Michael Goff and the staff of *Out* magazine (Viking Studio Books, clothbound, \$34.95). A day "in the Life" of America
4. [3] **Men on Men 5**, ed. by David Bergman (Plume, trade paperback, \$11.95) New short fiction by and for Gay men
5. [7] **Glamourpuss**, by Christian McLaughlin (Dutton, clothbound, \$19.95). The adventures of a semi-closeted soap star
6. [6] **What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality**, by Daniel Helminiak (AlamoSquare, trade paperback, \$9.95). Examining Scripture vis à vis Gay lives
7. [10] **The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories**, ed. by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell (Penguin, trade paperback, \$13.95). The editors' somewhat narrow-minded notion of what's best in Gay fiction
8. [4] **The Folding Star**, by Alan Hollinghurst (Pantheon, clothbound, \$24). A love story after James and Mann
9. [-] **The Gay Guy's Guide to Life**, by Ken Hanes (Fireside, trade paperback, \$6.95) Tips for getting through it without going mad
10. [-] **Gay Soul**, ed. by Mark Thompson (HarperCollins, clothbound, \$22) Famous Gay men tackle the issue of spirituality

Numbers in [brackets] indicate last month's ranking. A dash (-) means the book was not included in last month's list.

This month's best sellers list reflects the best-selling books at the following stores: Lambda Rising (Washington, D.C./Baltimore/Rehoboth Beach, Del.), Lammas Women's Books and More (D.C./Baltimore), A Different Light (New York/San Francisco/West Hollywood), Glad Day Bookshop (Boston), New Words (Cambridge, Mass.), Giovanni's Room (Philadelphia), Sisterhood Bookstore (Los Angeles), Outwrite Bookstore and Coffeehouse (Atlanta), Charis Books (Atlanta), Crossroads Market (Dallas and Houston), Liberty Books (Austin, Tx.), Common Language (Ann Arbor, Mich.), People Like Us (Chicago), Unabridged Books (Chicago), Our World, Too (St. Louis), Faubourg Marigny Bookstore (New Orleans), and White Rabbit Books (Raleigh and Greensboro, N.C.).

—Trey Graham

# The Wide World of Randall Kenan

By Richard Morrison

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Too often American authors are defined by the positions of place, race, sexuality. As a result, they sometimes unwittingly inherit the mantle of representing an entire sector of the population.

So what to make of Randall Kenan, whose points of reference cover all those bases and who adamantly resists narrow definitions of himself or his work?

"One of my goals is *not* to become a spokesperson," Kenan says emphatically.

Born in Brooklyn but raised in the Eastern North Carolina town of Chinquapin, Kenan, currently a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of two stylistically daring and emotionally potent books. These books, the novel *A Visitation of Spirits* and a short story collection titled *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, amalgamate his experiences of growing up both black and gay in the rural and religious South.

Kenan's fiction is centered around the imaginary town of Tims Creek, North Carolina, a small farming community not unlike the one in which Kenan grew up. But his stories do more than chronicle life in a small Southern town. They explore the ways a community changes through time, and the ways its members deal with those changes.

"Someone told me once that the most important writing comes out of communities when they are shifting," Kenan explains. "You look as that great burst of Jewish writing in the middle of the century, especially in the '50s and '60s when the Jewish culture was being assimilated in a way never seen before, and we got Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow. I have a feeling that's what is happening with African-American literature now."

There's no denying that Kenan's fiction speaks to the African-American experience, and sometimes the oppression of gay black men as well. (The story of Horace, a gay teenager in *A Visitation of Spirits* who destroys himself because he is unable to reconcile his sexuality with his strict religious upbringing, is tragic in the most profound sense.) But to think of it only in these terms would be reductive. The layers of events and characters in Kenan's work make it impossible to pigeonhole him as simply African-American, gay, or Southern—or even as gay, African-American and Southern.

This complexity is perhaps the key to Kenan's wide appeal as a writer. It may also explain his reluctance to wear the label of "spokesperson," a

reluctance reinforced by his experience of writing a young-adult biography on James Baldwin for the Chelsea House series, "Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians."

"It wound up being more a cautionary tale than an inspiration," Kenan says about writing the life of another gay black writer. "There's something classical about the story of how prophets become secondary or tertiary to their message and how the actual prophet can go by the wayside as he continues to deliver his message."

At 31, Kenan is considered one of the brightest and most accomplished literary stars among a new generation of American writers. He has been compared to the likes of William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Kenan started out with very different aspirations. "The environment I came up in was a place of farmers and people who worked on [military] bases," he says. "Of course we had books, but you didn't think about people who made them or how they came about. It was all very mysterious. The possibility of actually making a living as a writer just didn't come up."

It wasn't until Kenan came to UNC-Chapel Hill as a student and met writing professor Max Steele that he began to think about his writing as something more than a hobby. "I had intended to be a physics major," he recalls, "but as a sophomore I took my first writing class with Max and he sort of challenged me. I was going to write science fiction. I wanted to be a real Arthur C. Clarke or Isaac Asimov, the first black scientist inventor who also writes science fiction."

"But Max and I, we sort of tussled, and he got my head on straight, or straighter"

After graduating from UNC, Kenan moved to New York City and began working in publishing. "I started as an office boy in waiting," he laughs, "like an in-house temp. I'd go to work in publicity at Random House, then be a receptionist for Pantheon...then I became a receptionist at Knopf, and a few years after that I was allowed to start buying books."

While working as an editor at Knopf, Kenan somehow managed to write *A Visitation of Spirits*. "I was working 100-hour weeks," he recalls, sounding amazed at his own productivity. "I was writing on subways, wherever. I worked for another year after my book was accepted by Grove, and I actually published a first novel while my first novel was being published."

The book that Kenan was editing for Knopf—while he was being edited by Grove—turned out to be Durham writer Sharlene Baker's novel,

continued on page 15



Author and North Carolina native Randall Kenan. Photo by Tim Smith.