

Gay Books for Libraries

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Contributing Writer

I did not realize that the nearby branch of the Chicago Public Library has a special collection of gay and lesbian books until one day a year or two ago when I was looking for Gertrude Stein's entertaining *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which I am embarrassed to say I had never read.

The librarian directed me to the gay book section and there was Alice — along with about 750-800 other books on gay sexuality, gay history, coming out, gay travel, gays and religion, health and AIDS issues, gay athletes, religion, gays and the military, and 200-300 novels and light fiction.

And the books get used. Some patrons use them for learning more about some subject they are interested in; others — as with me and Alice — to read a classic by a gay or lesbian author; students use it for researching class projects and term papers.

Libraries are one of the obvious places a mother would go to find information about a son who just came out to her, or a boy beginning to discover that he is gay, or a lesbian couple wanting story books to read to their children about other families with two mommies or two daddies.

Yes, the Internet exists. But search under "lesbian" or "gay teen" and see how many pages you get. And it is unselective: There is accurate information along with misinformation and repellent calumnies. Then too, a lot of fine, older material is not on the Internet at all. And books usually provide more sustained analysis and supportive documentation than the typical website.

I also learned that the library accepts book donations to supplement its collection. I decided to test this. I had an extra copy of Steven O. Murray's anthropological survey *Homosexualities*. So I took it in and presented it to Patrick Corriere, who created and curates the collection. Could it be added to the collection? But of course, said Corriere.

Since the main library downtown also had a copy, already catalogued, Corriere was able to use that catalog number, type up a label and enter the book into the computerized catalog. Within 15 minutes it was on the shelf.

Impressed, I tried another book. I asked Prof.

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Spring Book Special!

By Jesse Monteagudo
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***Secrets Of A Gay Marine Porn Star: A Memoir by Rich Merritt;* Kensington Books; 468 pages; \$15.00.**

Rich Merritt was born in 1967 in Greenville, South Carolina. In 1973, his parents enrolled him at Bob Jones Elementary School, the

educational "Fortress of Fundamentalism." Merritt finished Bob Jones Elementary and went on to Bob Jones High School and Bob Jones University but was expelled before he got his university degree. After he got a degree from Clemson University, Merritt joined the United States Marine Corps, where he rose to the rank of captain.

Unbeknownst to his superiors, Captain Merritt, by this time an active gay man, supplemented his income for a while by appearing in male adult films under the name of "Danny Orlis" (which Merritt stole from the hero of a series of Christian boys' books). In 1998, Merritt caused a sensation when he came out in a *New York Times Magazine* cover story about gay Marines. Even worse (for Merritt), *The Advocate* dug up Merritt's porn past and exposed it. Having left the Marines (with an honorable discharge), Merritt's life took a wrong turn as he descended into a tailspin of circuit parties, drugs and alcohol, only to eventually recover and begin a new career as a lawyer — and as the author of his published memoirs.

Such is the gist of *Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star*, a memoir by Rich Merritt. Of course no paragraph could adequately tell Rich Merritt's eventful life story; though Merritt does overdo it a bit by extending it to almost 500 pages. But while Merritt's *Secrets* might get ponderous towards the end, on the whole his is a captivating story. He who began as the Southern

Christian version of "the best little boy in the world" ended up as every fundie's nightmare: a gay man, who served in the U.S. military while living a life of drugs, alcohol,

turned tricks or had sex in front of a camera. That *The Advocate* made a big issue out Merritt's "youthful indiscretions" is hypocritical, since *The Advocate* owes its financial solvency to gay porn and its subsidiaries (e.g. *Men* magazine). Merritt didn't help matters much by neglecting to tell the *Times* reporter about his peccadillos. More recently, Rich Merritt, Esq. lost his job in a prestigious Atlanta law firm, not because he is gay but because he wrote a book (this one) that detailed his sordid past.

Merritt survived his Atlanta law firm experience, just as he survived every other incident in his storied past. Merritt spent the last few months promoting *Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star*, as well as maintaining his Web site (richmerritt.com). Though Rich Merritt is not everyone's idea of a role model, his is a story that's worth reading, if only to keep from making some of the mistakes that he

made. Admire him or not, Merritt can tell a good story; and *Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star* is the most interesting gay memoir that I have read since Alan Helms's *Young Man from the Provinces*. Not yet 40 years of age, Merritt still has years of experience and achievements ahead of him. Perhaps he will write about them some day.

***Out Of The Past: Gay And Lesbian History From 1869 To The Present, Revised and Updated,* by Neil Miller; Alyson Books; 678 pages; \$18.95.**

In 1976, when the first historical surveys of homosexuality appeared — *Gay American History* by Jonathan Ned Katz and *Sexual Variance In Society and History* by Vern L. Bullough — homophile

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promiscuity, prostitution and pornography. If this is not enough to give Jerry Falwell a heart attack, I don't know what is.

Lesbian and gay activists were also disappointed by Merritt's spotty past. While they were initially delighted by the revelation that a decorated captain in the United States Marine Corps was secretly a gay man, they weren't too happy when they learned that their model Marine had once

