



LOST GAY NOVELS

A Reference Guide to Fifty Works
from the First Half of the Twentieth Century

ANTHONY SLIDE

Lost Gay Novels
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from the First Half
of the Twentieth Century*

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of the Twentieth Century*

Anthony Slide

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Slide is the editor of the Scarecrow Press “Filmmakers” series and the author of more than sixty volumes on the history of popular entertainment, including *The Silent Feminists*, *The New Historical Dictionary of the American Film Industry*, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*, *Early American Cinema*, *Great Pretenders: A History of Female and Male Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, *Silent Players*, and *Gay and Lesbian Characters and Themes in Mystery Novels*. In recognition of his work on the history of popular culture, Bowling Green University awarded Dr. Slide an honorary doctorate of letters in 1990.

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Introduction

Lost Gay Novels is a reference work for students and scholars in modern gay studies or queer theory, providing a unique record of fifty English-language popular novels from the first half of the twentieth century identified as containing gay characters, gay themes, or both. Each entry provides a detailed examination of the text of the novel, together with a sampling of contemporary reviews and pertinent historical information as to the author and the work.

The emphasis is on lost gay novels, by which I mean novels that are not generally known to modern audiences. The approach of the novelist toward homosexuality may not always be a positive one; in fact, it is almost always negative, but the works are important to an understanding of contemporary attitudes toward gay men and gay society. These novels, the majority of which qualify as second-rate literature, are fascinating examples of contemporary prejudices and both their authors' and society's inhibitions. They are worthy of study in relationship to the unapologetic gay fiction of high quality by such authors as Christopher Isherwood, William Burroughs, Dennis Cooper, Armistead Maupin, and John Rechy, published in the second half of the twentieth century.

The gay protagonists are generally young and stereotypical—drugs, alcohol, and drag play a major role in the lives of many of them—and ageism is prevalent in the thinking of many of the novelists. Homosexual men past the age of thirty are seldom seen in a positive light, although Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* and Rex Stout's *Forest Fire* discuss the love of an older man for a younger one. If nothing else, so many of the novels here—Myron Brinig's *This Man Is My Brother*, Richard Hull's *The Murder of My Aunt*, Blair Niles's *Strange Brother*, and others—illustrate the basic assumption that gay characters in literature must come to a tragic end. It is very much as if an early death is the only justification for the inclusion of a gay protagonist.

Death plays an important role in many of the titles. In both Isabel Bolton's *The Christmas Tree* and Ward Thomas's *Stranger in the Land* there is a neat twist, and it is the straight man who dies at the hands of the gay hero. In Charles Jackson's *The Fall of Valor*, the bisexual protagonist wishes he might have been killed. The central gay character in André Birabeau's *Revelation* is dead throughout the novel. Their gay protagonists might not die, but presumed gay (or at least bisexual) authors Stuart Engstrand and Harlan Cozad McIntosh, illustrating that life could indeed emulate art, chose suicide to end their own lives.

Some of these novels have been rediscovered in more recent years and reprinted; some remained in print for many years until supplanted by novels with more positive (and more explicit) gay texts, while others, rightly or wrongly, have simply been forgotten. Specifically not included here are the familiar gay novels of the period, such as Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (Harcourt, Brace, 1937), Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (Random House, 1948), Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Houghton Mifflin, 1941), and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (E. P. Dutton, 1948). I have also chosen to ignore the many erotic novels of Frederic Prokosch, Carl Van Vechten's *The Blind Bow-Boy: A Cartoon for a Stained Glass Window* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), and Charles Brackett's *American Colony* (Horace Liveright, 1929). The last writer is worthy of additional study if for no other reason than as a gay man he posed as a straight (and married) Hollywood screenwriter and was a highly regarded president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Because it was published in Paris—by the Obelisk Press in 1933—and not in the United States, I have not included *The Young and Evil* by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler.

This study is limited to novels from the twentieth century, in large part because they are more accessible to a modern readership. The gay novel can, of course, be traced back to the Greek and Roman Empires, and while the genre was relatively dormant in Western civilization for more than 1,000 years, it did reappear in Victorian England. Two prominent works from this later period are *The Sins of the City; or, The Recollections of a Mary-Ann* (1881), set in London's gay underworld, and *Teleny; or, The Reverse of the Medal* (1893), the story of a love affair between two young men, sometimes attributed to Oscar Wilde. The modern gay novel may be dated from E. M. Forster's

1914 writing of *Maurice*, but because it was not published until after the author's death, it does not belong here. As Roger Austen has noted, "The main reason for the dearth of explicitly gay novels in America from the nineteenth century up to 1920 is that sexual perversion was regarded as hardly a fit subject for fiction—or, for that matter, nonfiction."¹ He might have added that it remained a subject about which most Americans were happy to remain in ignorance.

Gay authors did not exactly flourish in Europe, but they must have been aware that, unlike their American counterparts, there was a strong possibility that they might be able to find a sympathetic publisher. Robert Musil's *Young Torless*, Jean Cocteau's *Le Livre Blanc*, and Jean Genet's *Notre Dame des Fleurs* are examples of European gay novels from the period that would not find American publication. Scottish-German author John Henry Mackay published the explicit *Der Puppenjunge*, the story of a Berlin rent boy, in Germany in 1926, but it was not until 1985 that Hubert Kennedy translated it into English as *The Hustler* for distribution in the United States by Alyson Publications.

The majority of the authors represented here were probably not gay; those who were must, of necessity, remain closeted to the present, simply because it is impossible to identify them through the pseudonyms they chose to use or to determine their lifestyles through often limited contemporary reporting. Some, such as *The Night Air's* author, Harrison Dowd, one assumes to have been gay; others, including *The Gallery's* John Horne Burns and *The Fall of Valor's* Charles Jackson were identified as bisexual late in life, and a handful, including *The Welcome's* Hubert Creekmore and *The Invisible Glass's* Loren Wahl, write so well of the gay experience that one hopes they might have been gay men and that in their private lives they achieved some measure of happiness.

In identifying the fifty gay novels under discussion, I have relied upon earlier published bibliographies, on a subject index compiled many years ago by unidentified librarians at the Los Angeles Public Library, and on my own good fortune in stumbling upon a few treasured volumes, such as Compton Mackenzie's *Vestal Fire*.

Often I have followed up on leads only to be disappointed by a singular lack of gay content in a novel that appears in most gay bibliographies. What, for example, is gay about Richard Pyke's *The Lives and Deaths of Roland Greer* (Albert and Charles Boni, 1929)? The ti-

tle character is heterosexual and he has a love-hate relationship with his older brother—and that is all. If anything, Pyke is attracted to his brother's wife. Too much attention has obviously been paid by bibliographers to the novel's dust jacket and the publisher's claim that this is "the life of a spiritual hermaphrodite, where the masculine and feminine are fighting for control."

One must beware of dishonest claims by publishers. The dust jacket description of *Send Them Summer* by Hansford Martin (Harcourt, Brace, 1946) tells us that the principal character, "Banjo," is hated by the character "van Brunt" for "being normal." Yet "van Brunt," a fat, pasty-faced guy, is barely present, and is more despised by "Banjo" than the reverse.

Just as the motion picture has presented its share of "buddy" movies, such as *Wings* (1927), in which the love between two men is heterosexual, so has the publishing industry come up with its fair share of "buddy" novels. A fine example is John Kelly's *All Souls' Night* (Harcourt, Brace, 1947), in which two young men are in love with the same woman and also with each other. However, there is nothing overtly sexual in the men's relationship; they may share the same bed, but they keep their pajamas on and neither hug nor kiss.

Mainstream American publishers did not shy away from gay characters or themes, but the United States boasted no gay publishing house comparable to Britain's Fortune Press, which remained in existence from 1926 to 1970. The one U.S. publisher most associated with the gay genre from the 1930s through the 1950s is Greenberg, but the gay connection is unclear. The company was founded as Greenberg Publisher, Inc., in June 1924 by three brothers, David, Jacob, and James Greenberg. It published more than 1,000 titles, with the emphasis on nonfiction, and early made its reputation with the illustrated children's books of Tony Sarg. Among its most prominent writers were Max Eastman, Robert Graves, Betty Smith, and Deems Taylor, and among its best-sellers was *Freud: His Dreams and Sex Theories* (1949).

A gay editor must have been associated with the company, but his name is not recorded. One editor identified with some of the later gay works from Greenberg is Elliott W. McDowell (1903-1976), who came to the company in 1944 and became its editor in chief. The small amount of information accessible on his personal life gives no indication that McDowell was gay.

Ian Young notes that two lesbian novels by Anna Elizabeth Weirauch were translated for Greenberg by Whittaker Chambers, who was a prominent figure in the Alger Hiss spy scandal, and who kept his homosexuality a secret.²

Also worthy of further study is New York publishing house William Godwin, Inc., founded in 1931. One of its leading writers was Gerald Foster, responsible for such suspiciously titled novels as *Lust* (1934), *Strange Marriage* (1934), and *No Women Wanted* (1936). The first, described by its publisher as “A book for harassed men and curious women,” was reprinted by Balzac Press in 1949.

Just as so little is documented on the gay editors responsible for publication of America’s first gay novels, so is there little available on the authors of many of those novels. They hid behind pseudonyms, with their real names unrecorded in the publishing records of the Library of Congress. Yet again, another aspect of gay society and gay culture remains firmly buried in the historical closet. Thanks in large part to prescient public librarians—many of whom were probably gay—the lost gay novels have survived (if seldom on the circulating shelves), but beyond what exists on the printed page must remain only supposition.

NOTES

1. Roger Austen, *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977, p. 1.
2. Ian Young, “Some Notes on Gay Publishing,” in *The Male Homosexual in Literature: A Bibliography*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1982, p. 291.

James Barr, *Quatrefoil*

Quatrefoil (Greenberg, 1950) is a novel that obviously meant much to the gay community when it was first published, but is, in hindsight, overwritten, overwrought, and peopled with characters that seldom break through the fictional veneer. The ending is weak and depressingly conventional for a work of gay fiction. *Quatrefoil* meets all the guidelines for popular romantic fiction of the day, with a gay couple substituting for the typical hero and heroine.

It is 1946, and Ensign Phillip Froelich is en route to Seattle, where he faces a court martial. He has disobeyed his captain's orders and, in order to get various jobs accomplished on board ship, he has fraternized with the men. Froelich comes from Oklahoma, but he is not a typical native of that state—his father is head of a bank and the family owns much of the town where he grew up. The twenty-three-year-old accepts a ride from Commander Tim Danelaw, a married man ten years his senior, who is able not only to get the charges against Froelich dropped but also to persuade the young man to cancel his wedding plans. It transpires that Danelaw's is a marriage of convenience, and in San Francisco, Danelaw lures Froelich into bed. The happiness that the two men share is brief, as they are discovered by a fellow officer.

Ultimately, after a trip by both to Oklahoma, a relationship develops and is sustained. Froelich keeps his belongings at the base, but spends his nights with Danelaw at his club in Seattle. "For the first time in his entire life, he [Froelich] felt individually free" (p. 353). The happiness of the pair is momentarily stifled when Froelich receives a visit from a sailor named Stuff Manus. At sea, the two men had become friendly, despite the difference in their ranks, and Stuff had, in a clumsy fashion, attempted to sexually assault the young officer. "He felt Stuff's firm mouth on his own, the man's tongue forcing itself into him," writes Barr (p. 72) in one of the few descriptions of

physical sex in the novel. Renewing their acquaintance in Seattle, Manus again attempts to force himself on Froelich, but is again rejected. At one point, Danelaw contemplates what Froelich means in his life, commenting, "Had Phillip been of the other sex, his life would change little at this point. With its sanction, he would be tied to society a little more, but his vows would still be made." But, as with countless gay men before and since, "He was glad Phillip was what he was, for in loving him he withdrew farther from all men and saw them in greater perspective. Phillip was his last benevolent gesture, the crystallization of his nature" (p. 338).

Of course, in 1950, even in a novel authored by a gay man and aimed at a gay market gays could not find lasting happiness. Danelaw is killed in a plane crash. Froelich reads of the accident: "He had gambled with life for happiness, and miraculously enough he had won. But as he had put out his hand to receive his reward, it had vanished. Life and the game, both were a dream" (p. 372).

Froelich contemplates suicide, but perhaps because, again, this is 1950 and a gay-oriented novel, he stops, recalling the last words of Danelaw: "And now, my life is a part of ours, and your life is a part of mine. Never again shall we stand entirely alone" (p. 373). For Donald Webster Cory, writing in *The Homosexual in America*, "The note of hope on which this novel ends is perhaps its finest contribution to the literature on the subject."¹

A subplot involves the Froelich family in Oklahoma, an overbearing and unsympathetic father, and the eventual discovery that the grandfather for whom Phillip Froelich is named was also homosexual. The family ponders whether Phillip has "inherited the taint?" (p. 323).

Neither Froelich nor Danelaw is a stereotypical gay man. As both have experienced sexual relationships with women, they might well be identified as bisexual. There is nothing feminine about either man, excepting that Danelaw is an amateur painter, and Froelich, "like most men of his class . . . considered art effeminate" (p. 122). When Froelich agrees to pose in the nude for Danelaw, the author is very much overreaching the bounds of possibility; a naval officer is very unlikely to agree to such a request by another, but it does provide an opportunity for an intimate description of Froelich:

Tim watched the lithe, rippling muscles of the boy's splendid body. . . . He saw the white cups beneath the arms, the lean ribs,

the ridiculously narrow waist and hips, the smooth, down-covered columns of the legs, the high white arches of the feet, and above everything else the graceful, straining, uplifted arms that framed a relaxed sensual face. (p. 165)

The description, with its lack of comment on either the buttocks or the sexual organs, is possibly a result of the mores of the times, but it might just as well be lifted directly from the pages of a modern Harlequin romance.

When they first meet, Danelaw asks Froelich if he has anything against Oscar Wilde. By discussing Wilde, Froelich realizes he has revealed much about himself, just as the supposedly idle comment demonstrates to a modern readership how two gay men might identify themselves upon a first encounter.

Quatrefoil was reprinted by Alyson Publications in 1982, with an introduction by Samuel M. Steward, who praised it as “a wonderful treatise on how to live happily in the closet in 1950.” At this point, Alyson was unable to locate the author, but he resurfaced and wrote an epilogue for the 1991 reprint of *Quatrefoil*.

James Barr was revealed as the pseudonym of James Fugat . He had apparently worked in the oil fields, and in 1951, he published (also through Greenberg) a collection of gay short stories appropriately titled *Derricks*. James Fugat  identified the central character, Phillip Froelich, as a fraternity brother, with whom he had had a brief and unhappy affair. Phillip and the author had both independently joined the Navy, where the latter frequently encountered the Timothy Danelaw “type”; “They were often brilliantly educated, frequently married, and usually completely bewildered at having found strong tendencies of homosexuality in their personalities.”² The real Phillip was brutalized by his father, and committed suicide on his wedding day. When he was told by Fugat  that he was to be the central character in the novel, he asked only that he be made happy. In so doing, Fugat  escaped the stereotypical gay character of the period and the stereotypical gay ending that the real Phillip Froelich experienced.

NOTES

1. Donald Webster Cory, *The Homosexual in America*. New York: Greenberg, 1951, p. 297.

2. James Barr, *Quatrefoil*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991, unpaginated epilogue.

Larry Barretto, *The Great Light*

A gay man, Roswell Cleminshaw, dominates only one chapter of *The Great Light* (Farrar, Straus, 1947), but he is a pivotal figure in the life of the central character, Dirck Ericson. Just what the violent and confrontational scenes between the two actually constitute is somewhat difficult to understand or explain. Dirck is given to hallucinations, is seeking some kind of inner truth or beauty, and is never fully developed as a character. As critic “J. B.” wrote in *The New York Times* (October 19, 1947), the author assures us that Dirck is “an extraordinary and sensitive person who is seeking for absolute beauty. Unfortunately, however, he succeeds in bringing Dirck to life primarily in those scenes where his conduct is anything but saintly.”

Those far-from-saintly moments include not only the chapter with the gay man but also a deeply disturbing encounter that Dirck has in New York around midnight. Unable to sleep, he prowls the streets and meets a young man who asks him for a match. The guy may or may not be gay, but as he speaks,

the words did not issue from that sweetly curving mouth. Instead it was the mouth of Roswell Cleminshaw whose sagging lips were trying to stiffen in an attempt at self-control, and it was Cleminshaw’s effeminate face that was looking so intently at him. (p. 97)

“You God-damned fairy!” (p. 97) Dirck yells as he strikes and kills an innocent man. Dirck confesses this ugly truth to a friend, but there is no punishment for his crime, and neither the characters in the novel nor the author seem to care too much about the matter.

Dirck Ericson is a good-looking youth—a friend, admiring him in the showers, describes him as resembling “a Scandinavian God” (p. 22)—but he is abused by his father, reduced to poverty, and forced

to work in a menial occupation. With friend Archer Paine (who later becomes a novelist), Dirck enlists as an ambulance corpsman at America's entry into World War I.

One of the men in his unit is Roswell Cleminshaw:

Cleminshaw was not a man, he was an affront, and every member of the unit resented him. Somehow he seemed to reflect discredit on themselves even though he did his work a little better than well. He was a slim, pale boy with wavy blond hair, and a timid smile which faded soon after his arrival. His voice was soft, precise, unpleasantly artificial and complicated by a lisp which he could no more control than he could the involuntary gestures which he made with his hands. His shoulders were over-narrow for his frame and his hips were over-wide. In the shower the men stared at him with amusement and contempt. (p. 37)

It is Dirck, at the age of eighteen, who gives Cleminshaw the name of "Nelly," joking that if he met him on a dark night, "in the struggle my virtue might be impaired" (p. 38). However, it is Cleminshaw in action who proves his bravery, while Dirck, through no real fault of his own, appears to shun the fighting, preferring to go on K.P. and work in the kitchen. Still Cleminshaw is ridiculed by Dirck: "Well, Nelly . . . were you a brave girl at the front today?" (p. 44). When Cleminshaw accuses Dirck of cowardice, he is beaten up, but Cleminshaw has gained an inner strength: "You've beaten me up, but I've learned now there are other things worse than that" (p. 44). He has faced death, and he has a Croix de Guerre given him by a French colonel, who removed it from his own tunic, in recognition of his bravery. The hostility of the men in the corps is turned on Dirck, and the name Nelly is never again spoken.

"I truly believe that night was the turning-point in his [Dirck's] life" (p. 45), writes Archer Paine, but the turning point to what still remains obscure. Dirck wanders aimlessly through life, examining his emotional problems with psychiatrist Nevius Brooks. The latter discusses homosexuality with Dirck and his friends:

I reviewed the history of homosexuality insofar as I know it, stressing the fact that it is believed all humans are born with a bisexual nature which sometimes becomes overbalanced, and is

even evidenced by physical characteristics of the opposite sex. . . . Speaking to Dirck, I said that this condition had been accepted in ancient Greece, and was even now more than tolerated in large sections of the modern world. (pp. 109-110)

One of Dirck's friends, banker Peter Fleming, who would rather die than take a blood transfusion from a "nigger," asserts that "all men like that should be shot" (p. 110). But tolerance grows in Dirck and he becomes obsessed with the mythical Greek character Andragathus, the presumed paramour of the poet Meleager. He has visions of Andragathus; in the features of the man he killed, Dirck more and more sees an archaic Greek lover.

When America enters World War II toward the close of the novel, Dirck addresses the troops, arguing against race prejudice and intolerance. The former he defines, but intolerance is left vague. Where there might have been gay propaganda, there is none. Again, neither Dirck nor the author appear fully able to establish a philosophy. The chapter dealing with Roswell Cleminshaw argues that gay baiting is wrong and that gays are as strong and courageous as any heterosexual soldier. There is a marvelous moment when the troops return to New York in 1918. Cleminshaw suggests doubtfully that he and Dirck might shake hands. The latter agrees, but notes that he will wear his glove. " 'Don't mention it,' Cleminshaw answered sensitively. 'I've kept mine on too' " (p. 84). Yet the story is not adequately developed from that point. Thanks to Cleminshaw, gays have gained in stature and respect, but what of Dirck? Is he a closet gay? He has married and separated in the course of the novel, but he has certainly not displayed any physical interest in any of his apparently attractive male associates.

Again, contemporary critics understood the problem with *The Great Light*. In the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* (October 12, 1947), Rose Feld wrote that

Mr. Barretto has a philosophy, but it comes through somewhat vaguely. It is undefined, mainly because Dirck remains vague and unreal. He never reaches the stature of spiritual greatness indicated by his quest. Strangely enough, or perhaps because he is dealing with recognizable people, Mr. Barretto is highly successful with the secondary characters of the book, particularly