

Rarely Pure and Never Simple

Selected Essays of
Scott O'Hara



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott “Spunk” O’Hara (1961-1998) was a well-known porn star who appeared in twenty-six films between 1983 and 1992. He was editor and publisher of the sex journal STEAM (“the literate queer’s guide to sex and controversy”) from 1993-1996 and was published in numerous anthologies, magazines, and newspapers. His first book of short stories, *Do-It-Yourself Piston Polishing (for Non-Mechanics)*, was released in August 1996 by Badboy. His autobiography, *Autopornography: A Memoir of Life in the Lust Lane*, was published in 1997 by The Haworth Press, Inc. and was #14 on the “Books Bought Mainly by Men—1997 Top 100 Bestsellers” list as rated by A Different Light Bookstore. O’Hara died of AIDS-related complications in February of 1998.

Foreword

“His death was about as ‘good’ as a death can be: planned, ordered, with time for good-byes; not too much pain, no loss of mental faculties, very few of the ‘indignities’ that are associated with late-stage deaths. He was grateful for that. And the rest of us, well, we take comfort where we can find it.”

So Scott O’Hara wrote me in a letter dated April 22, 1996, about the passing of a friend.

Scott was one of the last human beings alive who preferred writing letters to talking on the phone (or enduring the irritations of e-mail). One of his many change of address postcards is still tacked to my bulletin board. “Written words welcomed,” it reads, “telephonic torture tolerated.” “If I can go an entire twenty-four hours without hearing the phone ring,” he writes in this book, “I consider that a successful day.”

Dialing his number in early February 1998 I did not expect that he would answer. In fact, my dinner was ready. I was braced for another confrontation with his hostile answering machine: a militantly inhuman voice prompt and fifteen seconds in which to leave a message.

To my surprise, Scott picked up, and we talked for half an hour. He was anxious to hear my thoughts on the manuscript he’d sent me of *Rarely Pure and Never Simple*. Being taken off guard made it easier for me to be frank. I told him I’d relished his collection of sixty short essays and poems, but wondered whether it might not be just a little too long. I had been unable to get through it during a six-hour visit to a university tearoom woefully lacking in distractions (a tearoom, incidentally, that I had discovered through *STEAM*).

After howling with laughter, Scott agreed that this was indeed a bad sign, and offered to consider making some cuts. I assured him that the essays I had read were more enjoyable than what casual sex

I did have that day. Scott said that he knew just what I meant; his own lack of interest in what most people call sex was threatening to become a personal crisis. After all, what else would anyone want to hear about from the man who built his fame on having “The Biggest Dick in San Francisco”?

We didn’t get around to discussing his health. When I mentioned that my dinner was getting cold, Scott said good night.

A week later, at 10:30 in the evening, I picked up the phone and someone said, “I’m here at San Francisco General Hospital with Scott O’Hara, who isn’t expected to make it through the night. Scott would like to say good-bye. Here he is.”

Talk about the impossibility of finding the right words. “I guess *you’ll* have to make the cuts now, Steve,” Scott laughed. “The book will sell better posthumously.” I could not laugh, and after three or four minutes of at least managing not to say anything really stupid (I hope), I became a little choked up. At which point Scott excused himself.

He died twenty-four hours later, at home in San Francisco, surrounded by friends. He threatened that if they held a memorial ceremony he would come back and haunt them.

“Writer/publisher/performer Scott ‘Spunk’ O’Hara wishes to announce that he croaked at 10:40 p.m. on Wednesday, February 18,” read the *Bay Area Reporter* obituary, which Scott wrote himself. “In lieu of flowers, he requests that you make a donation to your favorite sperm bank.”

* * *

The boy who would legally change his name to Scott O’Hara was born in Grants Pass, Oregon, on October 16, 1961. The youngest of seven children, he grew up on a thirty-eight-acre farm a few miles outside of town. His parents—John Birchers and “puritanical” Presbyterians—may be said to have been slightly eccentric. His father was obsessed with flying saucers, and sometimes barbecued road-kill. Scott and his brothers did not sleep in their bedrooms, but outdoors on the lawn. Yet the family were not exactly “white trash.” One day in his teen years a plank broke off a crate Scott had been using as a chair, revealing the contents: \$50,000 in silver and gold.

It was then that he realized he would probably not have to worry about preparing for a typical career.

After high school Scott left home, traveling—by bicycle—to San Francisco, then all over the country. He put in a year at the University of Dallas. In Chicago, he married the lesbian ex-lover of his beloved sister Claudia, who had killed herself. Throughout the 1980s he relocated to Hawaii, to Australia, to Washington state, to Southern California. But again and again he returned to the City by the Bay. It was there that he began autofellating onstage, won the title “Biggest Dick in San Francisco,” and launched his five-year career in gay porn video.

In 1989 he realized that a purple mark on his calf, which he had taken for a motorcycle exhaust pipe burn, was a Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesion. He bought forty-seven acres of land in rural Wisconsin and named it Littledick. . . .

All of which territory Scott covered in *Autopornography: A Memoir of Life in the Lust Lane*. But that book left off just when Scott’s life grew even more interesting—with the advent of the pioneering journal he published and edited for four years: *STEAM*, “The Literate Queer’s Guide to Sex and Controversy.”

STEAM was highly influential and is sorely missed. It went down with *wilde*, a glossy porn magazine Scott tried to launch—bankrupting him in the midst of protracted battles with lymphoma and an ex-lover named Larry.

It is a testament to Scott’s character that losing *STEAM* did not destroy him. On the contrary, he became more productive than ever. He appeared on stage in a play based on his experiences in porn. He authored *Autopornography*. He penned the weekly columns that grew into this book. And, most importantly to him, he wrote his own play, *Ex-Lovers*, and saw it staged at Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco.

In June 1997 he wrote me: “Words cannot express how elated I am right now. We’re talking, here, about one of my major Lifetime Goals: having a play of mine produced. The past two years have seen the realization of two others: acting professionally in a play (however minor & tawdry) and getting my first book published. Steve, I’m running out of Goals! Really, I’m not complaining; I’m

just wondering, Where do I go from here? How could life get any better?"

* * *

Scott's title for this book refers to a famous line from *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple." But I must protest that there was indeed a certain purity about Scott. And there was a beautiful simplicity in the gospel he preached: "Sex is wholesome and natural. It doesn't need to be hidden. It won't harm the children. It's not an assault. It's a declaration of membership in the human race."

This is not, however, to suggest that Scott was uncomplicated. Elsewhere in this book he tells us: "Sex is unimportant. Trivial, unnecessary, frivolous and boring."

"I'm tired of being Scott O'Hara," he complained to the *Bay Area Reporter* in the last month of his life. "I hate to rewrite history, but I wonder how much I actually enjoyed [sex]. I think I liked the idea of sex more than the actual act." He added: "I've become practically a Puritan."

That claim can be questioned.

A big-dicked porn star's ambivalence about living up to his public image is but one of the many fascinating subjects Scott expounds on in this quintessentially O'Haran work. In *Rarely Pure and Never Simple*, the most seasoned of his writings, Scott treats us to rhapsodies about the erotic potentials of impotence, leather jackets, hospital waiting rooms, and rimming sea anemones. He rails against cigarette smokers, gym queens, size queens, and "gay-for-pay" pornstars. He gives us the dirt on *Making Porn*. He shares his fantasy of being anally penetrated by the head of a bald man. And, with inimitable style, he defends promiscuity, unsafe sex, intergenerational love, and walls perforated by fist-sized holes.

Scott was never one to shy from controversy. But with his final book he managed to become even more audaciously honest. It was I who urged Scott to publish *Autopornography* with The Haworth Press, but one thing that bugged me a little about that book was the voice. Having met Scott in person, I found myself slightly puzzled by the "Hey, guys" bravado he sometimes affected in print. That wasn't the way Scott talked. His voice was conventionally mascu-

line, but there was a gentlemanly refinement and politesse to his speech. This comes across better here.

The blunt and shocking truth is that Scott O'Hara was eminently *decent*.

But I had better stop there or else he really will come back and haunt me.

Anyone who reads this book and knew this remarkable man, even from afar, is sure to smile and nod (or grimace and shake their head), and say, "That's Scott."

* * *

There is another change of address postcard tacked to my bulletin board. Adorned with an image of Scott autofellating, it includes an invitation to write the executor of his will to request a fragment of his cremated remains ("one final chance to 'do with him what you will'"). It reads: "Scott 'Spunk' O'Hara wishes to announce his final relocation. If you ever find yourself in the vicinity, do drop in for a visit."

Steven Zeeland

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Do Be Fruitful, Won't You Dear?

The appellations we've acquired never cease
to make me giggle at the miscommunication.
The ones who hurl these epithets, like spears,
clearly think of them as insults: "Fairies! Queers!"
For most of history, the fairy—in whatever guise—
was neither feared nor taunted, but respected;
and Queer's a term that certainly applies—
I wouldn't want to play a "normal" role.
But Fruit's the word that really gets me rolling.
I take it with a certain sense of irony
that many of my favorite things should be
drippy, firm and fleshy, sweet and juicy,
a solace to this sometimes-troubled soul of mine:
whether meaning pears or men, a Fruit's divine.

Sunday, December 15, 1996

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The Truth Is ...

STEAM Magazine, which I edited and published for three years, was an ivory tower for me. I told my partner when we started, “I don’t want to have anything to do with anything remotely business-like. You handle distribution and money and printing and all those other quotidian. I’ll handle making the magazine something we can be proud of.” This proved a source of tension between us over the years, as “something we can be proud of” meant very different things to us. I was talking about literary qualities; he was thinking of dollar signs. Funny, since I was the one who put up the money in the first place . . . but then, money has never been entirely “real” to me. That’s what comes of having too much of it for your own good.

After *STEAM* folded (and *Wilde*, too, which had completely drained that bottomless pit of money) I was left somewhat aimlessly casting about for something constructive to do with my talents, between writing *Autopornography* and my first play, *Ex-Lovers*. A friend suggested writing newspaper columns. Hey, sounded good to me; I’m a pretty opinionated kind of guy, so I figured I could ruffle some feathers, at least. I dashed off half a dozen and sent them out to about fifty gay papers around the country. I think I heard back from ten of them; six papers eventually printed one or more of my columns. Oh, I did some follow-up calling and badgering of editors, but the truth is, I’ve never been good at selling my work. It’s that money thing again: I don’t like even talking about it. And it’s kind of hard for me to believe that people really want to read what I have to say. Call it an inferiority complex, and don’t laugh. Even the Scott O’Haras of the world have them.

Still, there were two papers—*On the Wilde Side*, on Long Island, and *Pittsburgh’s OUT*—that ended up running columns for an entire year. At that point, *OtWS* folded, and I lost interest in being a columnist. Too many other things on my plate, and not enough marketing skills. Syndicating a column, I discovered, is a full-time

job . . . and I really didn't feel like giving a 50 percent cut to an agent.

What was more interesting, though, was the papers that declined to run them. The editors I talked to had various reasons, of course, but several of them said, "Sorry, we can't use four-letter words." I must confess, that shocked me. Can't say "dick" in a gay paper? Oh, dear. We're in trouble.

Most of these columns talked about dick. Talked about it in theory, if not in fact. Mused about why it is that we can't talk about it, and why it should be so important in our lives. These are the things that fascinate me most, these days. A nice rousing public debate over the propriety of dick-pictures in the window of a bookstore is more interesting to me, I'm afraid, than the thought of going out and sucking some real live dick. How the mighty have fallen. I do feel that I got just as much pleasure from writing these essays as I ever did from my "field research" for *STEAM*. These pieces were the kernel of this book (and a few of them were expanded into longer pieces for other purposes). Some of them will undoubtedly offend you. Tough shit. None of my writing has ever been about winning friends in high places, and I make no apologies for these essays.

A Dick by Any Other Name

One of the most frequent, and annoying, questions that I'm asked by my adoring public is, "Is Scott O'Hara your real name?" Annoying, because yes, I know what they mean by that question, but it presupposes a whole set of societal values that I don't accept. For instance: That parents have the right (or ability) to create and/or define their children. My parents gave me a name at birth; it was not Scott O'Hara. It was someone else's name. You see, they thought they had produced a nice christian baby who would get married and settle down on the farm next to theirs and pass on their values to his children. So they gave me a name that suited such a destiny. Need I add, I was not thrilled. I knew from a very early age that I was a changeling. I spent the next eighteen years looking for my real name, and since I found it I have not pretended to be anyone else.

(Not quite true. When I was working for Falcon, well, they insisted on knowing my *real* real name. They would never have believed me if I'd told them Scott O'Hara was my real name, nor would they have allowed me to use it. They insist on anonymity for their stars. So I came up with a different birth certificate. I didn't let them call me Danny, however.)

This all sounds much more mystical and magical than I normally get, but the fact is, names are powerful. Mine is more so than most, perhaps, because more people know it. Saying "Scott O'Hara" to someone is likely to set off a train of associations—whether accurate or not. The reason I object to the practice of pornstars inventing "screen names" is that it creates a false image, a misleading persona; it disconnects the "public" image from the private one, so that what we see up on the screen is only a fraction of a person. A "porn name" only refers to a person's sexuality and doesn't even do a very good job of representing that. Well, okay, fine, I hear you say: That's all we're interested in. If true, I feel that's a pity. I know it's not true for me. The porn films that I think are most successful—the

ones that turn me on the most—are the ones that try to integrate the performers' sexuality with the rest of their lives, the ones that show us how sex really works. Sex is never isolated, cut off from the rest of life. And seeing a real person—with a real name, real emotions, and real pimples—is more sexy, to me, than seeing a glamorous pornstar with a name like Dirk Dixon having what Erica Jong called “zipless sex.”

When the subject of porn comes up in conversation, the most common critique I hear is that the men in these videos aren't “real.” Of course they're not; they're fabrications of the movie studios, created by a gym, a tanning studio, and a plastic surgeon. The nom de porn is just the appropriate finishing touch for such a mannequin. (Have we had a pornstar yet named “Ken Doll”? No, I suppose that would be just too obvious.) Directors and producers will tell us, helplessly shrugging their shoulders, “We only produce what the public wants!” But the (quite informal) surveys I've conducted would indicate just the opposite: That there is a market for more “real” porn, with more average-looking men, men who you might realistically expect to encounter on the street. Naturally, my survey is skewed: These respondents are all friends of mine, and therefore have exquisite taste and prodigious intellectual powers.

There was a time when not all pornstars considered it essential to take pseudonyms. Richard Locke never did, to the best of my knowledge, nor did Chris Burns. There was something in this straightforward honesty that impressed me, and still does: These were men who weren't ashamed of their sex lives, who considered it the most natural thing in the world to have their dicks and butts up there on a movie screen. But sometime in the mid-1980s, the attitude changed. I don't quite understand why; maybe it had something to do with the proliferation of “straight” performers in gay roles (another phenomenon I don't understand). The reasons given always have to do with public exposure: What if my parents found out? What if my boss found out? What if I run for political office in ten years? I don't think any of these hold much water, but then, I've never been a big fan of closets. We recently had a graphic example of a pornstar being “outed” and losing his job and his wife; performing under a pseudonym didn't seem to help him much. Maybe

he should have worn a mask, too, and gotten the studios to use one of those audio distortion machines on his voice.

I don't know what this particular performer has decided to do with himself, now that his cover is blown. If he does, in fact, consider himself straight, I should think it would be dreadfully tiresome for him to make a full-time career of gay porn. But if he does, my advice to him would be: Drop the silly screen name. Drop the façade. Whatever your real name is—and that's for you to decide—use it. Give us a person, not a persona. You might be surprised by how popular it proves to be.

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Making Porn: The Hangover

Have you ever known someone so tacky, so completely declass , that when her dildo disappeared, she immediately accused you of stealing it? I thought not. (For those of you who answered “yes,” you have my condolences.) With luck, I’ll never know another one.

I was an actor manqu  in high school; I’ve always dreamed of being on the professional stage. (My jack-off career, though very enjoyable, doesn’t quite count. Equity never noticed me.) So when Ronnie Larsen suggested that I really ought to go onstage in his new play, *Making Porn* (which was, after all, based on scenes from my porn career, which I’d narrated to him in half a dozen endless telephone calls), there was no way I could resist the lure.

Ronnie’s method of interviewing is somewhat unusual: He asks a question, listens to a few seconds of the response, and then proceeds to answer the question in his own words for the next five minutes.

The first time I met Ronnie was in May, when he and his producer, a toad named Caryn, and one of their friends drove up to Wisconsin to do a reading of the new play. (They were in rehearsal in Chicago at the time.) I admit, I wasn’t altogether thrilled with the script. My immediate reaction: If he ever gets to Hollywood and starts writing sitcoms, he’ll be a smash. But hey, his last play (which was certainly no more distinguished) ran for five months. You can argue with success if you want to, but it won’t get you very far. I said yes.

Our next encounter was in San Francisco, in July, at the first rehearsal. Still missing two of the actors, but we went ahead with it. I don’t recall much of the early rehearsals. They went well; Ronnie was easygoing, congenial, and Caryn was seldom present. But we had less than three weeks of rehearsal time, and as the opening night came nearer, Ronnie became a certifiable maniac. He began exploding every time one of us said a word wrong. His script was the *gospel*, goddammit, and he didn’t choose his words casually, he put