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Exclusive Interview with Edmund White by Richard Canning



New York City Boy: A Conversation with Edmund White, on the US publication of City Boy, 9th October 2009

By Richard Canning

Photo of Edmund White in Venice in 1974, with Alfred Corn (left) and David Kalstone (right)

RC: You open with a description of 70s New York: 'grungy, dangerous, bankrupt' but artistically in its zenith. That's pretty evidently meant to contrast with present-day Manhattan. Are there any major cities

today which feel especially creative?

EW: I've just spent two months in Madrid, which seems vibrant and alive, full of young people who inhabit the center and who stay up all night, a gay life that is flourishing... New York seems to have lost its edge.

RC: By page two, you're hanging around, hoping to bump into Susan Sontag or Paul Goodman, author of the journal *Five Years*, a big deal in its day for its openness about his bisexuality and erotic adventures. The contrast in subsequent reputations of this pair is rather poignant, isn't it? As you point out, Goodman is scarcely recalled today, and almost never read. I wondered if, in the seventies, when the "newness" of gay art and culture and writing was so obvious, you remember having some sense of the people and works that would last? And, in the thirty years that have followed, have those instincts clarified or changed much?

EW: I think I thought that Sontag's reputation would last because she

had so much integrity, was so high-minded and so uncompromising - and because every line she wrote contained a unit of thought. I think I was right. Though people might gibe about those very qualities now, nevertheless she remains a beacon of high culture and seriousness. I also felt that John Ashbery and Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill were all making lasting contributions, though to my surprise Bishop has nosed her way to the front, and Merrill is now in third position. So I guess I'd say I could spot a winner but couldn't predict the order of celebrity they would eventually assume.

RC: One of your first lovers then, Stan, you describe as having a 'classic' look of beauty which was 'generally acknowledged.' Rather cleverly, I thought, you don't describe him in too much physical detail; the reader can then supply his or her own version of that classical beauty. Do you accept that these things are culturally specific, even as they feel universal, eternal or classic?

EW: I guess we all prize virility, even a joli-laideur now, more than we did back then. Stan had a John Barrymore kind of classical handsomeness that would still be appropriate to a marble statue.

RC: You confess in the book to having been politically apathetic: You also imply that this apathy was widely shared; that nobody thought of there being a gay community or society. Would you say that artists in particular shied away from political engagement? And how much do you think AIDS would change all of this? (After all, you co-founded GMHC).

EW: I felt generally alienated from the culture and its ideals. I was terribly cynical and astounded that people got so worked up over a "little thing" like Watergate or Chappaquidick, or even cheating over Twenty Questions. I assumed everyone was cheating all the time. This cynicism and a complete sense of disaffection and disabuse kept me away from politics in any form. Larry Kramer sort of shamed me into joining (and eventually heading) GMHC, but I was happy to duck out as soon as possible. Partly I had an artist's fear of unnecessary and time-consuming entanglements that other people could do just as well or better.

RC: One of the best things about the book is its tender, considered account of long-term friendships, which 'feed the spirit' - in particular, through the examples of Marilyn Schaefer, still with us, and David Kalstone, who died. Perhaps this is a topic which fits uneasily in fiction, since its very constancy risks being undramatic; it's easier to think of fiction bringing to life dramatically the experience, say, of the betrayal of friendship. Were you aware of this book offering the chance to document such friendships, finally?

EW: It seems to me that many people count relatives and mates as their best friends. Some people are extremely attached to childhood friends. I suppose the chance of meeting people later in life and cultivating an intense friendship with them is rare - and perhaps gays, with their (previous) lack of interest in family life and marriage, were best suited for developing these intense friendships later in life (even if "later" is defined as occurring in one's twenties or thirties).

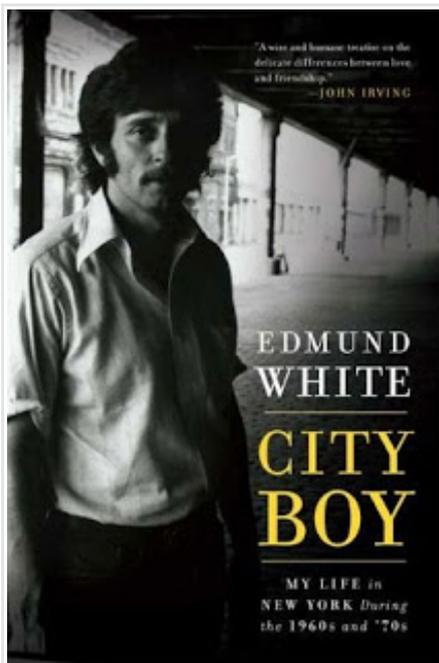
RC: You describe escaping to Puerto Rico with Stan for holidays, and sexual release there. I suppose it goes without saying that racial politics in gay culture has changed a lot, in the last thirty years. Would you comment? And do you worry about how you represent the racially other in your writings?

EW: Of course there is rather a "colonial" sound to my Puerto Rican adventures, but I think most Blacks and Puerto Ricans, for instance,

would rather be loved and admired for the wrong reasons than ignored altogether. Anyway, *City Boy* is quite clear about the moment it is concentrating on. It would be ahistorical to attribute to my narrator attitudes that didn't come into being till much later.

RC: I loved the comment that gay "intellectuals" in the seventies found that, through their learning, they simply had more evidence arguing against their own existence - they could 'torment' themselves 'with extra zeal' with Freudian ideas. On the other hand, extensive reading in literature has often been described as liberating, particularly at this time, for its offering of role models in fiction and so on, if not always positive ones. Did you encounter, let's say, untutored gay men whose self-understanding seemed more positive and mature than others', in Manhattan in the seventies? And were the books with gay themes that people devoured appreciated, would you say, for featuring gay content at all, or (especially) for featuring positive gay storylines?

EW: I think I was thinking of "non-intellectuals" who weren't aware of Freud's prejudices against homosexuality as a form of character disorder or infantilism. They were the lucky ones because they didn't dwell on all the ways in which they were "sick." I wasn't (as you suggest) thinking about those who were versed or unversed in gay literature written by gays. It's true that if all you'd read was Giovanni's *Room* or *Death in Venice* or even Proust, you'd come away with a strange view of gay experience. On the other hand, Andre Gide's journals were nourishing because he seemed a self-respecting man with far-flung interests.



RC: You mention revering writers such as Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene, considered to have rather unelevated prose styles; 'readable' authors, as well as Henry Green, whose prose is somewhat more challenging, surely. Your own fiction has often been viewed as split into two camps – the 'readable' autofictional works, and the more baroque, stylised novels such as *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes* and *Caracole*. Would it be fair, by now, after *Fanny* and *Hotel de Dream*, to argue that the 'readability' has won out in your case?

EW: I suppose I lost interest in the degree to which prose seemed "experimental." What interested me in Graham Greene was the extremely subtle use of figurative language (he's really the best in the business for similes and metaphors). With Bowen it was the easy way in which she could embed apothems in her running narrative,

something I've carefully emulated, though it gives a "moralistic" and slightly old-fashioned tone to the writing. Henry Green is a comic genius and his seemingly rattle-brain (but actually very scheming) women are hilarious, and his idiosyncratic use of dialogue is dazzling. I also like his way of letting a sinister subplot slowly emerge. I agree with Ian McEwan that these are writers who've been upstaged in literary history by more obvious experimentalists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, though Bowen and Green are better than Woolf.

RC: You make a true, and rather comic observation: that gay men always feel too old, wherever they are, whatever they are doing. It's poignant, because at first that sounds like a terrible curse or imposition. But once you've appreciated the truth of it, it could become liberating, no? Particularly for... a relatively senior gay man... (Coughs).

EW: Yes, it is liberating to put all that worrying behind one. Now I have a Spanish boyfriend who appreciates me because I have white hair and I'm chubby - I'm his type! I never would have guessed that when I was young. When I look at the photo Alfred Corn just sent of me when I was thirty-four, I remember I hated my looks then, and thought I was ugly, though in fact I was quite presentable.

RC: I wanted to ask if there's anywhere in the US you could imagine living today, outside Manhattan? City Boy seems to suggest not. You spent a period in San Francisco, and even that didn't work out...

EW: I always get this lonely forlorn feeling in other American cities, though I do like to spend a month a year in Key West, and could easily spend more time if I had the money or opportunity. It might be fun to teach for a semester in New Orleans or Austin, but otherwise I'm not too tempted by other cities, especially since I don't drive.

RC: There's a provocative moment, where you describe the 'three great geniuses of the twentieth century' as 'Stravinsky, Nabokov and Balanchine.' I laughed, because it follows a comment about New Yorkers at that time being 'still obsessed with a hierarchy of the arts and the idea of the Pure.' So, here's another hierarchy! I don't expect you to back down. But it's intriguing that you linked these three because of their imperial Russian ancestry, their time in France and their later careers in America... Could you say something more about what you mean here by 'genius', or about the way this succession of transplants may have informed it?

EW: All three of these geniuses are Romantics, or at least are addicts of beauty and a certain dreamy vision of beauty. But at the same time all three are witty and crisp and decidedly "modern." Balanchine, in his big white ballets like Symphony in C, or Nabokov in the love passages in Lolita and Stravinsky in the romantic grandeur of The Fire Bird... In these works, we feel the grandeur and scope of Imperial Russia. But all three could be very angular and witty as well - Stravinsky in Jeu de Cartes, Balanchine in Agon, Nabokov in Pale Fire. And all three are always renewing themselves - Nabokov in his very late Look at the Harlequins! (which is a delicious parody of autofiction and its coarsest preconceptions), Balanchine in a big story-telling ballet such as Don Quixote (precisely the opposite of everything he'd otherwise stood for) and Stravinsky in his late, twelve-tone scores such as Dumbarton Oaks. I think all three were "light" and flexible and unsentimental, though very romantic because of their years of contact with French culture.

RC: I can't have been the only person waiting for your take on Susan Sontag, which turns out to be very balanced, and nuanced. You've space for her good qualities ('protective and generous', etc.). On the other hand, I wondered about some of the apparently neutral observations: 'Susan was

also like a queen in that she had a full life, largely ceremonious'; 'Her genius was in saying the obvious in a strong and dramatic manner.' This one, though, took the biscuit for humour: 'She should have been given the Nobel Prize. That would have made her nicer.' Ouch! Could you reflect on the uses of humour in the memoir form? Have you erred, ever, or been misinterpreted in the way you've laughed about people from your past, or your interactions with them?

EW: Of course the people I write about and their friends are never happy. James Grauerholz just wrote a pretty wounded e-mail to me about my treatment of him and William Burroughs. He thinks I failed to see their love for each other. He also thinks I didn't really "get" Burroughs. Craig Seligmann, who wrote a book about Sontag and Pauline Kael, said I was trashing Sontag, which shocked him since I'd already attacked her in Caracole. So I guess we should ask the victims of my humor what they think. I, of course, think I was pretty even-handed. I was determined to be objective or at least fair about Sontag...



RC: The book ends with AIDS, which, once again, introduces the essential nature of human friendship. It's a logical close, and leads to your departing for Paris, which you've sketched a little already (in *Sketches from Memory*, also published as *Our Paris*). It also brings us to the present, in that we know that the author of *City Boy* is now ensconced in Chelsea. Where do you go from here? It feels as if this may have drained the pool of material for memoir, at least for now. Do you have a fictional project in mind?

EW: I'm a hundred pages into a novel about a straight man and a gay man who are best friends. I'll follow them through three decades. Then I'd like to do a memoir about Paris in the 1980s. And eventually a memoir about my nephew, Keith Fleming, who committed suicide last spring, and his mother, my sister, whom I've almost never written about.

RC: So much to look forward to. Thanks so much for your time.

City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and 1970s appears from Bloomsbury in the UK on 4th January 2010. Richard Canning has known Edmund White for over fifteen years. He interviewed White for his first book, *Gay Fiction Speaks* (Columbia University Press, 2000), and included his story 'The Painted Boy' in the anthology of gay fiction *Between Men*, as well as the story 'An Oracle' in an anthology of fiction about AIDS, *Vital Signs* (both Carroll and Graf, 2007). White has also contributed an essay on Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memories of Hadrian* to Canning's latest collection, **50 Gay and Lesbian Books Everybody Must Read** (Alyson, 2009). In the same book, White's novel *A Boy's Own Story* is discussed by San Franciscan author Robert Gluck. This year, Canning has also seen

the publication of a second gay fiction anthology, **Between Men 2** (Alyson), and a brief biography of E. M. Forster (Hesperus, November), following his first, on Oscar Wilde (Hesperus, 2008). He can be contacted at r.canning68@googlemail.com.

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