# Winter White

Belle of letters Edmund White talks to Editor in Chief Walter Armstrong about his new novel, The Married Man, telling the truth in fiction and living la vie positive.

June 1, 2000 By Walter Armstrong

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*Incomparable chronicler of the dramas and traumas of gay liberation, Edmund White has outlived not only his own generation ("the geniuses having sex in the trucks") but many in the next, whose coming-out his books helped inspire. Now 60, White has returned to New York City after a decade in Paris, set up house with writer Michael Carroll and completed The Married Man, out this month. As the novel's title suggests, gay life has grown more sober and seasoned, as HIV positive Austin (read: White), a fiftysomething American in Paris, meets Julien (White's late lover, Hubert), falls in love and, of course, loses him to AIDS.*

**POZ:** Married Man is so different from your previous novel, Farewell Symphony.

**White:** Symphony had to be epic, because gay life in the '70s had a cast of thousands. The geniuses were having sex in the trucks, so AIDS was a double loss: both the freewheeling sexuality and the tremendous creativity. The story of my French lover Hubert lent itself to a more traditional, disciplined novel. Maybe because Hubert was bisexual, I was 50 and we both had AIDS, we were marginal to gay life.

**Certain gay writers slammed Farewell Symphony for all the anonymous sex.  Married Man is chaste in comparison.**

I did that almost out of defiance—to show I could write about gay subjects without sex. But there was a deeper reason. Austin never has penetrative sex with Julien because he fears both disclosing and infecting him. By suppressing sex, I could throw into relief other things—like how positive people are often dishonest about sex.

**Julien is straight-identified, apolitical, AIDSphobic—not an ACT UP role model.**

The French don't understand the American emphasis on being nice. Julien would rather be interesting. But it worries me that people will think he is unlikable since he is based on a real person who was my lover. American AIDS novels tend to be sentimental, and the lovers are ennobled by the disease, fighting against the world and becoming closer, whereas it seemed to me more realistic to show how AIDS places a terrible strain on a relationship. Austin and Julien also

suffer from what I call AIDS restlessness—the idea that if they travel enough, they will outpace death. At the end, Austin is close to crazy, realizing that his own will is not enough to carry this off.

**You call your novels "autofiction." Is there a connection between coming out as gay and the impulse to document your life?**

I think all gay people are autobiographers. It's pillow talk—you have sex with a stranger and then share coming- out stories. We're programmed to follow a heterosexual trajectory and then, because of a sexual taste, we have to revise everything. This makes you aware of the story values of your own life.
In a 1998 speech, you said that the best literature about AIDS has been memoirs and testimonies, not novels or plays.

I just wrote an introduction to composer Ned Rorem's last journal installment, which follows the dying of his partner, and I say that a diary is the ideal form for AIDS. Because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, you're giving the complete mix of happiness and despair, trivia and exaltation, childish irritation, plus moments of intimacy and spirituality. There is nothing more powerful. I've been very involved with the Estate Project and publishing a series of essays called Loss Within Loss about writers who have died from AIDS before doing their greatest work. It is important to have these tombstones.

**Do you feel part of an AIDS community?**

I do feel closer to people who are positive. Today I had root-canal surgery; the dentist noticed on my chart that I have HIV, and he whispered to the nurse, and she came back all shrouded and shielded. You have these experiences that separate you from the rest of the world. You do feel differently and, even in sex, your risks are different. If you and I went to bed together, and I knew you were positive, I would feel more relaxed about it.

**Excerpt from**
*The Married Man*
by Edmund White
Random House
336 pp., $25.00

*He both feared and embraced the French silence in the face of this disease (and of all other fatal maladies). Something superstitious in him whispered that if you didn't think about it, the virus would go away. From one month to the next he never heard the dreaded three letters (VIH in French rather than HIV, as if the French version of the disease itself were the reverse mirror image of the American, just as the French acronym SIDA was an anagram of AIDS).*

*Americans sat up telling each other horror stories, but they were later astonished when their worst fantasies came true, as if they'd hoped to ward off evil by talking it into submission or by taking homeopathic doses of it. The French, however, feared summoning an evil genius by pronouncing*

*its name. Neither system worked. When the lioness awakened and felt the first hunger pains, she would show her claws.*

*He knew in his heart that the French approach was especially unsuited to the epidemic. His friend Herve last year had been so ashamed of falling ill that he'd slunk back home to his village in the Dordogne without calling a single friend. Only his ex-lover Gilles had stayed in touch, although Herve's grandmother irrationally blamed Gilles for having given him AIDS. Each time Gilles called she'd say that Herve was sleeping but would call back later. A month later, the next time Gilles phoned, Herve had already been dead and buried for eleven days.*

*It was as if a few young men in the provinces managed to escape to Paris where they lived for a few seasons, where they clipped their heads, lifted some weights, danced on Ecstasy, tattooed one haunch with a butterfly and had sex with hundreds of other underemployed types—and then they were driven home to Sarlat by their somber families, all dressed in black as if out for their Easter duties, and they disappeared in a whispered diminuendo, the score marked ppppp....*

*What didn't work out about this system was that no young bright kid coming up to Paris ever saw his predecessor, skinny and crippled, hobbling back down to the provinces. The best prevention, the most convincing proof of the necessity for safe sex, was ocular evidence, actually seeing KS blotches on skinny arms or watching rail-thin old men of twenty staggering into a restaurant on two canes, sharpened cheekbones about to rub through the parchment-thin skin, the eyes as bulbous as an insect's. But in Paris, magical city of elegance and romance, men with AIDS were no more visible than the retarded, the mad or the lame—they'd all been whisked off to some shuttered house in Aquitaine. The French were masters of silence, and as ACT UP claimed, "Silence = Death."*

*Austin invited Big Julien away for the weekend. In his Michelin guide he'd found a luxury hotel only forty-five minutes by train outside Paris, not far from the royal chateau of Rambouillet. They didn't need to rent a car to get there; theoretically they should be able to find a taxi at the train station. Fatuous as it sounded, Austin was relieved to be going away, for once, with a capable adult male, one who regularly submitted construction plans to the mayor's office and traveled by train to other cities.*

*It was the beginning of May. They took an electrified double-decker commuter train that quickly left the historic city behind and rushed past planned communities in the suburbs, the ugly apartment blocks oriented to one another at rakish angles (to prove how humane the planner had been) rather than laid out in the usual stultifying cemetery grid. When Austin said something dismissive about the buildings and the orange and black supergraphics on an aubergine-colored wall in the station shelter, Julien said he knew the architect, an Albanian refugee famous for his sound engineering skills ("No division of labor in Tirana," Julien said matter-of-factly), and his remark put paid to Austin's facile sneering. Austin was happy to have this handsome man beside him, someone so eccentric in his views, his way of referring everything back to Ethiopia, his indifference to gay life and his ignorance of its tyrannies, his unlikely clothes; Austin thought*

*maybe Julien didn't even notice a detail like age: their twenty-year age difference. For Austin was wired very peculiarly. He wasn't like some of his contemporaries who felt they could reduce the gap by doing three hundred sit-ups every day until their thickened waists and slack skin looked like melting chocolate bars, the hot flesh oozing over the lines between the tablets. He didn't want to dance all night on drugs, his steps an anthology of four decades of approximated wriggling. He didn't want to shed his dated slang, the words groovy, mellow, or get down, girl.*

*He liked this intense, brooding married man with the unclassifiable preoccupations, which permitted Austin, by contrast, to appear relaxed and relatively normal, even of a normal age. As they rode side by side in the train they kept stealing glances at each other. They were virtually alone on a Saturday morning in this commuter train heading out of the city. The walls lining the tracks were like ramparts; if Austin looked up he could see the windowless sides of houses rising above. Austin's only other French lover, Little Julien, had never gone anywhere with him in France, perhaps out of fear of being recognized by friends in the company of a much older foreigner. But Big Julien was here with his dark blue eyes, black hair, neat, courtly gestures, his deep, deep voice thrumming and resonating in Austin's ear, his sudden, utterly fake booming laugh, so out of character that Austin assumed it must be a private homage to a friend or relative he'd emulated in the past. No, he wasn't interested in the general impression he was making, even if he was playing to Austin, the unique member of his audience. Julien was a loner, seriously alone now that he was getting divorced, alienated from his father, too, for some reason. Austin would look over at this man whose body he'd never held and imagine they were about to be married, as old-fashioned virgins were once married; he daydreamed his way into the mind of a nineteenth-century bride who looked at these pale male hands beside her, tufted with glossy black hair, and thought she'd know them the rest of her life, that he'd explore her body with them for fifty years.*

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