The Symphony Plays On

Edmund White on being a lone wolf and longtime survivor, teddy bear and rapist...and why he stopped speaking to Larry Kramer

November 1, 1997 By Patrick Califia

Edmund White writes like an angel—an arch angel who's been there, done that and somehow escaped becoming jaded. His six novels, his stories, essays and criticism, and his big biography of Jean Genet are all so strong and so finely crafted that the straight literary establishment has been unable to withhold its recognition, despite the fact that White writes often and extensively about homosexual passion. I was lucky enough to encounter White's novels early on in my career, and I learned from him that material for fiction. We were not, in his talented hands, unspeakable. He left nothing out, roded us, as well as the search for ecstasy and understanding that drove us to accept our dangerous passions. And that made it easier for me to find my own truth as a writer.

His new novel, The Farewell Symphony, is one of the funniest and most tragic books I've ever read—a witty, bitter, bawdy and yet loving look at how AIDS devastated a large segment of New York City's gay male community. White's original intention was to tell the story of his life with his lover, Hubert Sorin (Brice in the novel), who died of AIDS in 1994. Unable to encompass this tragedy, he instead writes in detail about what seems to be every other romantic and sexual exploit he's ever had. Anecdotes about Brice are tripped into the tale, becoming what White refers to as "the absent heart" of the narrative and serving as a metaphor for his own emotional distance from the men he desires and sometimes love (usually unrequitedly).

I was especially eager to talk to White given the recent surge of anti-sex sentiment among prominent gay journalists. In the May 27, 1997 Advocate, Larry Kramer wrote bluntly, "We brought AIDS upon ourselves by a way of living that welcomed it. Nature always extracts a price for sexual promiscuity....We have made sex the cornerstone of gay liberation and gay culture, and it has killed us." He singled out The Farewell Symphony for attack, calling it "an irresponsible piece of work....Tricks, bushes, S/M, discos, drugs bathhouses, Fire Island, phone sex, meat racks—is this all we are capable of writing about?"

It's true that White's novel is, like the decades it covers, obsessed with sex. But Kramer fails to distinguish between the graphic and the pornographic. Since I make no bones about being a pornographer, perhaps I'm able to be more clear. White is describing the libertine, not the liberated. He dissects "casual" sex with forensic skill. It's arousing to read his descriptions of the appearance of godlike virile perfection that lust can lend a trick. But White sticks around after the cum shot to reveal the bad teeth, boils, uncouth idioms and pathetic histories of his fallen idols.

Only a very stupid reader could see this novel as a paean to licentiousness or as a plea for greater self-control.

Calling Edmund White in Paris to speak with him was intimidating, to say the least. I kept wondering how the young Samuel Steward got up the courage to go to France and introduce himself to Gertrude Stein. I don't think I've been that nervous since the very first time I walked into a dungeon with my keys on the left. But White was gracious and charming to a fault, and patient as could be while I fumbled with the speaker phone and tape recorder.

PAT CALIFIA: In his Advocate piece, Larry Kramer blames the AIDS epidemic, and the lack of gay civil rights in general, on writers who focus on sex. He criticizes you in especially harsh terms for documenting gay male promiscuity in the '70s and early '80s. How do you respond?

EDMUND WHITE: Larry was always sex-negative, even before AIDS came along. That was revealed in his novel, Faggots, back in the late '70s. Now that AIDS is receding, I think he's panicking. He's written very little, so he's not going to be remembered as a writer, and the crisis that made him famous is also beginning to ebb. A lot of his reaction is jealously. But not just against me, against a whole world that was sexual before AIDS came along and is going to be sexual after AIDS goes away.

You and Kramer have a long friendship.

Our friendship is over. The Farewell Symphony is not some novel I made up and that was totally an act of imagination. It's me, it's my life, it's what I am. And if he can attack it in those terms—so stupidly and with such vitriol and jealously—then it's just as though he's attacked me.

I feel betrayed by him personally because I had sent the original manuscript to him asking for reactions. I had put in that I was the one who had named the organization the Gay Men's Health Crisis. I remember the whole thought process by which I came up with the name. But he said that in all the history books he had said that he was the one who named it, and would I please change that. So I did. Later he said to me, "You didn't really have all that sex, did you?" And I said, "Yeah, I did." And he said, "Oh, come on, I can't believe that." And I said, "No, Larry, I did." And that was it, I didn't hear any more from him. And then all of a sudden, there was this outburst in The Advocate.

But before that, we were in the Key West in January for a conference on AIDS and literature. I gave the keynote address. He was pissed off because he thought he should give it and told me so. On the second day, we were on a panel with Jewelle Gomez and Sarah Schulman. And Larry was attacking me for living in France in an ivory tower and being a mandarin. And all the while he was attacking me, he was sitting next to me and patting my leg under the table out of sight of the audience. Sort of like saying, "This is just to excite them, but we're still friends."

That's really strange.

I thought so. On the last day of the conference, everybody was supposed to speak alphabetically, but he asked to be switched to the last. Then he went into the bathroom and threw up because he

was so nervous about what he was going to do. He came back out and screamed at everybody. He said, “I’m sick of people sucking cock in bushes. Is all our literature going to be about nothing but that?” It was basically the same tirade that he later published in The Advocate, except he had not yet read my novel.

I just really disagree with the position that if we don’t talk about unsafe sex, people will stop having it.

I think the real question is, How do you reach young people who are drifting back toward unsafe sex? I don’t think you reach them by urging them to be monogamous, which is what Kramer and other right-wind gay leaders are doing. To tell a 20-year-old who’s just beginning his best decade that he should be monogamous is ludicrous. Just adjusting to the fact of being gay is so traumatic that the chance you’d have the maturity and calm to find a lover and be monogamous at 20 is so remote that it’s not even worth discussing. The truth is that sex is fun, and gay people have to be highly motivated by sex or otherwise why would they bother? Why would we go trough all the crap that everybody has to go through to be gay?

The narrator in your new novel finds a lot of pleasure in rough sex and sucking cocks under trucks, but not a lot of happiness. You characterize anonymous public sex and S/M as addictions. Do you think that these and other kinds of sexual adventurism have positive values?

First of all, I don’t think that happiness is the only goal. For people who simply want to have the minimum of anguish in their life, that’s easily enough arranged. I don’t drink or take drugs now, but I would never deny that some of the most powerful and transforming experiences I’ve had occurred to me when I was drinking and taking drugs. I seem to have burned out on S/M now, but I was very, very involved with it—mainly as a bottom—for years. Even now, when I jerk off I often think of those experiences. They were very powerful ways of discovering myself.

You wrote once, Pat, that the great thing about being a masochist is, you can take the thing you’re most ashamed of and eroticize it. It’s something that I’ve always remembered. In other words, things that you feel bad about, the way that you look or your cock size or you’re not muscley enough or you’re too old or you’re too fat, or this or that—all those things can become eroticized and in that way redeemed. It’s very much like writing.

There’s a witty line in your book that summarizes gay history. You say we were liberated in the ’60s, exalted in the ’70s and wiped out in the ’80s. But then there’s this whole generation of gay activism—such as ACT UP—that’s missing from the novel. Is this because you’re an expatriate and weren’t around to see that happen?

I was the first president of Gay Men’s Health Crisis. And I move in ’83 to Europe. In France I was one of the founding members of a group called AIDES, which is like the Gay Men’s Health Crisis of France, that Michael Foucault’s lover started after Foucault died of AIDS. It’s true I’ve never been part of that world. That was definitely America after I left.

But you certainly didn’t get away from the epidemic by moving overseas. You’ve gone on record saying how dreadfully the French have dealt with AIDS.

The French are very opposed to ghettoes of any kind. And what they don't see is that ghettoes can also be a source of power. They believe in a thing called universalism. They're very, very against identity politics. And there is no real feminist movement there, or black movement, gay movement. That was OK for gays until AIDS came along. Because of the lack of a community, there was no infrastructure for prevention. As a result, France has four times more cases of AIDS than England, which is a country that was touched at exactly the same time by the virus, has the same-sized population and is organized in a similar way with most of the gay people in one big city.

There's a passage in your book that made every hair on my body stand on end, where you describe being very drunk, having sex with a straight man who's a hustler, and fucking him without his consent and without a condom. I thought it was very brave to write about this.

I've taken that out, though! When I printed that in the English version, every single interviewer came down on me about that so much that I just finally lost my nerve and took it out of the American version.

Really? Is it OK to talk about it?

Sure, it is. It really happened. It's something that I put in there, and up to the last second I couldn't figure out what to do with it. I kept wondering, "Should I take it out or leave it in?" Because I felt the advantage of leaving it in was that for all those people who have done exactly what I've done, which I think is quite a few—

Apparently.

It would make them say, "Oh my God, you mean he's really going to talk about that?" But in England, it upstaged the rest of the book. Whether it was my relationship with my mother or my sister, or my interest in becoming a writer—every other issue was dominated by that. There were two things that the English picked up on. One was that, and the other was that I say sometimes that I have had sex with three-thousand-six-hundred-and-whatever-people.

Which was a conservative estimate, I thought.

I thought so, too. [They both laugh.]

The Farewell Symphony is not a simple-minded "sex positive" book. You capture the riotous carnal glory of that era along wit its selfishness and amorality. And this is one of the darkest episodes in the novel. Yet it's presented in a matter-of-fact way. When you look back on these events, how do you feel today?

I think I make it very clear that the narrator—and therefore pretty much me—is totally irresponsible socially. At one point he says if he were the last person to walk out of a burning building, he wouldn't care about the others in the building. Part of the thrust of the book is to show that for gay people who came of age in the '50s there was so much social oppression—and absolutely no gay community—that everybody felt like a loner, a lone wolf. The narrator even uses that image of himself. On the other hand I don't want to paint myself as a total

monster, either. Basically there's a lack of responsibility toward others in the narrator's attitude, and that's what I wanted to depict.

You've made a lot of changes since then. For one thing, you don't drink anymore. Do you think the same thing could happen to you now?

No. One of the things I pointed out there was that (a) the narrator had not known for very long that he was positive when the scene occurred, (b) he was stoned, and (c) he did not realize he was raping that boy. It was only later on that the boy told him, "You raped me." I don't drink or smoke grass or anything now. In fact, I say at the end of that episode that I have since then never again practiced penetrative sex one way or the other. And I never have.

I know this is politically incorrect as all hell. But I don't find his claim of rape to be very credible. It was made by a supposedly straight man who has sex with other men for money. So the alleged victim was obviously in some sort of denial about his own behavior. It's pretty common for people to get high, do something outrageous, feel bad about it later and then blame it on someone else.

That's true. And also, with that same boy I had always been a bottom. But suddenly because I was stoned, I turned into a top. And I think that startled him. But he didn't say anything at the time. And it seemed to me that if he really felt he was being raped and I was going too far, he would say something. Mind you, he was stoned too. I'd like to think of it your way. I haven't thought of it your way, but it exonerates me a bit.

It's possible you put this episode in the book to punish yourself, because you felt so guilty about what happened.

I think that's true. And I took it out because I was fed up with discussing it and being on the defensive.

The journalists who trashed you for exposing someone else to HIV were asking the wrong question, "How on earth could you do such a terrible thing?" I think the right question is, "Why does unsafe sex happen so frequently?" And you answered that—lowered inhibitions: "We were really high. I felt entitled. It was the kind of sex I was to having. I didn't think about it."

Also, he was a hustler, and there's a very bad attitude that people have toward hustlers, as though they can do what they want with them. I have had a very irresponsible feeling toward hustlers, as though they should be the ones to know how to protect themselves from HIV.

You're a long-term survivor of HIV. Michael Callen used to say he had survived for so long because he became an angry activist.

I think I'm a medical anomaly. The trouble with attributing it to anything is that it makes it sound like you're blaming the victims. You're saying, "All these people who died, they ought to have something important." That's fine in Michael Callen's case, because he was ill for a long time and was battling the actual disease. I've never even had one single opportunistic disease. My counts are still in the 700s, and my viral load is still under 100. Everything has been very easy for me.

But survivors wind up dealing with an enormous amount of grief about the people you've cared about who you've lost. And with a lot of other stress.

I never had much survivor guilt for the longest time. I once asked a psychiatrist friend of mine why, and he said people who were positive had less survivor guilt than people who were negative. They kept thinking they were going to get ill eventually. But now I do feel more guilt, partly because I feel like now maybe I won't get ill. It's been so long, and there are so many treatments, and more coming. Anyway, I'm 57, so pretty soon I'll have to be calling in Dr. Kevorkian.

You begin The Farewell Symphony by saying you're going to write, if you can, about a love story, your relationship with Brice—

And I don't. I never do it.

There are just little anecdotes. But the reader ends up inferring almost as much about that relationship as if you'd told the whole story in great detail. The description of your trip across Morocco with him in the last stages of his illness is absolutely harrowing. You don't depict him as a martyr or a saint.

Well, that is the real problem. I think with so much AIDS writing—that it's very sentiment, isn't it?

Little Hummel figurines of people dying in a state of grace.

After my lover died, I had a picture of him up on my mantle. It was a portrait of him taken by the great lesbian photographer Rollie McKenna, just before he bed. And his brother, who is gay, got mad at me for having that picture. He said, "Why don't you have a picture of him when he was healthy?" And I said, "Well, to me, when he was healthy he looked like a million other cute gay boys. But this is the look that he earned. And to me, he was more beautiful at the end." His face had been engraved with all these lines that he had put there. I hate that whole idea that people who are about to die of AIDS are somehow grotesque. To me they're not. I hate that the gay aesthetic, which is already pretty dubious to my mind, gets applied even to people who are ill.

Toward the end of his life, John Preston published a pretty amusing little piece that said, "Look, if you want me to continue to be your favorite pornographer, you need to put a little more, boys, I need to be getting a little more sex here." Since you are one of the cultural treasures of the queer nation, I just wanted to check in on you and make sure you were getting some.

[Laughs] I live with my lover, a very nice guy named Michael Carroll. I met him one year after Hubert died. He's an American and he's a writer and he's 32 years old and he's very cute and he was in the Peace Corps teaching English and he wrote me a fan letter and then I said, "Well, why don't you come to Paris?" And he did. And we met and we fell in love and he moved in two years ago exactly.

What a wonderful story.

And then I like to go to a bathhouse here in Paris that is for bears and for guys who like bears. They're called nounours, which means teddy bear. On the door, there's a big picture of guys in leather with enormous bellies hanging over their belts, saying, "Welcome." It's funny because

France is a country that’s full of body fascism otherwise—not the American buffed look, but the super-thin look. It’s also a country where, if you go to the normal baths, you’re turned away if you’re over 40.

Well, that still happens here too, unfortunately. Isn’t it interesting that the bear movement has come into being post-AIDS? Most of the men I knew who cruised on Castro or Folsom Street in the ’70s would have been nonplussed.

My generation—the Stonewall generation—was always used to having its way. And part of our strategy was to always affirm whatever we happened to be. Whether it was gay or it was HIV positive or if it was being fat. There was this belief that “Who I am, is good.” And each time we change, it’s like a little leap of faith or decision to put our own seal of approval on whatever we happen to be. We were a generation that was very used to that act of self-affirmation.

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