



The PENGUIN BOOK *of*
GAY SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY
DAVID LEAVITT AND MARK MITCHELL

PENGUIN BOOKS

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GAY SHORT STORIES

David Leavitt is the author of the short-story collections *Family Dancing* and *A Place I've Never Been* and the novels *The Lost Language of Cranes*, which was made into a BBC film, *Equal Affections* and *While England Sleeps*, a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* fiction prize. He lives in Italy.

Mark Mitchell is the editor of *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing*, which will be published by Viking in 1995. He lives in Italy, where he is writing a biography of the novelist E. M. Forster and a memoir.

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SHORT STORIES

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MARK MITCHELL

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID LEAVITT



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*To the heroes of the AIDS wars,
the fallen and the fighting*

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Introduction

I

The first novel I ever read about gay men was called *The Lord Won't Mind*. I was sixteen at the time—1977—a high school junior growing up thirty miles south of San Francisco, in what was just becoming Silicon Valley. Palo Alto had a wonderful left-of-center bookstore in those days, which actually maintained a gay section—just a few shelves, yet I knew their contents by heart. *The Lord Won't Mind*, by Gordon Merrick, caught my attention because its cover, on which two radiantly handsome blond men stared longingly into each other's eyes, suggested what seemed to me a promising combination of erotic heat and practical information. So I bought the book, slipping the copy I'd chosen between two innocuous magazines in case I ran into someone I knew on the trip from the gay section to the cash register. What I feared, peculiarly, was being obliged to confess an identity to which my libido had already made an unwavering commitment. No one saw me, however. Now I wish someone had.

Today, *The Lord Won't Mind* is out of print. Turning up a copy took me ages, but I finally found one. The story concerns Charlie, just out of Princeton, and Peter, just about to start Princeton, who are brought together by a wealthy woman of large gestures called C. B. Both are blond, rock-hard, stunningly handsome. In the first chapter Charlie seduces Peter by parading in front of him in only a towel, then suggesting that Peter undress so that they can compare their bodies in order to deduce whether they might share clothes. This titillating striptease leads, of course, to the

inevitable dropping of drawers, the revelation of male members “extended to [their] fullest limits before actual erection, prodigious but blameless.” The words “cock,” “fuck,” “suck,” are never used; Merrick’s pornography is insistently polite, even highbrow—just like his Princetonian protagonists. “Before the staggering fact of Peter at last revealed,” Merrick writes, “Charlie thought for an instant that he had been surpassed. A quick glance for comparison reassured him. It was more slender than his and an inch or two shorter, just the way Charlie would have wished it, but without threatening his supremacy.”

What was my reaction to all this? Hot arousal, most certainly. And in the aftermath of hot arousal, bewilderment. Finally, after judicious effort, I had located a work of fiction that described the “first time” experience I suspected (hoped) I would someday have. And yet this tale of bronzed gods with erections the size of tennis ball cans disturbed me as well. Was sex between men, I wondered, the exclusive property of the beautiful, the muscular, the superhuman?

Of course I didn’t know anything then about the history of the way gay men have been portrayed, both in literature and in film: the history of the lisping twit and the oleaginous villain. Nor did I understand how Merrick and other homosexual writers of the early seventies, energized by Stonewall and the evolving gay liberation movement, might have found this sort of glorification of the male body both invigorating and celebratory. Growing up near San Francisco, I knew nothing of what was going on in San Francisco. I knew only that I longed to read a novel in which the gay characters were neither reduced to a subhuman nor elevated to a superhuman level. Instead I wanted to read a novel that told something like the truth.

Dancer from the Dance, by Andrew Holleran, was the second novel about gay men I read. This was a serious work of literature, even though it had a racy cover. The novel followed the progress of a beautiful young man named Malone as he explores the neon-lit underworld of gay Manhattan in the late seventies: a decadent, sex-soaked, drunken, clothes-conscious orgy of a culture. The story is told in a voice that is literate, thoughtful, occasionally gothic, with distinct Southern twangs. (The ghosts of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote hover in the white space.) It horrified me in ways the cartoon porn-boys in *The Lord Won’t Mind* never could have. Here is a scene that exemplifies why.

An old queen called Sutherland is leading an innocent boy—an

ephebe—on a sort of tour of the gay underworld. (Remember the song “Disco Inferno”?) The boy sees a man with whom he falls instantly in love. “Who is that?” he asks.

“His name is Alan Solis, he has *huge* balls and does public relations work for Pan Am. . . . I used to be in love with Alan Solis, when I came to New York. I was so in love with him . . . that when he used the bathroom on the train to Sayville, I used to go in right after him and lock the door, just to smell his farts! To simply breathe the gas of his very bowels!”

“You know,” said the boy, bending over as if in pain, his eyes on Alan Solis with all the intensity of a mongoose regarding a snake, “if I can only find a flaw. If I can find a flaw in someone, then it’s not so bad, you know? But that boy seems to be perfect!” he said. “Oh, God, it’s terrible!” And he put a hand to his forehead, stricken by that deadliest of forces, Beauty.

“A flaw, a flaw,” said Sutherland, dropping his ash into the ashtray on his left, “I understand perfectly.”

“If I can just see a flaw, then it’s not so hopeless and depressing,” said the boy, his face screwed up in agony, even though Solis, talking to a short, muscular Italian whom he wanted to take home that night, was completely oblivious to this adoring fan whose body was far too thin to interest him.

“I’ve got it,” said Sutherland, who turned to his companion now. “I remember a flaw. His chest,” he said, “his chest is so hairy that one can’t really see the deep, chiselled indentation between the breasts. Will that do, darling?”

The boy gnawed on his lip and considered.

“I’m afraid it will have to. There isn’t a thing else wrong with the man, other than the fact that he knows it.”

Chilly perfection. Inaccessibility. Disinterest. Were the only choices for gay men, I wondered, either to exude or suffer from these unpleasant qualities? There is irony in Holleran’s vision, of course, but I wasn’t wise to it then; it didn’t occur to me that he might, in some subtle way, have been mocking the exclusive mating rituals that characterized gay male life in American urban centers in the seventies. (It is easier than one might think to mock and romanticize simultaneously.) Instead I saw only, and

with a kind of ashen horror, my future, or what I feared my future was going to amount to: relegation to some marginal role in a world where supermen possessed of almost blinding physical perfection preen, parade, ignore, dismiss. Seventies gay male culture did not have very much patience for the ugly man, the old man, the man with a small dick or a potbelly or no hair on his head. (It has only slightly more these days.) According to *Dancer from the Dance* and *The Lord Won't Mind*, only the most exceptionally beautiful among gay men were entitled to erotic fulfillment. The rest of us, it seemed, had no choice but to salivate in the wings, or at best, try and buy our way in.

A tendency to romanticize rejection—to romanticize the very farts deposited into the air by the object of idealization—characterizes Robert Ferro's *The Family of Max Desir* as well. (This book I read considerably later, when I had just graduated from college.) Here the author's obsession with the physical beauty of his hero—even his name suggests what he is the object of—overwhelms the eponymous family: the novel would be better titled *Desiring Max Desir*. For instance, in a long flashback, Ferro recalls Max's arrest in Florence after he makes a pass at a plainclothes policeman. Max ends up in jail, where he meets Nick Flynn, who becomes his lover. As in *The Lord Won't Mind*, their budding relationship is helped along by a rich, theatrically self-dramatizing woman, this time an Italian named Lydia. Older men constantly fall for one or another of the pair; indeed, their beauty is such that at one point it quite literally kills an elderly monsignor who loves "angels as they appeared in the form of young boys":

It had been his heart, concerning which this was the last of several incidents, but it seemed at the time, to Nick and Max, to be *them*. What strains had they put on the old man's failing health? Not that they had ever spent a moment alone with him, or thought of it. But it was death at close range, the first for either of them. And it seemed, like so much in their lives—as for instance their meeting in prison—to have some larger meaning. This impression was further developed a few weeks later when the host of a similar weekend house party, at which Lydia was not a guest, just as suddenly dropped dead, this time not actually in their presence but very soon after leaving it.

Talk about looks that kill! But as the novel progresses, the dreamlike tone of the Italian section gives way to a grittier American realism; more important, Ferro finally gets down to the subject at hand, namely Max's relationship with his father, John, particularly after his mother, Marie, has died. Nonetheless Max's erotic obsessiveness routinely intrudes on the family drama that is the novel's ostensible centerpiece, as in this scene, in which Max and his father fly to Vermont to supervise the construction of Marie's tombstone:

They drove to the airport, left the car in the lot, and had breakfast after checking in. A man behind the counter in the coffee shop was one of the most beautiful Max had ever seen. It was implausible that such a being had not conquered films, Seventh Avenue, or the Sultan of Oman, but was instead breaking eggs at La Guardia Marine. John did not notice. The man smiled back at Max. His was a body reserved for the transubstantiation of visiting angels, with the same perfect evenness, proportion and symmetry found in the beautiful face. . . . While Max ate his breakfast John read the paper. The counterman had arranged the bacon on Max's plate in the shape of a question mark.

Unlike *Dancer from the Dance*, *The Family of Max Desir* isn't about its hero's (or its author's) obsession with male beauty. Instead it's that rarity: a novel in which a gay man plays an integral role in the unfolding drama of family life. But the obsession with male beauty is a constant and intrusive element here. What I found myself longing for, as I read the book, was a gay literature that, rather than fawning over angels made flesh, transformed homosexual experience into human drama; a gay literature that was literature first and gay second. Yes, writers might constantly be distracted by the sight of pretty boys behind breakfast counters; they could afford to be distracted; a work of literature cannot.

I had a conversation with a twenty-one-year-old friend of mine recently. When I told him I was planning to take on some sacred cows in this essay—most notably *Dancer from the Dance*—his response was swift and unhesitant: “Thank God someone's doing it,” he said; “it's the first gay book most young American gay men read, and I can't think of another that's done as much damage.” Damage is the key here: the voyeuristic fixation with beauty that powers the novel (and undermines *The*

Family of Max Desir) compels younger gay men who don't know better to wonder if that's all there is to the business of being gay, a question to which the answer is a resounding no (a no echoed by any number of lesser-known novels and stories). For contrary to popular opinion, most gay men *do* want more from their lives than a few decades spent panting after unattainable perfection; indeed, most want relationships based on spiritual as well as physical attraction, which grow more solid as the years go on. *Dancer from the Dance* romanticized—even exalted—what is to many of us the dreariest aspect of gay experience. (It is curious that its publication so vastly overshadowed the almost simultaneous appearance of Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, a novel that savagely satirized, even condemned, the very bars and discos, Fire Island beaches and popper-hazed back rooms, about which Holleran writes so lushly. Holleran exults in the romance of dark, smoky rooms; Kramer rudely shuts off the disco music, switches on the lights, and forces us to see things as they are.)

In those days, the gay section at the bookstore in Palo Alto didn't stock many books, and in retrospect, it's to the credit of that sadly defunct place that a gay section existed at all. I had little right to complain; in terms of liberal tolerance, northern California in the late seventies was paradise. Still, even the luckiest young gay men and lesbians are isolated; even in places where people tell you it's okay to be gay, you have to tell *them* you're gay first, and that's never easy. Unlike our heterosexual counterparts, for whom history, rituals of courtship, models for behavior, and codes of decorum are handed out daily in the classroom, we must seek out, furtively, some sense of our connection to official history, not to mention some sense of our own history, which by definition is discontinuous, a series of stops and starts that begins again each time a young gay man or lesbian sneaks his or her way to the gay section at a bookstore—if indeed there is a gay section; if indeed there is a bookstore. Well, in my case there was. And what was in it? *The Lord Won't Mind* and its endless interminable sequels. *The Front Runner* by Patricia Nell Warren. John Rechy's *The Sexual Outlaw* with its seedy “street” ambience and awkward neologisms (“youngman” as one word). *Dancer from the Dance*. What wasn't in it that should have been? For starters, *The Folded Leaf*, William Maxwell's seminal tale of love between teenage boys, published in the late forties. J. R. Ackerley's agonizingly honest autobiography, *My Father and Myself*; Sanford Friedman's *Totempole*; perhaps some

of Forster's posthumously published gay stories. I knew about none of these books back then. I didn't even know about them in 1984, when in direct response to the dearth of decent gay literature that characterized my adolescence I started my own first novel, *The Lost Language of Cranes*. It took the intervention of my agent to point me toward *The Folded Leaf*. It took years more to dig out the other books I could have read when I was sixteen, instead of *The Lord Won't Mind* and *Dancer from the Dance*. Not that these books prettified or idealized gay experience—we are talking about nothing so simple as “positive role models”; but they told the truth. The men who inhabited them were recognizably human. And the impulse that fueled their creation was not the impulse to glorify or romanticize; it was the impulse to articulate the process by which gay men, in the words of E. M. Forster, go about “the prosecution of daily life.”

One characteristic of most pre-eighties gay literature was the assumption that an irrevocable gulf existed between “them” and “us,” the heterosexual and homosexual realms. Before *The Family of Max Desir*, few works of literature about gay men allowed for any nonhostile communication between the two. The gay underworld portrayed in Rechy's *City of Night* and *The Sexual Outlaw* or in films like *Nighthawks* and *Taxi zum Klo* existed as a kind of parallel universe with the straight world, a shadowland, if you will, where gay men by night led secret lives. Crucially, in these works night brought on the transformation not only of the men but of the world itself; a park where by day children played innocently becomes by night the scene of Bacchic frenzies. Few novels portrayed the option of freeing oneself from this double life; indeed, one of the only ones that did, *The Seraglio*, written in 1954 by the esteemed poet James Merrill, offered a protagonist who achieves liberation by means of an act of extraordinary violence: he slices off his own penis. Afterward, quite literally “cut off” from the heterosexual imperative his wealthy parents have demanded he obey, our hero reemerges a happy, bookish intellectual living in a brownstone in *louche* Greenwich Village. But at what cost?

Dancer from the Dance is an historic novel because its protagonists had freed themselves from the tyranny of this double life; they were made to suffer much more by each other than by heterosexual agents of oppression. The gay underworld thus gave way to the gay ghetto, where men held hands and kissed in public and dared the “public” to say a word about it. And at the time of its publication, all over the country, gay men

were urging each other to “come out of the closet,” a misleading metaphor, since in those days coming out by definition seemed to require vacating not only the closet but the house itself. To come out was not merely to announce oneself, it was to change one’s way of dressing, speaking, thinking; in many cases it required a literal relocation, to San Francisco’s Castro district or New York’s Greenwich Village or, in the summer, to Fire Island, Provincetown, Key West. These neighborhoods became meccas for gay men eager to live free, though not always untroubled by the knowledge that in joining their fellow “tribesmen” they were, in effect, accepting residency in a realm that was separate and only perhaps equal: a realm of bars and pornographic card shops and more bars and more pornographic card shops. As Susan Sontag has succinctly put it, in the 1970s “many male homosexuals reconstituted themselves as something like an ethnic group, one whose distinctive folkloric custom was sexual voracity, and the institutions of urban homosexual life became a sexual delivery system of unprecedented speed, efficiency, and volume.” AIDS wasn’t the only fallout; as Larry Kramer’s prophetic novel *Faggots* suggests, such a life-style can destroy souls as well as T-cells.

I remember, in the early eighties, standing on the brink of coming out and being deterred not by fear of retribution so much as by fear of the culture into which coming out seemed inevitably destined to thrust me. Yes, I wanted to be openly gay; even so, my few forays into gay New York left me shaken. This wasn’t the world I wanted to live in, and I saw no advertised alternatives. More important, I flinched at the notion that coming out somehow meant that I would have not only to reimagine myself totally but to cut off my ties to my family, my heterosexual friends—indeed, the totality of the world I’d grown up in. To do so, it seemed to me, was to risk doing myself real psychic violence. Yes, I was gay, but I was also Jewish, a Leavitt, a writer: so many other things! Why should my sexual identity subsume all my other identities? I wondered. And then I saw the answer: because the world, the “straight” world, the “normal” world, upon learning I was gay, would see me only as gay; because ghettos are invented not by the people who live in them but by the people who don’t live in them. A new level of liberation needed to be achieved, I decided then: one that would allow gay men and lesbians to celebrate their identities without having to move into a gulag.

II

What makes a “gay story” gay? This is a more complicated question than it may at first sound. Traditionally, anthologies of so-called gay fiction have collected stories by gay male writers writing about the lives of gay men. On the other hand, numerous gay male writers, both contemporary and historic, have written fiction that at least explicitly has nothing to do with the gay experience, even though it may exhibit a “gay sensibility” or “gay style” (two more problematic terms). Conversely, heterosexual writers sometimes write pieces of fiction that deal eloquently with the experience of gay men. What about them? And what about the thornier question of fiction by lesbians? The majority of gay anthologists have not only left lesbian work out entirely; they haven’t even seen fit to apologize for the exclusion, which simply proves that sexism is as alive and well in the gay community as it is in the heterosexual community. On the other hand, limits must be agreed upon if an anthology is not to become so enormous as to defy publication. Some rules—arbitrary though they may be—must be set down.

For the purposes of this anthology, then, a gay story has been defined as one that illuminates the experience of love between men, explores the nature of homosexual identity, or investigates the kinds of relationships gay men have with each other, with their friends, and with their families. The sexuality of the author, according to this definition, is finally irrelevant, although obviously more gay men write about these topics than heterosexual men or women. The anthology limits itself to twentieth-century fiction written originally in English, simply because not imposing some sort of restriction would necessitate multiple volumes. (And indeed, a second anthology, of international gay writing, is currently in the works.) Lesbian fiction gets its own anthology: *The Penguin Book of Lesbian Short Stories*, edited by Margaret Reynolds. Finally, excerpts from longer narratives have been avoided wherever possible; there are only a very few in this anthology. The rest of the pieces are self-contained, autonomous works, most of which fit comfortably within the rubric of the traditional short story.

The anthology begins with a brief narrative of adolescent love, D. H. Lawrence’s “A Poem of Friendship,” published in 1911, and ends with a brief narrative of adolescent love, A. M. Homes’s “The Whiz Kids,”

published in 1991. Comparing these two stories tells us a lot about how the lives of gay men have—and haven't—changed over the course of eighty years. In "A Poem of Friendship," for instance, the narrator and his beloved friend, George, swim and frolic, then dry off together:

He saw I had forgotten to continue my rubbing, and laughing he took hold of me and began to rub me briskly, as if I were a child, or rather, a woman he loved and did not fear. I left myself quite limply in his hands, and to get a better grip of me, he put his arm round me and pressed me against him, and the sweetness of the touch of our naked bodies one against the other was superb. It satisfied in some measure the vague, indecipherable yearning of my soul; and it was the same with him. When he had rubbed me all warm, he let me go, and we looked at each other with eyes of still laughter, and our love was perfect for a moment, more perfect than any love I have known since, either for man or woman.

Likewise, in "The Whiz Kids," the narrator and his friend (unnamed) take a bath together:

In the big bathtub in my parents' bedroom, he ran his tongue along my side, up into my armpits, tugging the hair with his teeth. "We're like married," he said, licking my nipples.

I spit at him. A foamy blob landed on his bare chest. He smiled, grabbed both my arms, and held them down.

He slid his face down toward my stomach, dipped it under the water, and put his mouth over my cock.

My mother knocked on the bathroom door. "I have to get ready. Your father and I are leaving in twenty minutes."

. . . Later, in the den, picking his nose, examining the results on his finger, slipping his finger into his mouth with a smack and a pop, he explained that as long as we never slept with anyone else, we could do whatever we wanted. "Sex kills," he said, "but this," he said, "this is the one time, the only time, the chance of a life time." He ground his front teeth on the booger.

The changes aren't only in the vernacular. In comparison to Lawrence, Homes's narration of "The Whiz Kids" is shockingly direct, even pornographic. There's no apologizing here, no prettying up for the sake of the uninitiated or faint of heart. More crucially, by 1991 AIDS has entered the picture. These sophisticated boys know that what they're experiencing together—sex free of complication, not to mention the threat of death—is something they can never again experience in their lives.

Still, both these stories are about first love and, as such, heart-stopping in their sweetness. In both, erotic discovery germinates in the fertile innocence of water, under the watchful eye of parents who would never suspect such ideas to be entering their sons' heads. In the watering hole or the warm, soapy rinse of the womblike tub, among rubber ducks and bubble bath and towels and other children, desire discovers itself, boys discover each other. That Homes is a woman only adds to our sense of simultaneous mystification and delight.

In between these two stories there is every imaginable kind of gay story, written by every imaginable kind of writer. Some are already famous—Isherwood's "Sally Bowles," Allan Gurganus's "Adult Art." Then there are the surprises. Noël Coward? you may ask. My coeditor on this project, Mark Mitchell, turned up that one, an elegant and moving story about a gay man who has spent most of his life shepherding a group of showgirls around the world, and a joyous discovery for many reasons, not least of which is its portrayal of gay men in long-term relationships—something rare in those days. By contrast, J. R. Ackerley's "My Father and Myself" (excerpted here) features the author's rigorously honest appraisal of, among other things, his own unfortunate tendency toward "sexual incontinence," as well as speculation that a sailor lover might have left him because Ackerley attempted to perpetrate upon him an act of sexual congress considered in those days and in that place shocking, even though it has become in these days and in this place utterly commonplace. (This is, incidentally, one of several works included here that challenge the traditional definition of "fiction": while neither novel nor story, "My Father and Myself" reimagines—rather than reports—experience; as such, it is fiction, to our view.) William Trevor's "Torridge" is another surprise, primarily because its author, while generally recognized as a contemporary master of the short story, is not remotely gay. Still, he has crafted an incendiary tale about hypocrisy at an English boys' school,

a story that articulates more forcefully and effectively than any I can name the anger so many British gay men often feel toward those institutions that silently encourage homosexual behavior while simultaneously condemning homosexual identity.

There are, in these stories, gay parents (Ann Beattie's "The Cinderella Waltz"), as well as gay children (Peter Cameron's "Jump or Dive," Christopher Coe's "Gentlemen Can Wash Their Hands in the Gents' "). The discoveries of the young (David Plante's "The Princess from Africa," William Maxwell's "The Folded Leaf," Richard McCann's "My Mother's Clothes") elbow the consolations of the middle-aged and old (Edmund White's "Reprise," John Cheever's "Falconer," Larry Kramer's "Mrs. Tefillin"). And the tragedy of AIDS is evoked in all its splendor and terror by writers as diverse as Michael Cunningham, Dennis McFarland, the late Allen Barnett, and the New Zealand writer Peter Wells. As a subcategory, these stories constitute, it seems to me, the best collection of AIDS literature yet written. It is hard to emerge from Barnett's *Fire Island* unshaken, just as it is impossible to forget the erotic games played by the men in Stephen Greco's "Good with Words," for whom the threat of HIV infection turns out to be the source of surprising arousal. Nothing easy here, nothing status quo or correct; most defiantly not the usual suspects. While most of these stories, moreover, are conventional in form, they are far from conventional in content. The traditional gay male distractions are avoided here; these writers have their fingers too firmly on the pulse of experience to waste time with any of that.

It's become common, over the last twenty years, for American gay people to think of themselves as constituting an ethnic group, a "tribe" (to borrow the language of the seventies) or a "queer nation" (to borrow the language of the eighties). Such thinking has transformed what was a sundry assortment of isolated, secretive individuals into a community capable of wielding real power, even in presidential elections. To envision homosexuality, however, as an ethnic identity is to risk forgetting that sexuality is an extremely individualistic business; that each gay man and lesbian is gay or lesbian in his or her own way. Literature confronts the perversity of individual experience. Its role has never been to promote or prescribe particular ways of being but rather to expose the fine tension that exists between the way people actually are and the way the culture they live in would have them be. Recognizing that nothing is actually wrong with us is an important and difficult step for gay men and lesbians,

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