

His Book of Memories

By JAMES WOLCOTT

"The Farewell Symphony" (Knopf, 413 pages, \$25) is a rather fancy title for a book that might have been more honestly called "Hilly Buttocks I Have Known." In this autobiographical novel—which completes, consummates and capsizes the trilogy begun with "A Boy's Own Story" and "The Beautiful Room Is Empty"—Edmund White invites us to join him as he revisits the beloved rear ends of yesteryear. This is not the sort of invitation many people will leap to accept. Even relatively tame quotations from the novel show how far Mr. White is from reviving the Genteel Tradition in American literature.

"I suppose most of them are dead now," he muses, "all those young bodies I touched and undressed and tucked in when they fell asleep, the man with just one ball, the undertaker's son with the pale body who smelled of horse manure when I plowed him." The book is a wagon train of casual pickups and intermittent boy-friends that also includes a ballet dancer ("I couldn't forget his legs were insured for a million dollars as he wrapped them around my back") and a dear Italian boy named Enea whose bouncy bottom was "as hard and round as a soccer ball." A wan exhibitionist, Mr. White bares himself as well, presenting his posterior to posterity before it sags.

"The Farewell Symphony" is in part a lament to the inevitable slump to which flesh is heir. Once Mr. White was overweight and unwanted; then, after pumping iron and popping amphetamines, he became fit and frisky; decades later, he has come full circle, no longer slim and desirable, and, worse, no longer young. A spectator again, he feels the chill of mortality, with only memories to keep his chestnuts warm. Since Mr. White has lived in Paris for years, his recollections are

supposed to bear the bittersweet fragrance of Marcel Proust (plus gym sweat). Mr. White alludes to Proust now and then in case we miss the point.

With an autobiographical hero who is clearly meant to be the author and yet not quite, "The Farewell Symphony" follows in the gay-fiction tradition of Christopher Isherwood's novels and Gore Vidal's "Two Sisters." The difference is that those books are foxy literary refinements—they mimic the memoir but play a shiftier, slier game of revelation and deception. "The Farewell Symphony" has no filtering devices or formal distance; it's all spill. Mr. White crams the page with such



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"The Farewell Symphony"
By Edmund White

graphic, gross, nonstop, indiscriminate, inside-gayworld flutter and abandon that giving the characters names seems a mere courtesy, they're such interchangeable receptacles. As if to compensate for the dearth of dramatic range in his cast, Mr. White reaches for mythic parallels ("does Medea let Jason off the hook, does Phaedra give Hippolytus an easy out?") and stokes the sex scenes until they become ever more baroque, a downtown Satyricon featuring orgies ("five tiny guests, pile-driving this guy"), leather-bar sadomasochism, golden showers and enemas. First serial rights for the book went to The New Yorker.

One of the defenses of gay promiscuity is that it is actually a Byronic quest for Love. "The great romantics always live alone since a long run can only dull the perfection of the opening night," Mr. White writes. He plucks a few lyric

strands from his cruising days (misty morning walks on Fire Island), but they are muffled by the thumping traffic his body bears. Nothing deters our narrator, not even monthly bouts of gonorrhea. (After one diagnosis, he has sex with his well-endowed doctor.) The pursuit of pleasure in this booty call is so one-track and tunnel-visioned that the reader is slightly thrown when Mr. White, who by his own rough count racked up more than 3,000 partners during his 20 years in New York, informs us that he doesn't think of himself as especially sex-driven. After all, he didn't cruise every night—sometimes he had dinner with friends. Only with the spread of AIDS does the party end and the obituaries begin. "I learned that my old secretary, William, had died, the brave little masochist who'd danced in leather and made jokes about his suffering and diabetes."

Arch phrases like "brave little masochist" make it difficult to remember or believe that Mr. White was once a dashing stylist—one of the few living writers singled out for praise by Vladimir Nabokov. "A Boy's Own Story," perhaps his best book, retains its snug denim fit, and the nonfiction collection "The Burning Library" shows literary application. But the writing here is coy, lax and sloshed with bathos—when one lover leaves, he says "the Hudson [River] ran backwards, salty with the tides of tears." Until its melancholy end, "The Farewell Symphony" purrs as if Mr. White thinks he's charming us with the moth-eaten tapestry of his sex life and literary endeavor. Edmund White the writer has given way to Edmund White the trashy raconteur. It's the same fate that befell Truman Capote, and it wasn't pretty then either.

Mr. Wolcott is a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair*.

fall BOOKS

As his new novel stirs up controversy in America, **Edmund White** talks about gay sex and gay censorship

By Sarah Schulman

SCHULMAN: The title of your novel *The Farewell Symphony* [Knopf, \$25] and its cataloging of your life and loves imply that you may have expected to die of AIDS complications before its publication. Now that you are, hopefully, outliving your own death, how do you feel about having thrown caution to the wind?

WHITE: I started it as my last book. I've always depended on charm both in life and in work. I didn't want to be quite so seductive, and I didn't mind showing myself in an unattractive light.

Do you feel that the waning of the sense of crisis around gay men and AIDS has left a community that has miraculously "coped," or is there fury, despair, and regret waiting to be unleashed?

I think there will be people over 30 now who have survived and who will feel themselves becoming more and more marginalized by younger people who aren't as aware of the whole battle. That's going to be painful in a very different way. It's one thing to think, *We all went through this together and survived it, and here's my story of what I went through.* It's going to be another thing to have nobody want to read those stories.

So what's going to happen to AIDS literature?

I don't know.

The Farewell Symphony was trashed by Larry Kramer in *The Advocate* for representing your promiscuity. Your novel *Caracole* was obstructed by Susan Sontag because she saw herself unflatteringly depicted. What do you feel when powerful people try to hurt you professionally?

In both cases they were friends, so I felt betrayed. I had sent Larry proofs of the book. In the manuscript I claimed that I was the one who invented the Gay Men's Health Crisis. Larry called up and said, "I think it was me, and I've told all the historians it was me. Could you please change that?" and I said, "Fine." Otherwise all he said to me was, "Ed, Ed, you didn't have all that sex." I said, "But, Larry, I did."

Then, the next thing I know, there's this explosion, choosing me as a focal point for his diatribe. "Sucking cock in bushes, is that all we are? What about Tolstoy, Flaubert?" and so on. Forgetting that Tolstoy and Flaubert had enormous scandals on their hands; Flaubert had an obscenity trial. Why didn't Larry call me and talk it over? He misrepresented my novel, and he misrepresented *The Joy of Gay Sex*, which

came out in 1977, not on the "eve" of the health crisis. Even if it had, I'm not a crystal-ball reader, and nobody in 1980 would have known that in 1981 there was going to be the AIDS virus.

People say to me, "It's good; it's controversy. It's going to sell copies." But I don't feel that at all. I just feel angry and then kind of wounded. I respect Susan Sontag.... I still have dreams that she and I will become friends again. But Larry—I just wash my hands of it. I never want to speak to him again.

Although you've maintained a patrician image, you've always been open about your sexual histories and desires—hus-

tlers, unsafe sex, masochism, phone sex, enemas, and endless tricking. This stands in contrast to what many white gay men have been calling for: gay marriage and monogamy. Is this the time for gay people to adapt heterosexual mores?

No. First of all, about my image: I never quite know what that comes from. My parents were both Texans;

my mother never wore shoes until she was 16. I went to the University of Michigan, not Harvard. I never got a single penny from anybody. The minute I graduated college, I was completely on my own. I'm earning 100% of my living from my pen. Being seen as a patrician has to do with the way I talk or act or look or something, but it has nothing to do with the social realities. I've always struggled to make a living.

In terms of monogamy, I think that's absurd. People who are ranting in that way are going to lose all credibility with younger people. To say to some 20-year-old gay man "You should become monogamous" is crazy, since what they really want is a lot of sex. I have always seen gay life as an alternative to straight life. If gay life meant just reproducing straight life, I'd rather become a monk. ■



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The White party

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