

Pema Baker

An Interview With Edmund White

Edmund White is an American writer and literary critic. He teaches writing at Princeton University. Although born in Cincinnati, Ohio (January 13, 1940) he grew up in Chicago, Texas and Michigan. White studied Chinese at the University of Michigan and later worked in New York as a journalist. From 1983 to 1996 he lived in France, which later became a setting for his fiction.

White's best-known and widely loved work, *A Boy's Own Story*, is the first volume of a semi-autobiographical series of novels that continued with *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* and *The Farewell Symphony*. Together, these books describe and reflect on the life stages of a gay man from boyhood to middle age. Many gay men in the English-speaking world, having first encountered White's work in their youth, have aged alongside the protagonists in these novels.

In 2006, White published an autobiography entitled *My Lives*. Typically unconventional, *My Lives* is structured by theme rather than chronology. *My Lives* is both forthright and brave. In 2009 White brought out *City Boy*, a memoir about New York in the 1970s.

White is a writer of significance for all readers, irrespective of their gender or sexuality. Indeed, some have controversially claimed that White ‘invented’ the genre of Gay Fiction. The question of invention is not core to White’s work however, what’s important is that he has consistently produced writing that is challenging, mature and lyrical.

Polari Journal is pleased to publish this interview as part of its inaugural issue.

Polari: Thank you for agreeing to answer our questions. Firstly, could we go back to the beginning? When you first began to write, were there any landmark books or writers that encouraged you to think that you might make a career of writing?

Edmund: I was very attracted to André Gide’s journals, to Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, to the lightly homoerotic and despairing and mystical atmosphere of Hermann Hesse’s novels and later, in the 1960s, to Jean Genet’s five novels and to Nabokov’s erotic and transgressive but solidly heterosexual *Lolita*. Of course Nabokov did write *Pale Fire*, a tender if satirical look at a homosexual madman.

Polari: Can you discuss any LGBT writers in the generations following yours who have received the same degree of critical and cultural recognition?

Edmund: There are many gay writers with an important readership! David Leavitt, for instance, is twenty-five years younger than I am and he has published many

excellent books, including his recent masterpiece *The Indian Clerk*. Alan Hollinghurst is the best gay writer England has ever produced and all four of his novels are better (and more influential) than anything I've ever written. In America we have many young gay novelists of extraordinary talent, starting with Michael Cunningham and including Vestal McIntyre and Peter Cameron and David McConnell.... What we don't have are gay readers!

Polari: What are *you* reading right now?

Edmund: I've been reading lots and lots of French fiction and non-fiction. Right now I'm reading a biographical study of a paedophile author by Gilles Sebhan – *Tony Duvert: L'enfant silencieux*. I'm rereading masses of Peter Carey since next week I'm interviewing him (with Claire Messud) at the 42nd street library in New York. I'm also rereading most of Martin Amis, whose new novel I'm reviewing for the *New York Review of Books*.

Polari: Over the years, you have produced work that is both revealing and poignant. Has it been difficult for you to 'lay your life bare' as it were?

Edmund: Fellow Americans never ask that question, oddly enough. I guess because we're a nation of exhibitionists.

Polari: Can you share something of your writing process with our readers? Do you have a philosophy behind the way you write or a specific kind of practice that helps you to go from blank page to completed manuscript?

Edmund: I write fiction by hand in fancy bound notebooks. That way I'm forced to keep going ahead. I like the feel of writing by hand. It's slower and more intimate, more closely connected to the brain-eye-hand loop. I often make up characters or base characters on friends and then I give them moments in my life to live. I'm incapable of writing anything that I haven't experienced in one way or another.

Polari: What are you writing right now?

Edmund: I am writing a novel about a straight man and a gay man. I follow their friendship from the 1960s through the 1980s. Set in New York. It's a subject I've often observed in life but almost never seen treated in fiction. Of course there are tons of gay subjects that still haven't been touched.

Polari: You are also currently teaching writing at Princeton University, how are you finding that?

Edmund: I've been teaching at various universities (Yale, Brown, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, New York University, Temple, and Princeton) ever since the mid-seventies. I think teaching puts the teacher more in touch with young people--their way of talking, their attitudes, and their culture--than a mere exposure to cinema or TV or literature would do. It's also useful to teach literary technique as a practical set of tools to students, since the teacher also benefits from that kind of research.

Polari: As a writer who has weathered a lot of change in the literary marketplace, in particular with relation to Gay and Lesbian Publishing, do you feel that the situation is better or worse for LGBT writers than it was a few decades ago?

Edmund: I think it's definitely better than it was forty years ago and worse than twenty years ago. Forty years ago there were few "out" gay editors and those that were closeted usually rejected gay books out of fear. Twenty or thirty years ago, however, there were about seventy gay and lesbian bookstores in America and dozens of gay publications, not to mention thriving university LGBT student organizations. Now almost all of the gay bookstores have closed down. A real loss, since LGBT book shops were community centers (a good alternative to bars for recovering alcoholics) and they carried the backlist of a lesbian or gay author....of course people rarely discover new titles they want to buy on Amazon – serendipity is much more likely to occur in a specialized book store.

Polari: As someone often labeled as a 'gay writer' have you any comment to make about the difference, if any, between LGBT and heterosexual writers in terms of the road to publication?

Edmund: I think the market for LGBT books has pretty much evaporated and it's very hard for young gay and lesbian writers to get published. That's why we need more publications like Polari!

Polari: On that point, in terms of readers, what do you think about the widely circulated notion of a shrinking readership? In particular, do you feel that the LGBT readership is shrinking?

Edmund: In America there's a real 'dumbing down' of the entire population, including the gay population.

Polari: Although lesbian readerships seem very strong, even for marginal genres like poetry, the reverse seems to be true for gay men. How can gay male readerships be grown in the future?

Edmund: The entire book industry is being re-thought now. Ten years from now perhaps books will be written to be read on I-Pads with color tie-ins and links to relevant Wikipedia articles. Or maybe not. People still seem to have a fondness for the actual book artifact and indeterminate fiction that requires readers' participation ("hypertext") hasn't had much appeal either.

Polari: We at Polari have also noticed that the phrase 'the death of Gay and Lesbian publishing' gets bandied about a bit these days. What do you think of that? Is Gay and Lesbian publishing dead?

Edmund: If it's true let's not talk about it too loudly. We must all pretend that gay art is flourishing!

Polari: Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or mention?

Edmund: About five million sexier and more heartening topics, but you'll have to ask me at a later time.

Polari: Thank you for your time Edmund! We at Polari look forward to exploring some of those five million 'sexy' topics in the future.

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