

THE TALENTED MR. STEWARD

San Francisco's Connection to the Gay Bestseller *Shocking the Nation*

*Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward,
Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade,*
by Justin Spring

In transparency, rather than review *Secret Historian*, I can best, as a SOMA historian, give heads-up about the authenticity of my friend Justin Spring's important biography of my longtime friend Samuel Steward. Born in 1909, Steward defied the stress of the anti-gay century when owning one gay photograph meant jail. He defiantly documented gay culture in his books, sex diaries (1924-1973), tattoo journals, and activist input to his beloved mentor Dr. Kinsey at the Institute for Sex (1949-1956). His anxiety-driven life was an existential pile-on of family dysfunction, literary ambition, alcohol, celebrities, speed, hustlers, censorship, inter-racial S&M, rage against ageing, and a soul shared with an unborn twin in his left testicle. As Gertrude Stein warned her "dear Sammy," his every gorgeous vice sliced away at his self-esteem until he died December 31, 1993.

New York author Spring was researching his book *Paul Cadmus: The Male Nude* when in 2001 he discovered the "cold case" of Steward stored in a San Francisco attic. Since 1969, I have been eyewitness to Steward's story, and can testify to the pitch-perfect authenticity of Spring's character study which downloads the analog diaries and letters without overpowering Steward's outrageously risqué voice.

At Stonewall, gay character changed. Reading *Secret Historian*, you see why it had to. And, why, if it hadn't, you'd still be in the closet.

Sam Steward was a *bon-vivant* chum whose life, like Christopher Isherwood's, was a cabaret. Sunbathing in France in 1938 with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, fleeing Nazis by ship, he was an ambitious boy from Ohio who knew how to sing for his supper at the tables of Stein-Toklas, Thornton Wilder, Oscar Wilde's lover Bosie, George Platt Lynes, Tennessee Williams, Kenneth Anger, the Hells Angels, and, even, my lover Robert Mapplethorpe and me when Steward joined what he playfully dubbed my "*Drummer* Salon" which included San Francisco poets Ronald Johnson and Thom Gunn.

Steward, always pursuing publishers, loved *Drummer*, San Francisco's longest-running gay magazine. As editor-in-chief, I printed his cop-fetish story in my "authenticity issue," *Drummer* 21 (March 1978). Simultaneously, for February 9, 1978, from my *Drummer* desk, I arranged an iconic dinner party "mixer" at the home of leather-priest Jim Kane and chef Ike Barnes. The guests were legendary *Drummer* contributors who had never before met: Steward; Tom of Finland and his lover Veli on Tom's first visit to America; *Drummer* art director, A. Jay; Oscar stalker Robert Opel, founder of SOMA's first gallery Fey-Way; and Robert Mapplethorpe with whom Steward shared a taste for kinky Polaroids and black men. I watched Steward, a graduate of Stein's "Charmed Circle," glow in the convergence of the kind of shining company he had adored since youth.

When Steward was seventeen in 1926, he recalled to me on audiotape, he blew silent-screen star Rudolph Valentino, while sneaking snips of pubic hair and enshrining Valentino's down-low DNA in a gold reliquary he kept forever. That's when his literary, art, and erotic hoarding started. Gay treasures piled up in his Berkeley cottage, and then the attic of his executor, expert librarian Michael Williams.

Steward, immensely generous to friends, romanced straight women; adored lesbians; fetishized black, Latino, and straight men; and spouted Old School queer theories knocking the wannabe masculinity of gay men. He chased Gide and Genet, ran from James Purdy, balled Rock Hudson, tattooed James Dean, and wrote screenplays for San Francisco filmmaker J. Brian. His sex-tourist diaries of San Francisco (1953-1954) give eyewitness to

bars, baths, and “sailor sex” so wild at the Embarcadero YMCA he was banned from Y’s everywhere.

As popular university professor and zealous masochist (1930s-1980s), he worshiped students and rough-trade Navy seafood. To get his hands on young recruits, he learned tattooing and, while still teaching, opened “Phil Sparrow’s Tattoo Joynt” (1956-1963) in a sleazy Chicago arcade with coin-operated sailors whom he paid thousands at three bucks a pop. Wrongly accused of child murders, he fled west to Oakland, opening his “Anchor Tattoo Shop” (1964-1970) where the Hells Angels adopted him.

Inking 150,000 men, Steward pioneered today’s tattooing style, mentoring young San Franciscan Ed Hardy and Chicago leatherman Cliff Raven who, like Steward, was intimate inside Chuck Renslow’s Family. Spring reveals that Steward documented how Renslow, the great unrequited love of his life, and the artist Etienne organized 1950s homomale leather culture around Kris Studio, *Tomorrow’s Man*, the Gold Coast bar, and 1960s physique contests that evolved into the International Mister Leather contest (IML).

Steward and I met in 1969 when he was sixty, and I was thirty. With Kinsey long dead, we both feared he might die without a post-Stonewall update. So I became the first gay scholar to interview him. Our session was recorded in his Berkeley cottage (1972) before the *Advocate*, the *Bay Area Reporter*, *Drummer*, and gay book publishers existed, and a dozen years before younger writers such as Joseph Bean, John Preston, and Gayle Rubin courted him. Sam’s self-esteem bucked up; he felt triumphantly validated by my arts grant to record him for the *Journal of Popular Culture*. But he stipulated I never use his narrative while he was alive, “because I have to live off my story.” He meant dinner parties, autobiographical essays, and university lectures.

On my audiotape, Sam’s voice rings as clear as in Spring’s book. He spoke frankly about his literary life, affairs, beatings, arrests, and divine lunches in Paris, Rome, and San Francisco. He smoked his cigarettes, tilted his glass, and told true oral history of sex, intrigue, revenge, and literary gossip in phrases so authentically measured I realized he had long ago decided precisely how his story should be told.

I believed every word, and gave my thirty-year-old transcripts to analytical scholar Spring who, empowered by Michael Williams' salvific attic archive, fit eighty-four years of Steward's drama into his astute book that finds a universal gay story in Sam's specific life. Steward would have loved Spring. Once again, Sam sings for his supper. *Secret Historian* succeeds as an amazing cautionary tale and awesome remembrance of things past.