

Spill a Drop for Lost Brothers....

LARRY TOWNSEND

Author, *The Leatherman's Handbook*

Editor's Note: For more than thirty years, leather authors Jack Fritscher and Larry Townsend were longtime friends often collaborating on books such as the S&M anthology *Rainbow County and Other Stories* which won the 1997 National Small Press Book Award for Erotica and was published by Townsend's LT Publications. Fritscher, often photographing Townsend in stills and video, is also the founding San Francisco editor of *Drummer* and the author of fifteen books including the Lammy Award Finalist "Drummer novel" *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir of San Francisco 1970-1982*, the nonfiction biography *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*, and the leather-history "Silver Anniversary Introduction" to Larry Townsend's *Leatherman's Handbook*.

Larry Townsend, author of the iconic 1972 *Leatherman's Handbook*, died at 2:40 PM, Tuesday, July 29 at Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. Born a Scorpio with Aries rising on October 27, 1930, he was 77 when overcome by complications from pneumonia. Writing for forty years under the pen name "Larry Townsend," he authored nearly one hundred novels including *Run Little Leather Boy* (1968), *The Faustus Contract* (1969), and the gay heritage landmark guide *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972) at such erotic presses as Greenleaf Classics and the Other Traveler imprint of Olympia Press.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

Dissatisfied with those straight publishers' corporate policies regarding royalties and copyrights, he broke free as an independent artist-writer in 1973 and founded LT Publications, the first dedicated gay leather book publisher in history.

Because Larry Townsend noted in his *Leatherman's Handbook* and throughout his life, that vanilla gay history characteristically suppresses leather history to keep it invisible, it is worth noting that for four years, Larry Townsend was the only specifically gay book publisher in America.

In the timeline of gay book publishing, Felice Picano did not found his SeaHorse Press in Manhattan until 1977. It was not until 1980 that Violet Quill authors Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and their New York City clique began publishing and reviewing and awarding one another's books as East Coast novelists who, they claimed, "founded modern gay writing." It was as if West Coast gay writers like Sam Steward (Phil Andros), John Rechy, Larry Townsend, and Jack Fritscher—all born before the Violet Quill swans—had not had books published beginning in the 1930s for Steward, and the 1960s for the others who had significant books in print as early as 1972.

Pioneering West Coast gay publishing, Larry Townsend had no time for queens in Manhattan. As an author and publisher, he set his sites on marketing to the entire United States as well as Europe. He was a mail-order retail genius. His books, distributed internationally, have been translated into several languages, and have sold more than a million copies.

Because Larry Townsend noted that gay history characteristically suppresses leather history to keep it invisible, it is worth noting that for four years on the West Coast—before Felice Picano founded his SeaHorse Press in Manhattan in 1977, and seven years before Violet Quill authors Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and their salon in 1980 began publishing one another's books as East Coast novelists "who" they claimed, "founded modern gay writing"—Larry Townsend was the only specifically gay book publisher in America. He was a mail-order retail genius. His books, distributed internationally, have been translated into several languages, and have sold more than a million copies.

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PREPPIE BOY TO STAFF SERGEANT TO SEX TOURIST TO LEATHERMAN

Growing up as a teenager of Swiss-German extraction in Los Angeles a few houses from Noel Coward and Irene Dunne, he ate cookies with his neighbor Laura Hope Crews who was Aunt Pittypat in *Gone with the Wind*. He attended the prestigious Peddie School, came out at the primeval LA leather bar “Cinema” on Santa Monica Boulevard, and was stationed as Staff Sergeant in charge of NCOIC Operations of Air Intelligence Squadrons for nearly five years with the US Air Force in Germany (1950-1954). During his European service, he day-tripped through Europe reading sadomasochistic literary classics in cafes and gathering post-war leather intelligence in cottages—all later reported in *The Leatherman’s Handbook*.

Completing his tour of duty, he entered into the 1950s underground of the LA leather scene where he and film star Montgomery Clift shared a lover. That romantic triad ended when Clift spirited the ham in their sandwich away to Cuba for the wild New Year’s Eve before Castro marched his revolution into Havana on January 8, 1959.

In the mid-1960s, he began photographing each of his dungeon partners for a scrapbook which he continued to fill for most of his life. With his degree in industrial psychology from UCLA (1957), he worked in the private sector and as a probation officer for juveniles with the Forestry Service. He was a lifelong animal lover famously favoring Doberman Pincher dogs, and Abyssinian cats who were the only creatures ever really able to top him.

INTRODUCING THE LEATHER “ARCHETRIBE” TO ITSELF

He began his pioneering activism in the LA politics of gay liberation in the early 1960s. By popular culture or academic standards, *The Leatherman’s Handbook*, published when he was 42, is a rather extraordinary study written by an eyewitness participant. Even though his queries and conclusions were mostly based on the pre-Stonewall leather culture of leather males, leatherfolk of all genders (including female leatherboys and FTMs) have for years,

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according to a diversity of fan letters in his files and responses at live conferences, read, enjoyed, learned, and adapted to themselves the basic leather tropes and codes of the leather lifestyle from his *Leatherman's Handbook*.

Stylistically, he was the first leather author to coin new portmanteau keywords tying *leather* and *sex* and *men* together to form the now standard vocabulary of *leathersex* and *leathermen*. He also dug deep to the rugged roots of Anglo-Saxon frankness to spell *cum* the nasty way so that it looks to the eye as onomatopoeic as it sounds.

Miffed at the queenstream's relentless pop-culture disinformation about leathermen, including that which would become the editorial attitude of *The Advocate*, he stormed the barricades of the politically correct leather-hating "sweater crowd" when he wrote this opening paragraph in his "Introduction" to *The Leatherman's Handbook*:

"There have been many books printed over the last few years dealing with various aspects of homosexual behavior and lifestyle. In all of these the leatherman is constantly neglected—neglected or ridiculed by the fluff or the 'straight' reporter who wrote the book. In reading these previous efforts...I have been more than a little annoyed. So have many of my fellow leather people."

As a teenager, three months older than James Dean, he was an upstart 1950s rebel with a cause, seduced by the charisma of Brando in *The Wild One* and by the totemic leather photography of Chuck Renslow and Etienne at Kris Studio. As a man and a psychologist in the 1960s and 1970s, he was a "leather identity" author intent on securing gender legitimacy for leathermen uncloseting their virilized selves in a Stonewall culture of gay liberation whose media image and sexual politics were dominated by effeminacy and drag.

When *Drummer* betrayed the masculine-identified trust of its readers with its absurd camp cover of *Drummer 9* (Halloween 1976), psychologist Larry Townsend was not surprised to learn of outraged men threatening to cancel their subscriptions because they judged "camp" to be taboo in *Drummer* where masculinity was totem. As a unit of measure of leathermen's mindset in the 1970s, the words most repeated in the *Drummer* classifieds in

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which readers wrote personal ads *identifying* themselves, as well as what quality they were seeking in sex partners, were *masculinity* and *masculine*.

In 1972, as president of the “Homophile Effort for Legal Protection” which he helped found in 1969 to defend gays during and after entrapment arrests by the LAPD, he led a group in founding the *H.E.L.P. Newsletter*, the forebear of *Drummer* magazine founded in LA in 1975. Larry Townsend himself chose not to accept an invitation to be a co-founder of *Drummer* because, among other reasons in the cage-fighting that was the LA social scene, he did not want to be part of a magazine with a demanding deadline every thirty days.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF SELF-FASHIONING LEATHER IDENTITY: REPORTING A LIFESTYLE CREATES THE LIFESTYLE

Nevertheless, Larry Townsend’s influence shaped the psychology and the business plan of *Drummer*. According to the new leather-heritage book *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, Larry Townsend invented a synergistic formula of “marketing and identity” for 1970s men self-fashioning themselves as homo-masculine men in that first decade of gay lib when women were self-fashioning themselves in feminism. In principle, his *Leatherman’s Handbook* reported the leather lifestyle and thus generated more emerging leather lifestyle.

Absorbing Townsend’s synergy into its editorial policy, *Drummer* built its monthly issues and its circulation by reporting on the homomale leather lifestyle it was creating, and thus empowering. For instance, leather history’s first cigar-fetish feature, “Cigar Blues,” and first cigar fiction, “Cigar Sarge,” in *Drummer* 22 (May 1978) caused the debut of cigars in leather bars five minutes after the issue hit the newstands.

Townsend’s pioneering *Leatherman’s Handbook* was the first important nonfiction analysis of leatherfolk in the twentieth century. It pairs perfectly with William Carney’s leather-identity novel *The Real Thing* (1968), a book which Townsend admired and cited specifically in his *Handbook*.

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EYEWITNESS *RASHOMON*

As a writer and photographer and as a leather player, Larry Townsend was an eyewitness of evolving gay liberation in Los Angeles bars and bike clubs, including the political outfall of the infamous LAPD raid of the *Drummer* Charity “Slave Auction” at the Mark IV Bath on April 10, 1976, when forty-some leather-folk were arrested and charged with breaking a Civil-War-era law forbidding “slavery.”

He himself was not arrested because he had spent the evening practicing “slavery” in his own photo-studio dungeon at his home in the hills on Sunset Plaza Drive above West Hollywood where many a bound-and-gagged slave experienced an S&M session feeling Larry’s greatest “hits” while his stereo speakers boomed out tapes of the ominous, fervent hammer blows of Mahler’s *Sixth* as well as his dark terminal *Ninth*.

Townsend, who could have written a *Rashomon* novel about the *Drummer* “Slave Auction,” documented his subjective version of that highly charged debacle between the besieged leather community and the fascistic LAPD Police Chief Ed Davis in his historical “Introduction” to *Gay San Francisco*.

LEATHER COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

For more than thirty years, whenever a leather organization or fund-raiser invited him to speak on a conference panel or to read from his work or to judge a leather contest, Larry Townsend rarely turned down any opportunity to help his hosts succeed. He was honored with many awards from the leather community, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Pantheon of Leather.

In the 1990s, he spoke his own personal oral history into the microphones of interviewers Jack Rinella for the Leather Archives & Museum and Bob Wingate for *Bound and Gagged Magazine*. His last public appearance was at Graylin Thornton’s “Mr. San Diego Leather Appreciation Dinner” in San Diego during March 2008.

He was as much a celebrity in London and Berlin and Manhattan and Chicago as he was in Los Angeles. In San Francisco, late in his life, even after the VCR and the Internet began making

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books an endangered species, he could pack a crowd into A Different Light Bookstore at 18th and Castro. In 1996, the audience loved seeing him make an entrance into that bookstore with a nearly naked young leather slave on one leash, and his Doberman dog on another. When both slave and dog “sat” at his stern command, he brought down the house.

DON'T FUCK WITH “THE TOWNSEND”

Writing in the *Bay Area Reporter*, venerable leather columnist Mister Marcus noted that the death of his peer was a loss to the “leather universe.” Larry Townsend was a huge personality who lived life large as a twentieth-century artist whose moods could have been charted by the National Weather Service, and whose roiling Rolodex of friends and frenemies might well be turned into a plot with arias like the operas he loved. At the Los Angeles Opera next season, a new young couple in formal clothes, not knowing whom they replace, will smile as they sit down taking their turn in a treasured pair of permanent seats surrendered only in death by the leather couple who through the years never missed an opening night..

In the way that Larry Townsend had dumped exploitative publishers like Greenleaf Classics and Other Traveler thirty-five years before to protect his earliest copyrights, he died pressing a wildly scandalous lawsuit—chronicled by *Publishers Weekly*—against many GLBT bookstores and a contemporary publisher he alleged had violated the intellectual property of his latest copyrights by reprinting his books without authorization, and without paying royalties.

In the last week of his conscious life, he made a *mea culpa* decision to remove most of the GLBT bookstores from his lawsuit because he realized the bookstores were not part of his alleged problem with the publisher. The lawsuit itself exhibits something of his character. Of all the gay civil rights he championed, his lifelong passion was to alert GLBT people not to be so masochistic that they sign over their copyrights to publishers in order to have their writing, drawings, photographs, and videos make it into print.

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Aware of the importance of legal paperwork to gays and to the preservation of gay culture, Larry Townsend in 2007 wrote a codicil to his will designating that his manuscripts, correspondence, taped interviews, original photographs, and artwork be collected and archived at the John Hay Library at Brown University because it is a private institution that receives no public funds and so cannot be censored by the kind of lawmakers and politicians who censored the leathersex photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe in 1989.

THE *DRUMMER* SALON

Along with Robert Mapplethorpe, and Robert Opel who streaked the 1974 Oscars, Larry Townsend was a member of the sex, art, and salon around *Drummer*.

“I’m not a *Drummer* writer,” he wrote of himself, “I’m a novelist whose books were often excerpted in *Drummer*. In 1978, Jack Fritscher, the new editor of *Drummer*, took me to supper and began to convince me over pasta that the San Francisco *Drummer* of the late 1970s was a different *Drummer* than Los Angeles *Drummer*. After more months of Jack’s friendly persuasion, I came on board because so many of the fans of my books were also *Drummer* subscribers.”

Larry Townsend’s signature “Leather Notebook” column appeared in *Drummer* for twelve years from 1980 to 1992, and continued in *Honcho* to Spring 2008.

PAGING ANDREA BOCELLI AND SARAH BRIGHTMAN: “TIME TO SAY GOODBYE”

Larry Townsend’s last novel *TimeMasters* was published April 2008. His last writing was his “Introduction” to the book *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer* subtitled *A Memoir of the Sex, Art, and Salon of Drummer Magazine 1975-1999* (June 2008).

His domestic partner of forty-three years, Fred Yerkes, died July 8, 2006.

When gay marriage became legal in California on June 16, 2008, Larry Townsend said, “I’d like to have someone to marry. Fred and I would have been married. Thank God, though, for the

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domestic-partner law because it saved me so much trouble when Fred died.”

Four weeks later he was unconscious in Cedars Sinai ICU; two weeks later, without regaining consciousness and surrounded by his family, he died, fifteen minutes after his power of attorney directed he be taken off life support.

At his own request, Larry Townsend was cremated with no funeral or memorial service. A suitable keening might be an hour spent reading from one of his novels or from *The Leatherman's Handbook*.

He is survived by his sister, a nephew, and two nieces who were present for him in his life and who cared for him during his final illness.