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## THIRTEEN YEARS AFTER LARRY HIS 90th BIRTHDAY THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF *THE LEATHERMAN'S HANDBOOK*

Thirteen years after Larry Townsend's death, I am writing this valedictory memoir about my friend on his ninetieth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of his *Leatherman's Handbook* which was the first analysis of leatherfolk in the twentieth century. For all the praise around his legend, no one has yet bothered to study his life, his writing, or his historical context. No one has mounted exhibits of the photos he shot, or of the hundreds of erotic drawings and photographs he commissioned as a gay arts patron to illustrate his publications. At age 82, I am writing about this writer, this activist, this man in full, warts and all, from my personal experience of him and of his big booming voice which I am quoting from his own vintage words folded inside yellowing periodicals, nostalgic letters, fading faxes, and recorded phone conversations.

I'm not exposing anything secret here about him or his inner circle of *Drummer* editor Jeanne Barney, *Drummer* publisher John Embry, film director Roger Earl, and film producer Terry Legrand, because in life, and in business on page and screen, these exhibitionists, always acting out, lived large in plain sight, and doubled-dared anyone to make a crack. While I'm diving deep in this memoir, in this dissonant Hollywood musical-comedy, I could, in fact, dive deeper into my memory and archives, but these people who were my friends are too recently deceased to go there in this "quantum writing" that folds time elliptically while repeating a few stories to stir in spiraling new facts and feelings each time with more *Rashomon* information. This apologia for

them contains an apology to them. Because I am a fallible human writing about other fallible humans, I wish my commemoration to give the benefit of the doubt to all the living and dead. So what I opine in this memoir I write allegedly. Didn't Chaucer, grown old, ask forgiveness for any slights in his *Canterbury Tales*? I'm just a documentarian letting the found footage play, like Magnus Bishop, the pop-culture professor, who is the narrator of my novel *Some Dance to Remember*.

After the Stonewall Riot changed gay character in 1969, its aggressive violent energy, affecting Larry, swept virulent through gay culture igniting the divisive gay civil war that began at the Stonewall Inn and continues to this day in politically-correct cancel culture over who and what is authentic, proper, and kosher enough to represent gay folk. For instance, gay literary criticism is often twisted by all kinds of purity tests around politics, sex, race, and gender. For all its vaunted equality and diversity, it is often applied exclusively, arbitrarily, and without nuance. Can politically-correct thinking cancel critical thinking?

Larry Townsend as avatar and victim is a case in point of "who gets to march in the Pride Parade." The gay literary establishment that recruits diversity had no place at the table for gay folk-author Townsend, and little understanding of his hearty gay pop-culture literature that spoke authentically to the psyche at the heart of male homosexuality. To his credit as a psychologist and healing mentor, he dared champion consensual sadomasochism as an empowering analgesic ritual for men trying to cope counterphobically with PTSD caused by exposure to lifelong homophobia.

San Francisco novelist Frank Norris wrote: "A literature that cannot be vulgarized is not literature at all." *Vulgar* means *popular* in the same good way the Vulgate Bible stories were written as accessible pulp-fiction for ordinary people. In literary reckonings, Larry tried to shrug off the insult that his best-selling pop-art vulgate novels were squeezed out of the gay canon, but a draft up your kilt is always cold.

Canons are a construct of social engineering. Canons rarely open. Canons stay stodgy because of competitive passions over incoming reputations and politics, as well as over ages-old

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**HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK**

bourgeois fears that formerly illegal adult subject matter and vocabulary, no matter how brilliant or essential, will somehow taint the polite literary canon, lose arts funding, threaten classrooms of innocent students, and ruin the reputations of publishers, bookstores, and journals that acknowledge it. You know. *Ulysses*. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. *Howl*.

The canon of American pop music rejected rap before accepting a vulgate art form that is as essential to Black culture as literary erotica is to gay culture. S&M literary erotica is to mainstream gay literature what tough-and-sexy film noir is to mainstream Hollywood studio family fare. Like the named genres of "Gay Mysteries" and "Gay Sci-Fi," this genre, often historicized as "Gay Pulp Fiction," might be more distinctly dubbed "Gay Literotica" or "Gay Leatherotica."

Thanks to scholars of progress and balance, there is a post-Stonewall reclamation effort around "lost" LGBT Literotica. One champion of this genre of gay American literature is Harvard professor Michael Bronski who thanked Larry Townsend for his help in gathering research material for Bronski's nonfiction book, *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps*. In his "Introduction," Bronski wrote that while reclaiming

this literature can only have positive effects on how we view the queer past, there is also a danger that these books could become part of what is referred to as the gay canon. This would be a terrible, and I think, unhealthy fate... the idea of a "gay canon" is not only unnecessary but unhelpful. In his essay, "The Personal Is the Political," Edmund White notes, "I myself am in favor of desacralizing literature, of dismantling the idea of a few essential books, of retiring the whole concept of a canon."

Larry on the West Coast would have said to these East Coast gatekeepers. "Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Nice theory." But in practice, he wanted in the door.

This is a memoir, and only that, of a man who helped create the gay culture that drove him mad.