

7

**LARRY'S GOLDEN AGE: STONEWALL TO AIDS
POLITICS AND PLAGUE THWART STUDIES OF
THE LIEGE LORD OF LEATHER
GAY LITERARY HISTORY CANNOT LOOK AWAY**

When the Psychedelic 1960s exploded in a glitter bomb at the 1969 Stonewall riot, gay character changed. Larry seized the 1970s before AIDS changed us again in 1981. His articles of revolution and novels of revelation became textbooks for students learning leather culture. During the ten glorious years of sexual freedom after the publication of *The Leatherman's Handbook* in 1972, Larry became the liege lord of leather. He changed gay sexuality by offering S&M as a rite of male passage in a politically-correct decade dismantling the role of paternal parenting. He paved the leather runway for *Drummer* magazine, Robert Mapplethorpe, and gay S&M films while creating audiences for them all by schooling the taste, and affirming the fancies, of millions of leatherfolk.

When the 1970s rolled over to the 1980s, credentialed critics began publishing articles about the Townsend effect on gay culture, but AIDS all too quickly sucker-punched the positive scholarship gaining momentum around his provocative work. Some vanilla gatekeepers desperately seeking a scapegoat to sacrifice or a witch to burn screamed that S&M sex caused the plague. In 1985, *Drummer* issue 87 quoted one critic, John Lauritsen, a member of the Gay Liberation Front since 1969, who preached that poppers, stereotyped by many as an essential S&M drug, caused AIDS. *Drummer* 99 rebutted him by quoting Dr. Bruce Voeller, the man who coined the phrase "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" and who wrote that anti-popper crusaders were often too politically motivated to discuss the issue.

Suddenly, Typhoid Larry and Sam Steward, and all us leath-er-otica authors had our thousands of published pages virtually burned by fundamentalist queer reactionaries who otherwise before HIV had marched against censorship and discrimination. Frankly, I didn't go out looking for the Gay Liberation Front as an antagonist in this memoir, but everywhere I turned in Larry's archive, there it was in clipping after clipping. Even so, there is joy to be found in many other early critiques. In the *Philadelphia Gay News*, 13, April 16-29, 1982, poet Ian Young, author Sam Steward, and college lecturer Brandon Judell wrote about Larry, leather culture, and the psychology of S&M.

Ian Young in his essay, "S&M: The Initials Also Stand for Sex Magic," assayed the rise of cancel culture while explaining S&M relationships and the magical thinking that sustains gay sex. He made a point about S&M serving the gay psyche: "Gay relationships, simply because there are no social models, can create themselves out of their own needs." As an eyewitness, he peeled back the intramural gay civil war waged against "politically incorrect" S&M identities and desires and literature by judgmental mainstream vanilla gays and Marxist leather gays whose power trip is blacklisting, censoring, and shaming writers like Larry. Young, even though he wrote that "Larry's scene and approach are different from mine," made his point specific:

John Rechy is in town, to debate about S&M....He's against it. Like most opponents of S&M, Rechy links it with Hitlerism. Does he believe it? The S&Mers I know are for the most part as politically conventional as everyone else....It used to be alleged that all homos are Commies. The Communists described homosexuality as "the fascist perversion." But "fascist" now means anyone of whose politics or activities the speaker strongly disapproves. Virtually all attacks on S&M are repeats of non-gays' attacks on gays. The same illogic, the same emotional hyperbole, the same earnest repetition of untruths....

S&M is primarily erotic theater. Its aim is pleasure-giving and therapeutic: It offers assimilation of

experiences that in “reality” might be very unpleasant but which have attractive erotic elements. S&M extracts the erotic elements and acts them out in a reasonably safe context....The elements of drama, play, and magic are essential to S&M. They are essential to us as human beings, and in a world which allows fewer and fewer outlets for these aspects of creativity, S&M is becoming more popular—like horror movies, mountain climbing, “Dungeons and Dragons.” But S&M also involves a coming to awareness of different levels of the self, a revelation, and a sharing. I mentioned the idea of magic. For me, that’s the third meaning of the letters S&M: sadist/masochist; slave/master; sex/magic.... I write from time to time on S&M, and, I hope, help people untangle their own thoughts about it. But I don’t want to be put in a position of “defending” S&M, anymore than I want to “defend” being gay.

My friend Sam Steward (1909-1993) liked to pay to kneel to straight sailors, cops, and Hells Angels he took to the backroom of his tattoo parlor. He scorned what he lamented was gay leathermen’s cheap imitation of real-world domination and submission. At his cottage in Berkeley where he loved playing the role of Grand Old Man, he’d ask me, “What are they up to on Folsom Street?” I’d tell him. He’d say, “That’s the end of everything.” While he liked Larry and wished his own alter-ego Phil Andros had written a bestseller like *The Leatherman’s Handbook*, Sam insisted on debunking the 1970s leather scene as less authentic than his own underground S&M sex scenes that began as the Roaring 1920s crashed into the Depression that made hordes of hungry blue-collar trade available for hire. “Buddy, can you spare a dime?” Sam paid for sex. Larry paid for models.

In 1964, four years before he heard of Larry, Sam had published his essay, “The Leather Fraternity: Boys Looking for ‘Real’ Men,” which *Philadelphia Gay News* reprinted in 1982. As the author of the 1953 novel, *The Motorcyclist*, Sam cracked wise about the evolution of leather culture from the war-torn 1940s to the hippie 1960s which were the life and times when Larry had

come out. Sam showed how necessary it was for some sage like Larry to come along and make safe the ways of bike boys on the prowl:

In the early fumbling days of the [leather] “movement” that was not a movement then, when there were still a few real men around, the S&M game was dangerous and exciting. If you then found a guy, back in the late 1940s, who wore a leather jacket and boots and had sideburns and looked at you with narrowed eyes, you knew he was the real McCoy—probably a jackroller with a real motorcycle, a heterosexual, who might tie you up and beat the hell out of you, rob you—even kill you. If you met the guy in the 1950s, dressed the same way, you might find that he was a homosexual, perhaps sadistically oriented, and that by now he had lost his motorcycle, and had only the costume. You were still taking chances; if you handed him a whip, he might seriously injure you, or burn you, or leave you tied up too long until gangrene set in. But if you meet the same guy in the leather bars in the 1960s, there’s no way of knowing what he is, or who does what to whom, unless it’s pre-arranged...[which was the main reason why the leather action in the 1970s switched in self-defense to the safe spaces of baths like the Barracks and Slot and clubs like the Mineshaft where cruising crowds of witnesses could monitor the wild free-for-all scenes].

Brandon Judell in that issue offered a humorous genuflection to Larry in “Why S&M Is Just a Pain in the Ass to Me.”

I cannot recall having conscious S&M fantasies until a Philadelphia expatriate presented me with Larry Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook*.... Unto this very day I envisage being a beautiful cop getting plowed by a bunch of gay bruisers (see Townsend’s chapter on gang bangs). Townsend’s other tales, supposedly true, were enjoyable but not my cup of Celestial Seasonings.... At that point, with my thumbed *Handbook* deteriorating

©2021 Jack Fritscher, Ph.D., All Rights Reserved

HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

along with my morals, the owner of a national chain of greeting card stores introduced me to *Drummer* magazine [while I happened to be editor]. Without any warning, I was masturbating more often than Ronald Reagan naps. I was “Prison Punk.” [A story by Frank O’Rourke] I exercised in the “S&M Gym.” [A serialized novel by G. B. Misa] My supple flesh was being shaved and...

Karla Jay, the first woman president of the Gay Liberation Front, and Allen Young revealed in their 1979 book of interviews, *Lavender Culture*, how specific the midcentury war against male S&M culture could be among early members of the GLF in New York whose separatist attempt at gender recalibration was the reason Larry openly condemned the GLF in *H.E.L.P.Drummer*, March 1973. They quoted radical feminist John Stoltenberg, husband of the dour anti-porn militant Andrea Dworkin, saying:

Anti-sexist genetic males might also find useful *Double F: A Magazine of Effeminism*, issue 2, 1973, in which Steven Dansky, John Knoebel, and Kenneth Pitchford repudiate “sado-masculinity” [Larry’s specialty] and “masoch-eonism” [male transvestism] with reference to the sexism of the gay liberation movement.

Forty years after that, I met Effeminist founder Steven Dansky when he interviewed me for his video series *Outspoken: Oral History from LGBTQ Pioneers*. Dansky was an early roots member of the Gay Liberation Front. As we became friends, we compared notes on our misspent youths. He told me about his time in the Left as documented in Linda Hirshman’s book *Victory: The Triumphant Gay Revolution*:

While working at a left-wing bookstore in the late Sixties, later GLF stalwart Steven Dansky remembers being given instruction in how to cross his legs and hold his cigarette so as not to appear effeminate and lose his chance at going to Cuba to meet his revolutionary brothers.

Dansky never expected these electric issues of gender to follow him into early gay liberation, as it was known at the time, but there was enormous tension in GLF between the femmes and butches that to some extent, he said, accounted for the demise of the organization.

Talk about the power of the underground press. The authoritative voice in Dansky's magazine, made credible, like Larry's, by the very act of indie publication, seemed to represent a popular movement with a substantial readership supporting the agenda when, in fact, Steven told me there were only three people, all men (Dansky, Knoebel, and Pitchford), in the Effemist Movement. He then surprised me with his candor and honor as a man, and with his fairness as a gay historian: he apologized. His metanoia illustrated the forward maturation happening slowly in postmodern gay culture around the subject of S&M and homomascularity.