

should queer nation admit gay cops?

OUTWEEK

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THE LESBIAN
AND GAY
NEWS
MAGAZINE
NO. 85

inside
the
women
and
AIDS
handbook

hall of fierce

A GALLERY OF BLACK GAY LEGENDS

new this week:

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BOX**

**THE
WORKOUT
SECTION**



s y l v e s t e r

And publishing such a volume naturally endows it with the aura of legitimacy that is—fortunately or unfortunately—a necessary element in making the information available and persuasive to the thousands of women who live, as they say, with AIDS. It also allows both women with AIDS and women who have dedicated some portion of the last decade to fighting AIDS the opportunity to make a substantial contribution to the literature that will inform the way people think about the first ten years of the epidemic in the decades to come.

Women, AIDS & Activism brings together cogent political points and personal accounts under a single cover, making the volume a significant addition to the growing library of AIDS literature. But publishing, as activists have learned from enduring the process of peer review that scientific articles undergo, also has distinct drawbacks. The statistical information in *Women, AIDS & Activism*, on which many of the book's political challenges rest, is dated, as is a considerable portion of treatment information and some political information. This is to be expected, of course, yet to the novice—and the volume is, arguably, directed to that reader—the fact that the first couple of essays in the book contain outdated information may be a lethal turnoff.

Even more upsetting is the fact that *Women, AIDS & Activism* is ultimately short on the kind of analysis that inspires people to activism, and long on the sort of condescending political and intellectual posturing that drives them away.

Consider, for example, this passage:

Even more important than sexism—a set of bigoted attitudes about gender—has been the institution of patriarchy, which perpetuates male control over women's labor time, sexuality and reproductive capacities. This male control may be exercised by an individual man, as in the case of a battering husband, or by male-dominated institutions, such as the Supreme Court, Congress, the New York Stock Exchange, the governing bodies of any of the major religions, or the medical profession.

Feminism 101 was important to me, too, but the relentless dogmatism of the foregoing quote is neither interesting nor resonant. Too many of the essays in

Women, AIDS & Activism revert to precisely this sort of simplistic "we-are-oppressed" worldview in lieu of more thoughtful analysis of how and why a dearth of information on women and AIDS persists.

The volume's personal essays, on the other hand, are timeless and deeply moving. Although the more polemic and analytical pieces are clearly intended to form the volume's backbone, pieces by Zoe Leonard and Cynthia Acevedo on having safer sex with an

HIV-positive lover as well as essays by Iris de la Cruz and Anonymous detailing some of the battles that women fight with themselves in living with AIDS are instructional and extremely compelling and give the volume an intimate, more cohesive structure.

A simple truism simply spoken—that activism does not necessarily writers make—could have salvaged a good part of this volume by infusing the whole with a sense of humility. The **See WOMEN on page 69**

Welcome to the Pleasuredome

SERIOUS PLEASURES: THE LIFE OF STEPHEN TENNANT
by Philip Hoare. Hamish Hamilton. \$29.95 cl. 463 pp.

by Max Cavitch

When he was a young boy, the Honorable Stephen James Napier Tennant was asked by his father, Lord Glenconner, what he'd like to be when he grew up. Stephen's precocious reply was, "I want to be a Great Beauty, Sir." True to his desire, Tennant spent the next three-quarters of a century not so much growing up as dressing up, leading a Peter-Pan-cum-Barbara-Hutton existence of indulgence and excess. Born in 1906, Tennant trailed silk and stardust all over the fashionable salons of the '20s and '30s, being snapped by his photographer-friend Cecil Beaton, pouring tea with Virginia Woolf and other Bloomsbury wits, flirting with German princes and Rus-

sian dancers, all the while resembling what Philip Hoare in his droll and delicious biography calls "an approximation of what a young man should



A GREAT BEAUTY—
Stephen Tennant as photographed by Cecil Beaton

look like."

The photographs of Stephen Tennant in *Serious Pleasures* picture an ethereally beautiful man who was, by all accounts, a head-turner—as much for the outrageous costumes and makeup he favored as for his exquisite features. Thanks to aristocratic privilege, Tennant could afford to thumb his nose at social convention and adorn himself in the most fanciful, feminine plumage. For a jaunt to Palermo, he had the famous *couturier* Charles James whip up "the stunningest fancy-dress—black trousers that seem glued to every fissure and ripple of thigh and bottom and an ineffably limp shirt of creamy satin like ultra, ultra Devonshire cream mixed with mother-of-pearl." Tennant also loved makeup. In the words of one friend, he "puts on as much as a girl." In fact, says Philip Hoare, "Barbara Hutton [the Woolworth heiress] was one of the few people who could rival Stephen in her patronage of the cosmetics industry." Even close friends like Cecil Beaton were often publicly embarrassed by Tennant's nonstop camp performance, but Stephen himself remained oblivious to the sneers of peers and plebes alike.

He managed also to remain more or less oblivious to England's institutionalized homophobia. Reading of Stephen's queeny exploits and almost-total lack of discretion, it's difficult to keep in mind that only 50 years before he was born, men could still be executed in England for having sex with other men, and that the decriminalization of homosexuality in that country would come only after Tennant's 61st birthday in 1967. While it is true that members of the upper class—including Stephen—often left England to pursue romance in other, more permissive countries, they did so because they could afford to. Most of their gay compatriots had to take their chances at home. At the beginning of 1930, while England's Sexual Reform Society was campaigning for the legalization of homosexuality, Stephen Tennant was in Sicily with his boyfriend, Siegfried Sassoon.

Tennant's brother once called him "a conscientious objector to things essentially manly." But Stephen made an exception in the case of Sassoon, the hunky soldier-poet who became

the great love of his life. Despite Hoare's attempts to downplay the sexual aspect of their relationship ("no record of its consummation exists"), there is no mistaking the passionate intensity that brought Stephen and Siegfried together and, for a time, made them exiles in love—a sort of gay Duke and Duchess of Windsor. That same intensity, however, ultimately drove them apart; Sassoon married a woman he scarcely loved, and Tennant never again enjoyed a significant romantic attachment.

Attachments of any kind were next to impossible for the selfish, insecure Tennant, who knew almost everyone there was to know socially yet spent the last years of his life as a lonely, slightly mad recluse. There were important friendships, with artists like Beaton and Jean Cocteau and with writers like Willa Cather and E.M. Forster. It was necessary for Tennant to surround himself with creative types in order to shore up his sense of himself as an artist. He was, in fact, a prolific amateur, with a long list of publications and gallery exhibits to his credit by the time he died. But far more than productive or talented, Tennant was notorious. Cyril Connolly

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described him as "an adolescent exhibitionist acting out the role of *grand écrivain méconnu*." Caroline Blackwood was even more acerbic, calling Tennant "just an eccentric gay who didn't really do anything... if he weren't upper-class, no one would've cared."

One gets the feeling from reading *Serious Pleasures* that Philip Hoare, for one, would've cared. His attitude toward Stephen Tennant is enthusiastically fond and generous. It would have been very easy for Hoare to have caricatured poor Stephen as a vain and predatory nonentity, feeding on privilege and ducking responsibility. But if Tennant was this, he also managed to be more, and Hoare gives us glimpses of Stephen's highly intelligent and passionate appreciation of things rare and beautiful. Such aestheticism is always hard to justify (if one feels called upon to try), and the lionization of a consummate aesthete like Stephen Tennant may seem especially hollow to those of us (pre)occupied with the terrors of our day. To his credit, Philip Hoare does the work of a true biographer, giving us the life of Stephen Tennant as nearly as possible according to the terms in which it was lived.▼

sit and spin*

Michael Fierman

The Saint at Large, Guest Spots

1. "Love" by the Dream Academy
2. "Being Boring" by Pet Shop Boys
3. "A Huge, Evergrowing, Pulsating Brain That Rules From the Centre of the Ultraworld" by the Orb
4. "Dream" by In Sync
5. "African and White Remix" by China Crisis
6. "Spiritual High" by Moodswings
7. "I Promised Myself" by Nick Kamen
8. "Sadness" by Enigma
9. "Cloud 8/Nothing" by Frazier Chorus
10. "Errors in the Human Brain" E.P. by Miss Lie

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