

homo love songs

RELAXING IN
PALM SPRINGS

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PARADE AND PREJUDICE

A simple request to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade inflamed the city, redefined the mayor and marked a major defeat in the Catholic campaign against lesbians and gays. **How Cardinal O'Connor finally overstepped his "divine mandate" for homophobia...**

SPECIAL REPORTS BY

avril mcdonald,
duncan osborne,
allen roskoff and
michael goff

PLUS an
OUTWEEK
editorial



Getting Down on Fiction

BOYS LIKE US by Peter McGehee. St. Martin's. \$15.95 cl. 166 pp.

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corporate stud.

by Max Cavitch

Peter McGehee needs to get some flesh on the bone. His first novel, *Boys Like Us*, is so thin that when stood on a shelf, it all but disappears. Most members of Congress have more pages than this book. Generally, they also have more interesting things to say. In fact, the only striking similarity between *Boys Like Us* and the average congressperson is that it never seems to do anything truly damning. It is, frankly, an inoffensive and diverting book. The characters are uniformly likeable, without being too appealing. The range of emotions is narrow enough not to risk touching upon any of the reader's own. The plot is comedic, the ending hopeful and the language simple enough for a president, much less a senator, to understand without strain.

Boys Like Us reads like a rehash of Bill Sherwood's 1986 film, *Parting Glances*. McGehee tells the story of Zero, a *thirtysomething* gay man trapped in a too-safe relationship with a corporate stud. Zero divides his time between fucking the doll, hating his job and caring for Randy, his wisecracking friend and long-ago boyfriend, who has AIDS and is, it turns out, Zero's true love. If that scenario doesn't already sound familiar, toss in a golden twinkie who gets everyone all hot and bothered by reminding them of "what we might have missed."

But whereas *Parting Glances* was breathtakingly unsentimental, *Boys Like Us* is merely affectless. In seeking to avoid the clichés of melodrama and romance that Sherwood soundly defeats, McGehee avoids the only things that might have given some style, if not substance, to what remains an enormously conventional and, therefore, meager book. Authors and publishers who dish out this kind of pabulum cater to our blandest taste, not to our sharpest hunger, and leave us wasting away.

Calling such run-of-the-mill novels onto the carpet for not

doing the provocative and difficult work of fiction is a cheap way of focusing attention on the moribund state of gay letters. But it also encourages us to ask what we should expect of our writers, and whether we have the right to expect anything at all. John Preston has spoken emphatically in this magazine about the need "to get it all down," to document in as full and fast a way as possible our experiences in the wake of AIDS, without over-scrupulous regard to frivolous standards of literary judgment. His argument is that conventional narrative structures cannot adequately accommodate the seemingly inef-fable scale of the AIDS crisis. He suggests that such structures be dispensed with in favor of an exhaustive reportage, a truth-telling that would more faithfully depict a story too strange for fiction.

Confronted with mediocre productions such as *Boys Like Us*, I find Preston's impatience with careerism and literary fashion very sympathetic. I disagree, however, with his notion that historical circumstances (even our own) ever call for the abandonment of the careful attentiveness to language and form that is what I take "literature" to mean. I also take exception to his insistence upon a single mode of writing, as though "historic documents" had some sort of transparent, immediate quality that rendered them universally sufficient.

"Writing," says Preston, "must be action." Absolutely. But writing can never emulate action unless it starts by taking itself seriously *as writing*. Historical documentation is itself a literary convention; our libraries are full of "historic documents" that purport to "get it all down" but that fail to acknowledge their own status as the subjective, interested works of writers who, like novelists, live in the world, have careers and are frequently swayed by fashion.

We have journalists enough. We have historians enough. God knows, we have more than enough novelists like Peter McGehee. And while the efflorescence of an unapologetic and marketable body of gay writing is itself a triumph, its generally poor quality is a disappointment and a failure. But instead of

calling for no fiction, we should be calling for a new fiction, a fiction that describes, rather than merely reflects, what's happening in our lives. ▼

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