

# The Keyhole or the Gate

## The Queer Lit Expansion; Straw Gate Books

BY DOUGLAS MANSON

**H**i. I'm Doug Manson, the new Small Press editor here at Boog City. I am a small press publisher myself and recently moved from Buffalo, that great iron furnace on Lake Erie with an amazing small press and poetry

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scene, to Brooklyn.

I got a few adjunct slots that allow me to eat beans and rice daily and sometimes chocolate and have a beer once in a while. For four months I have lived like a zombie tunnel-dweller and messy-haired, poorly-dressed earnest literature-loving teacher in classrooms of amazing students from all walks of life. I'm not one to gild the lily too much, but I love it here. While I am driven by a curiosity for Romanticism, lyric and dramatic poetry, language poetry, science, and nature, I've noticed that my dearest artist and writer friends are very much invested in water, food, and money as central to their thought and work. I have written a great amount of poetry over the last 25 years and am currently writing a play.

**Perry Brass' Most Exciting Feeling in LGBT Literature, and What He Doesn't See in Gay Writing But Wishes He Did See**

A few words from Perry Brass, author of *The Manly Art of Seduction: How to Meet, Talk To, and Become Intimate with Anyone* (Belvue Press) and organizer of the *Rainbow Book Fair* in New York City ([www.rainbowbookfair.org](http://www.rainbowbookfair.org)).

**Boog City: What would you say are the most exciting movements taking place now in LGBT literature? Is it coming from individual authors or from a number of writers? Does it seem specific to a community or communities? Is a style emerging?**

Perry Brass: The most exciting feeling I have now in LGBT writing, and I can speak more for men's writing than women's writing, is that the old "sad fag" school of writing based very much on internalized homophobia, that was taken

up so seriously by queer academics in the late '70s through the '80s, that became for many academics the foundation for a canon of gay fiction, such as Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, and some of the more baroque titles by Edmund White (I would not put him exclusively in this school)—has been supplanted by books that see the depth, range, and extent of queer men.

The earlier school of gay lit was based on older acceptable academic models, like [Marcel] Proust, [Jean] Genet, [Ronald] Firbank, or [Henry] James: being gay was this wound in your heart that never healed, and any deeper sense of personhood or manhood behind it was not there. So, models like Joseph Conrad or D. H. Lawrence—who both genuinely explored maleness, male closeness, and intimacy—were ignored, except by a few writers who would never make it into the acceptable canon. Two I would recommend for the "acceptable canon" would be Samuel Delany, (Delany is a genius of outlaw queer writing) and Tobias Schneebaum, whose book *Keep the River on Your Right* I have always asserted to be one of the few truly magical books ever written, certainly by an openly gay writer. This "sad fag" kind of queer writing is still promoted by academics and still manages to be resurrected by younger academics out of an attraction to the glamour of its "perversity."

What I find exciting is that we have had, for a while, another movement in gay writing that sees queer men as explorers of an entire spectrum of male behavior, of rapturous homoerotic feeling and depth. A real breakthrough was George Chauncey's *Gay New York*, which, although nonfiction, captivated you with the excitement of being gay in an earlier time; Paul Russell (*The Salt Point*), James Lear (*The Back Passage*), Christopher Bram (in his wonderful *Dr. August* book), Jamie O'Neill (*At Swim, Two Boys*), to name only a few, have been seeking this new definition of maleness and queerness. I would include my own books, *Warlock* and *Carnal Sacraments*, in this rank. The idea that a gay book is not just a keyhole into the hidden world of queerness, but a keyhole into

the hidden world of men, is something that I have wanted in gay writing ever since I was a kid and was thrilled to discover writers like Christopher Isherwood and James Purdy but always wanted something else. I think that something else is happening now.

What I don't see in gay writing, but that I wish I did see, is a sense of a community of writers and readers. This may happen online somewhat, but the demise of the LGBT bookstore has been a real loss for writers appealing to this audience. Queer writing has been vanillaized to the point that a huge number of books are just ground out under the rubric of M/M (male-on-male) writing, which has become cartoonish. In these books, the men are always hung, wealthy, successful, and their biggest problem in life is either getting laid or finding "true love." The only good thing I can say about this situation is that it has brought another

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group to the people, to the table. Lots of gay books are now being written by straight women who like the heat of queer writing but should be writing straight romance books, probably. But I'm not sure that what's on the table is doing much good for anyone. On the other hand, you never can tell what's going to happen next and where the next Jeanette Winterson will come from.

### Straw Gate Books

According to Straw Gate Books' website ([www.leafscape.org/StrawGateBooks](http://www.leafscape.org/StrawGateBooks)), the press was founded by Phyllis Wat in 2005 and publishes poetry and occasional related works. It is especially dedicated to publishing books by women, "non-polemical writing with an underlying social content," and new and

underappreciated authors. Phyllis Wat is a poet (*The Influence of Paintings Hung in Bedrooms; The Fish Soup Bowl Expedition; Shadow Blue*) and a founding coeditor of the late magazine *Six*. A biographical note explains that Wat, a graduate of the writing program at Temple University, "migrated" to Maureen Owen's workshop at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church and "became an aficionado of New York School poetics."

Straw Gate Books published Stephanie Gray's *Heart Stoner Bingo* in 2007 and Bill Kushner's *In Sunsetland With You*, a book of poems that, as Barbara Henning says, "celebrates and mourns dailyness, laying out the secrets of ordinary nyc life, apples and buses and blowjobs." It also published *The Rorschach Factory* by Valerie Fox in 2006.

I smile when I read Gray's lines:

seeing this city past  
the point of no return  
return before my eyes, a point  
somewhere between city,  
country, suburb, and industry  
gone awry.

I smile when I read Kushner's lines:

I feel soft & warm like a chewy shoelace.  
I dream I live in a chocolate house with  
a chocolate man & whenever I get awful  
hungry why I just take a bite of him, mmm.

And I smile when I read Fox's lines:

she pay the blood hand cat around her  
mouth dried  
the face of the melodramatic cat is nearly  
forgotten  
next to the curb.

You can hear some of these and more Straw Gate Books authors on Tuesday June 29 at 6:00 p.m. at ACA Galleries, 529 W. 20th St., 5th Floor, between 10th and 11th aves.

Douglas Manson lives in Williamsburg with Parker Posey.

## The Tolerance Project Redefines M.F.A.

BY ANA BOŽIČEVIĆ

What kinds of meanings do collaborative, polyvocal works of poetry reach for, as opposed to poems built on the bulwark of the much-relied-on (and -awarded) Western-individual Authorial Voice? The Voice is an identity politics and a poetics that makes elision of source its standard, and it's also one of the building blocks of M.F.A.-in-Creative-Writing culture. Poetic jewels-in-the-rough enter writing programs, wherein the

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impurities and imitations shall be sloughed off each Voice and its valuable "original" strains amplified in the hothouse collectivity of the workshop. M.F.A. programs are premised on this alchemical narrative of learning—that the many will help the one find One's Voice. And true, collective ritual often does work some form of magic, but to what extent the resulting change in pitch is a "mastering"—or a harmonizing with or tuning in to received poetic culture—is up for debate. And what happens when the complex experience of M.F.A. collectivity, with all of its dead-ons and dead-ends, is standardized into a calling card, an initiation ritual required for a successful "poetic career?"

The Tolerance Project, spearheaded by Rachel Zolf, is a radical and necessary intervention on the current narrative of M.F.A. collectivity. Zolf is an award-winning Canadian poet whose fourth full-length book of poetry, *Neighbour Procedure*, was recently released by Coach House Books. Her partner got a tenure-track job in the United States, and, since American immigration authorities don't recognize same-sex unions, Zolf

enrolled in an M.F.A. program to obtain a U.S. student visa. She is also a poet who collages poems through meticulous research and sourcing (*Neighbour Procedure* contains only three "original" phrases) and doesn't believe in "originality or the supremacy of the authorial voice."

It is no surprise, then, that Zolf's M.F.A. project should build and implode on its context. She invites 85 writers, artists, and thinkers from across North America to donate written and visual material from which she constructs poems for her M.F.A. workshops. She uses these constraints to examine those in her poetic and political life. She also blogs about the poems, inviting comments and stimulating controversy by sharing (anonymous) workshop critiques online. Donors

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receive barcodes they can use to find out when the poems sourced from their "poetic DNA" are being discussed. Zolf calls her project a "reality poetry show."

And what of the poems? As ever in project-based collaborative and collaged poetry, the process, the seams, are right there on the surface. The poems of The Tolerance Project swerve from meta-chat on violence and feminism and gay dogs, to fragments in a Big Brother manual discussing the necessary containment of hope, to language-DNA word-strings, performing themselves above the always present, cacophonous chorus of commenters

and critics. There's much elation, arrogance, and violence to their movement—and they're never not funny. From Poem 23, "Useful Bullshit":

You call this a performative nature? In my Lustrelessness, norm, form and function are revealed as blithely editable. I want my terminal degree, but we're not competing.

We're all encased in plastic, then turned into an intonation beyond the irrigated "pirate" mind. Why not center your poems - both physically and theoretically?

Polemical is a bad riposte against the triumph of "whimsy," but I want poetry to be funny. You might want to give up entirely, learn to write linearly and do your memoir.

Thinking through these questions has been a difficult but pleasurable exercise.

Some are written as themed class assignments ("Write a biography poem." "Write a caption poem."), and their week-to-week cycling maps M.F.A. programs' thematic and temporal territory. But beyond its work of dissection and real-time insitu critique, The Tolerance Project accomplishes an unexpected magic inverse from that of the workshop narrative's test tube/cauldron. Zolf, the project's one initiator, provides a platform for the many to find their Voice(s) and shows-and-tells the process that the authorial legend would discard as scaffolding. The potion of authorship separates into its base DNA elements, and they sing each to each.

[www.thetoleranceproject.blogspot.com](http://www.thetoleranceproject.blogspot.com)