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COMING OUT TWICE THE NEW JOURNALISM FACT AND FICTION IN *THE LEATHERMAN'S HANDBOOK*

Larry not only covered gay issues, he focused attention upon them. In *The Advocate*, March 26, 1975, three months before the first issue of *Drummer*, Larry was the first person to explain to the world of mainstream vanilla sex that leatherfolk must come out twice: once to sex, once to fetish.

I have heard all of these liberationists speak about their concern for the young person who emerges as a gay human being within an outwardly hostile world. They are concerned for his (or her) ability to survive without the support of other...groups or persons who share this sexual orientation. They should be doubly concerned with the dilemma of a person who must first go through the trauma of accepting himself as a homosexual, and then cope with his S&M proclivities. For him (or her)... the coming out process is two-fold and fraught with twice the number of pitfalls.

Practiced intelligently and with a degree of moderation, S&M can provide a tremendous catharsis. It can allow the participants to discharge an enormous amount of pent-up emotional tension. By the same logic that we justify a gay relationship on the basis of its being healthier to do it than to abstain and suffer the emotional consequences of deprivation, so I believe it is better for the sadomasochistically oriented person to act out these

impulses with a willing partner than to stifle the whole in a quagmire of guilt.

I have been asked to speak on this subject at several universities and other academic gatherings, but [to this date, 1975] I have consistently declined after doing it twice and experiencing the difficulties involved. Explaining any emotional condition to a group of people who do not share these emotions is the proverbial situation of describing color to a blind man.

Books are clones of the author. Larry did not need to make door-to-door house calls at universities. His *Handbook* was such a years-long bestseller that he literally educated American and international gay popular culture about the nature of leather people, principles, and practice. In Europe in 1977, *Der Spiegel* reported that in the world scene of leathermen, “*The Leatherman’s Handbook* by a certain Larry Townsend is considered their Bible.” He was an entertaining teacher who was not didactic, prescriptive, or old guard.

He stated directly in his *Handbook* that he was writing no more than his opinion based on his experiences:

Your desires may exceed or fall far short of the action I describe. This is exactly how it should be. No one—not Larry Townsend or anyone else—can even begin to set the standards for your sexual needs and/or behavior.

As a psychologist who wrote novels as a business, he fluffed up the abstract ideas in his *Handbook* with seductive episodes of erotic fiction because sex sells. He took a cue from Helen Gurley Brown’s best-selling self-help handbook, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962). He studied San Francisco leatherman William Carney’s *The Real Thing*—an epistolary novel of leather mores and manners published in 1968 in which a seasoned leather master, inspired by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ sado-maso *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, writes instructive and seductive letters of advice to a young leather supplicant. Larry frothed up the facts and fictions from his own experience and from guys who shared with him the

facts and fantasies of midcentury leather life as it was lived as the 1960s became the 1970s.

He used a pyramid scheme to create his *Handbook*. His collection of leathermen's oral histories was a gay-history first. In 1969, he composed a "Leather Fact Sheet" questionnaire that he as social scientist, psychologist, and marketing guru developed and mailed out like a chain letter to a hundred men across the nation. Each guy was asked to make five copies and mail them along to five friends. I remember my longtime intimate, the Catholic leather priest Jim Kane, gave me a copy in 1969 which I retyped onto a mimeograph stencil and mailed to my friends with Larry's return address at the top. The questions themselves were so provocative that the joke was we all jerked off at the questions while writing our real and fantasy answers.

The mail began pouring in addressed, as was one, to "Master of Masters, Larry, Sir." For many in that new Stonewall era, the Q&A was their first act of gay liberation. This was the exact time the homomascuine cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* were struggling to come out in Annie Proulx's short story about masculine-identified men. Larry was delighted at the detailed answers enhanced with the extravagant personal experiences and fantasies that men added. The Q&A format worked so well in 1969-1971 that in 1981-1982, he sent out 6,000 questionnaires for *The Leatherman's Handbook II*.

Absorbing all these men's voices into a narrative, Larry, half reporter and half novelist, joined the trending wave of New Journalists like Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Hunter Thompson in *Hells Angels* (1967). Writing as a very unique participant insider, he mixed fact and fantasy, and activated gay publishing with erotic interactivity. What other gay book has so changed behavior, given permission for a lifestyle, and made grown men sit up and beg for more? In his leather reading list in the *Handbook*, Chapter 15, "Literature," he recommended the work of Truman Capote. So is his *Handbook* in which he admitted "fictionalizing" perhaps a bit of a nonfiction novel?

Larry was a skilled ventriloquist who openly admitted he made nearly all of his *Handbook* up. He meant he processed all the incoming information through his own mind's eye. He

explained the sources of his diverse fictive voices in chapters 2, 11, and 15, revealing that he most often wrote from the masochist's point of view because readers identified with it more than with the sadist's. He disclosed how he transposed gay men's voices into his own omniscient narrative voice. They gave him and his *Handbook* text—echoing them—the visceral authenticity that causes readers to suspend disbelief while taking the text as gospel truth guiding their own potential lives that they must uncloset to become their own identities layered in homosexuality, leather, and sadomasochism. He disclosed:

If you recognize my “style” [his quotes] in the narrative [letter(s) he is printing], it happened because the gentleman writing the letter was a better S than he was a writer. My editing became a little heavy-handed.... In my own case, for instance, a large part of my leather writing has been in the first person, told through the eyes of an M. For this reason, I have had many top men approach me, assuming this is my scene. It really isn't...in *fictionalizing* [Italics added] these stories, it is simply much easier to describe a wide range of experiences....[Identifying with the Marquis de Sade, he observed the fantasy distance between an author's imagination and his actual experience.] As the poor bastard [de Sade] spent most of his life in prison [like leathermen locked in the mid-twentieth-century closet], he had much more time to dream and write than he had to act out his fantasies.

In terms of the 1970s zeitgeist, at the same time Larry's readers were discovering *The Leatherman's Handbook*, they were also reading San Francisco author Robert Pirsig's 1974 advice-novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* which, like Larry's *Handbook* was a fictionalized true story more about instilling values than about either Zen or motorcycles.

Townsend was the first mentor to many kinky men and women, and the third-person Oracle in many leather couples' relationships. His healthy counsel in his gay men's adventure stories activated thousands of men who wrote to him thanking him

for helping them to understand S&M psychology, and to come out into their natural-born temperaments. The way he jumped into the Rhine River to save the drowning German boy, he saved many a gay man from drowning in tears.