

Foreword

Gay American Literature

by Mark Hemry

“Jack Fritscher invented the South of Market prose style, and its magazines,” wrote critic John F. Karr establishing a time-line for gay literature in *The Bay Area Reporter*, June 27, 1985. Fritscher’s particular SOMA style, invented young, remains classic, current, inventive, hip, and hot, with a range from traditional fiction to cyber-punk.

Fritscher is epicentric to gay male literature. He was the right writer in the right place at the right time. In 1972, he wrote his hardcore novel, *Leather Blues*, which critic Michael Bronski praised as high male romance. By 1977, he was the founding San Francisco editor of *Drummer*, the first masculine-identified magazine of gay liberation. The Fritscher-driven *Drummer* issues remain legendary and collectible.

He created an original, actual vocabulary for the main themes of the Golden Age of Liberation. He developed and, in some cases brought to print for the first time, the themes that have since become evergreen staples of gay publishing: the concept of “gay pop culture” itself, leather, cigars, rubber, cowboys, daddies, bears, bodybuilders, gay sports, water sports, bondage, fisting and nipple play. In 1978, he pointedly added to the masthead of *Drummer* “The Magazine of American Gay Popular Culture.” By 1984, Fritscher’s cult-status leather writing was being referenced for its original psychological insight by scholars such as Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Charles Moser in *The Official Journal of the Society for the Study of Social Problems*, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec.

Fritscher brings into the gaystream of men’s erotic writing an alert sense of mainstream American literature. He spent his sophomore year in high school pouring over *Leaves of Grass* and *Ulysses* trying to find the dirty parts he’d been warned about, and finished quite happy to find the esthetic. He was raised on John Dos Passos’ *USA Trilogy*, Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel*, Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Ernest Hemingway’s short stories, Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, John Updike’s *Rabbit Run* and *Pigeon Feathers*, Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*, Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and virtually every word written by Tennessee Williams. In 1967, he came out in Chuck Renslow’s

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Gold Coast Bar in Chicago, and wrote, at Loyola University of Chicago, his doctoral dissertation, *Love and Death in Tennessee Williams*.

In 1968, as a founding member of the American Popular Culture Association, he took particular notice—and notes—of the gay liberation movement exploding exponentially with the Vietnam War protests. In San Francisco in 1971, he actually wrote in his journals the first words of his signature novel, *Some Dance to Remember*, in a room at the legendary Barracks Baths, above the Red Star Saloon, on Folsom Street at Hallam Mews. *Some Dance to Remember* defines the twelve years: 1970-1982. “If one can learn American history from the novels of Gore Vidal, one can learn gay American history from *Some Dance to Remember*,” David Perry wrote in *The Advocate*. Michael Bronski in *Firsthand* critiqued: “*Some Dance to Remember*, a mammoth saga of San Francisco gay life which spans the Sixties to the Eighties, is so bursting with plots, characters, energy, and ideas that it is...a great epic....an ambitious work and a rarity in modern fiction: a novel of ideas...telling the truth of gay men’s lives.” Critic Jack Garman wrote in the literary magazine, *Lambda Book Report*: “As a document of our times and our lives, *Some Dance to Remember* has no peer.”

Besides creating this “Proustian...*recherche*” novel dubbed “mythic” by *The Advocate*, Fritscher’s eye, ear, and pen have filled the dreamscape of gay magazines with a gift for language that Ian Young compares to the poet Dennis Cooper whose limit-pushing novel became the controversial 1995 film, *Frisk*, directed by Todd Verow. Editor-in-Chief Anthony DeBlase printed in *Drummer* #139, May 1990, an actual photograph of *Remembrance of Things Past* to illustrate a feature article, surveying gay history, authored by Fritscher, who once was photographed in Paris at Père-Lachaise, laughing—quite iconoclastically—sitting next to the black marble tomb of Proust himself.

As a premier magazine writer of fiction and features, as journalist, and as photographer, Fritscher, with more than 5,000 pages in print, is a most prolific artist diversely dedicated to the literary culture of gay magazines which he injects with fresh words and photographs that stimulate the intelligent imagination and broaden the conceptual vocabulary of sex. (See the formative Fritscher versions of *Drummer* issues 19-30, and *Son of Drummer*—all of which he edited and mostly wrote.) He is adamantly not part of the United States’ current *fin de siècle* fad of political correctness which he deems no more than a tantrum of leftover, failed Marxism: “The fundamentalist p. c. stone wall will fall exactly as did the Berlin Wall.” Fritscher’s writing, wrote Carrie Barnett, Jeff Zurlinden, and Allen Smalling in *Au Courant*, “is about as far as you can get from politically-correct,

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stylistically-orthodox, writer's-workshop fiction, and we like it all the better for it!"

Literary erotica is the most interactive art because of its double dedication to orgasm of the body and the mind. About anthologies of Fritscher's short stories, Q wrote in *The Philadelphia Gay News*: "Jack Fritscher is a master of gay prose pornography....He plays with the brain, man's most accessible and effectively reached sexual organ....The manner in which he manipulates language, sensuality, feeling, nuance, style, atmosphere, and even one's visual sense...is...sensational." Couple the five basic plot-lines in all of world literature with the maybe twelve actually available sex acts, 26 letters of the alphabet, seven kinds of punctuation, eight parts of speech, and a bag full of transitive Anglo-Saxon verbs and it becomes evident that refreshment of these plots and acts and literary devices is totally dependent on the writer's inventive gift. Fritscher, who spends much time in Ireland, is ethnically mixed Irish, and in the Celtic tradition of the *seanachie* [the Irish story teller], he brings genuine plot, motivation, character, and a lyric and rhythmic voice to the *mise en scene* of the landscape of lust about which *Gay Times*, London, wrote "he creates as an *evocation poetique*."

Taking his cue from the poetic evocations of Tennessee Williams who wrote great, defining, mainstream roles for women, Fritscher has written many stories, two plays, and two screenplays about women. He defines himself as a humanist: "Neither a feminist nor a masculinist be." His 1976 "gender" play, *Coming Attractions*, produced in San Francisco by the Yonkers Production Company on a double-bill with Lanford Wilson's *The Madness of Lady Bright*, was the first play written in San Francisco about women in San Francisco coping with the new breed of gay men in San Francisco. The three women's roles in *Some Dance to Remember* (1990) are crowned by the star-turn of the lesbian protagonist of his 1997 novella, *The Geography of Women*, and by his 1997 screenplay written for Beijing Films about the historical Chinese woman, Golden Orchid, titled *Water from the Moon*. Born under the sign of Gemini, on the summer solstice, during the bright noon hour of the longest daylight of the year, the same day as Lillian Hellman, Fritscher balances his yin and yang fairly with his animus and anima, but buoyed by the nature of his physiology, he prefers yang and animus: the actual, true-north preference of masculine-identified homosexuality.

So it is no betrayal of his Whitmanesque philosophy of humanism to sing the songs of men. Actually, his homomasculine preserve of stories about men is inclusive in a very specific way for a specific demographic:

the endangered species of masculine-identified gay men surviving in an age of virus and over-the-top male-bashing. (One sworn Streisand-identified critic, crippled by his own fundamentalist cant, went self-satirizingly ballistic censuring and censoring *Some Dance to Remember* because he misperceived the novel as a triumph of butch men over feminist gay men, and, so, not at all politically correct, as if all gay novels are duty-bound to be about queens. Fritscher responded: "Matriarchy need not replace patriarchy, because both have been replaced by democracy." Actually, Fritscher has never said or anywhere written that masculine gay men are superior in any way to effeminate gay men, drag queens, straight women, or straight men.) In *Drummer*, Fritscher early on in the 70's coined the Jungian-like term "homomascularity" to give broader reach to the male ethos than the crotch-focused term "homosexuality."

The gay press reveals the actual raw desires of its readers in gay magazine "Classified Ads." In these populist columns real people articulate their sincere primal ISO desires. The gay lonely-hearts-club band seems always in constant search for straight-acting, straight-appearing men. Fritscher, sniffing the irony, is sensitive to this quintessential gay yearning. (Actually, the main character in *Some Dance to Remember* is a gay-friendly straight, but no one ever mentions that little quirk.) He gives voice for that subclass of gay men who actually are masculine-identified and discriminated against for being naturally butch. In his stories, everyone is sexually experienced. These are not the tales of sensitive souls coming out. They are not tales of drag and queens. They are not tales of homosexual despair and suicide. These tales are bawdy Chaucerian tales of humor, lust, and pleasure. Outside the literary fantasy, Fritscher, in reality, advocates absolute abstinence or monogamy.

Fritscher in his gift for language has a long list of words and concepts he coined or introduced to American gay literature back when the rocks in Stonewall were still hot: *mutualist*, *homomascularity*, *homomuscularity*, *gaystream*, *manstream*, *leatherstream*, *sadomachismo*, *perversatility*, *mountainman*, and in 1981, *bear*, in *The California Action Guide*. In his 1972 novel, *Leather Blues*, he redefined S&M as "sensuality and mutuality," and coined in *Drummer* the phrase "the Second Coming Out" for a vanilla gay man's emergence into leather. In 1979 he founded with Mark Hemry the first leather 'zine *Man2Man*, which was Richard Bulger's acknowledged model for *Bear* magazine in 1987. The actual 1990's magazine *International Leatherman* took its title from *Some Dance to Remember*; Fritscher also created and titled the *Drummer*-affiliated magazine, *Tough Customers*.

Fritscher's only political theme concerns the anxiety of war. In "Good-bye, Saigon," a memory tale, the past comes insouciantly "prousting" back, and the reader is reminded that the Vietnam war was only a twenty-four-hour plane flight away from Castro Street and Christopher Street and that the protested war—not ended until May, 1975 (more than half of the 70's)—proactively transformed the character of the 1970's gay liberation movement. The *realpolitik* of the fear of death in war drove young draft-age men to libidinous heights of public sex: the more extravagantly gay a man was the less likely the Selective Service was to draft him. Gay sex meant survival.

Even so, comradeship in war, as a reason for genuine man-to-man bonding, affection, love, and sex, is celebrated in the long story, "The Shadow Soldiers," which dramatizes the pay-back for the American invasion of Vietnam. Reading such rough-sex texts caused critic Michael Bronski in *Gay Community News* magazine, to place Jack Fritscher's writing in a new stream of romantic gay writers including the veteran Sam Steward (Phil Andros) whose erotic publication career Fritscher revived in *Drummer*, and the neophyte John Preston whose *Mister Benson* draft-manuscript Fritscher mentored, edited, polished, and serialized in *Drummer*. As a particular emotional influence, Fritscher's brother, a career military man, served two tours in Vietnam and was caught in the horror of the Tet Offensive; the character of the Vietnam vet in *Some Dance to Remember* is not, however, based on his brother, except, Fritscher states, "to the extent that all writing begins in autobiography and ends in allegory." Certainly, Fritscher's war-torn "Wild Blue Yonder" is an absolutely beautiful story, a romantic notion built not only out of the poet William Blake, but of Fritscher's own childhood of missing men and dead soldiers during the stateside horror of World War II blackouts and shortages.

His "The Assistant Freshman Football Coach" is a Socratic-Platonic romance extolling the mystical sexual union of teacher and student, intellect and athlete in a bittersweet campus relationship in a time of war. Characteristically, this story of a college English professor alludes to American poet Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The actual verbiage of the author shines through in the highly alliterative line so casually woven: "...a student and teacher breaking taboo in a war-torn time of broken totems." Fritscher played team contact sports in high school and college before his years of experience in bodybuilding circles and leather playrooms. In many of his stories, these athletic experiences borne out of the boxing ring and the gridiron become a measure of sexual psyche. "He took [my dick up his ass] like a man. I don't mean like the

cliche. I mean like a man.” In “Football Coach” and elsewhere, Fritscher means not like the stereotype in a gay story, and not “like a man” in a politically-correct story, but like the Jungian archetype of perfect animus.

This is important, because storytelling, especially erotic storytelling, is a shorthand mix of archetypes and stereotypes. “Usually,” Fritscher wrote, “the archetypes are the good guys we identify with and the stereotypes are the bad guys we hate.” Erotica thrives on, and thrills to, familiar archetypes of slang, like calling a blond man a “Swede” or a “Polack” because the archetype, like the stereotype, connotes a whole character so thoroughly.

“The Shadow Soldiers” is, like the survivalist “The Old Man and the Sea,” a symbolic story of courage. Written shortly after the last helicopters lifted off the roof of the American embassy at the fall of Saigon, this rather unique story is actually about straight men allowing themselves to regard each other tenderly, sexually, without guilt. What torturous sex there is is not gay sex; it is not even sex, because it is simply rape. Few gay writers ever address either the tragedy of Vietnam or the happy side of the golden age of sexual liberation of the 70’s. Fewer would equate them. In fact, Fritscher has never shied away from the twin realities of war and sex. Both fascinate him. He is the writer who named the 70’s “The Golden Age of Sexual Liberation.” His survival stories from the 70’s equipped him for the survival stories that became standard in the HIV 80’s as in his high-sex, high-comedy novella, *Titanic*, published in *Uncut* (September 1988) and in *Mach* #35 (March 1997). In fact, he peels back history, folds time, and reveals the 70’s in many stories, as in *Some Dance to Remember* with its heavy-duty Vietnam subplot that has eluded some reviewers who comment only on the novel’s reflection of gay history as if their horizon is the rim of the gay ghetto, as if they are not citizens of the wider society.

Fritscher, like his bicoastal lover, Robert Mapplethorpe, finds it inappropriate to live in any ghetto. He daringly disassembles the Art Reich ghetto of New York City in his 1994 autobiographical memoir *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*. In *Mapplethorpe*, like “The Shadow Soldiers” with its martyrdom and triple “crucifixion,” he demonstrates the long continuing tradition in western culture of the imagery of religious suffering ending in Mapplethorpe’s own suicide-martyrdom by virus. Mapplethorpe’s photographs, Fritscher, the art critic, points out are virtual violence worthy of theological consideration. Consider Mapplethorpe’s crucifix, gun, and knife photographs, and his portraits of gay “saints,” and himself as Satan, Jesus, and, finally, as Death itself. In the home-front war story, “Goodbye, Saigon,” which is the same erotic genre as Tennessee Williams’ classic, “Desire and the Black Masseuse,” the staccato beat of

language is powerful poetry. Actually, this parable of a hawk and a pacifist seems a retelling of belief and faith and honor in the upper room where the glorified Christ, dead and risen, invites the Doubting Thomas, the apostle, to place his fingers in the bloody wound in Christ's side. *Eros* and *thanatos*, *love* and *death*, are the two major themes in his work.

Fritscher loves American popular culture as much as he loves American literature. The war story, "From Nada to Mañana," has its genesis somewhere in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* as his "Foreskin Prison Blues" in *Stand by Your Man and Other Stories* is spun out of Jon Voight's iconic masculinity in *Runaway Train*. Even Prince Sodom is described from movie iconography in the wonderful coinage, "Conneryian," after the look of Sean Connery in *Zardoz*. These stories, as much as the pop-culture novel *Some Dance to Remember*, exist in the world of American movies.

The melodic capture of language in "Nada/Mañana" is typical of Fritscher's Irish-American tongue, and the moonlit images are typical of his filmic eye. As auteur, he has composed and directed more than 125 feature-length videos; two of his documentaries of the photographer-painter, George Dureau, are in the permanent collection of the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris. His rebellious coffee-table book of erotic photographs, *Jack Fritscher's American Men* was published in London, 1995, and in it there is none of the usual coffee-table fare of faceless, svelte gymbo-modelles leaning in artsy shadows holding hoola-hoops. The use in "Nada/Mañana" of the present tense makes fiction, usually written in the past tense, come as alive as a news report. Actually, "Nada/Mañana" can be read as a performance piece for an actor after the manner of Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*.

If one reads the reincarnation story, "Wild Blue Yonder," outloud, the writer's rhythms are melodic. He is a philosopher of the yearning heart who has the ability to write: "Can you imagine being dead...and jealous?" His description of being inside the orgasm that conceives the writer himself has to be one of the most innovative plot twists ever ginned up to reunite two lovers. In the same vein, "Big Doofer at the Jockstrap Gym" is a droll, comic parody of and paean to muscular masculinity where, at orgasm, trees bend, dogs howl, crops fail, trailer parks twist into wreckage. This is erotic literature of desire, because the voice speaking is wise, funny, and living in a butch-camp that works erotically and frankly, causing in the reader the shock of recognition: he's been reading my dreams!

In the tradition of romantic literature, Fritscher's content of the classic ideal embraces beauty and terror. The advice-column format makes

“Wait Till Your Father Gets Home” a horror story of child abuse or a nostalgic memoir of a Daddy-Son relationship that gay magazines ritually glorify each issue. Each of Fritscher’s stories is actually based on a principle of homomascularity, and each piece features sexual climax and intellectual payoff. “S&M Ranch,” debating city-versus-nature values, raises the price of an existential poker chip to a bet where normal folks might not understand the coded feelings in the story which is not about brutality, but about transcendence. Fritscher so actually believes in the doctrine of Transubstantiation that when the word becomes flesh in this story, and flesh transcends words, he offers a peek into a psychology fit for a monastic retreat where fasting and mortification of the flesh lead to crystalline mystical clarity of spirit. There is religious poetry in “S&M Ranch”: “The sound of the whip...the sting and the pain and the welt and the wait for the next crisscross blow.”

The characters assume high-sex nicknames: MacTag, El Cap, Firbolgs [ancient Irish forbearers], Peter Eton-Cox, Dogg Katz, Rip, and Strip. Throughout his writing Fritscher is very careful about naming his characters. *Some Dance to Remember* would be a quite different novel if the dropdead blond musclegod were not named “Kick,” the sister were not named “Kweenie,” and the video pornographer were not called “Solly Blue.” Certainly, in the sci-fi fantasy cyber-punk story “RoughNight@Sodom.cum,” a huge metaphysics opens up precisely because of the name of “Prince Sodom.”

If ever a “cult” story reveled in and revealed the devotion of true believers, “Sodom.cum” is the HIV equivalent of the *Holy Roman Martyrology* of Christian martyrs replayed masterfully in an age of sex devotees embracing a killer virus that comes as part of the sex act. When sex is unsafe, nothing is safe, and the only joy left for many is to die a martyr. Fritscher wisely stops short of intoning the words of Transubstantiation: “This is my body. This is my blood.” The outlaw “Sodom.cum” is *Quo Vadis* minus the bourgeois Hollywood Code. Most moralists would write this story a different way, or have a hero come to everyone’s rescue. In Fritscher’s fantasy world the point is that no one even wants to be rescued, the way gay people don’t want to be “rescued” from being gay.

“Sodom.cum” is an Antonin Artaud comic book of sensuality about the erotics of death. This is an over-the-top romp from the Theatre of Cruelty that runs smack into the taboo of death where most people won’t admit they fantasize, unless they are devotees of the gay *Katharsis* magazine or the gladiator novels of Aaron Travis/Steven Saylor. In his memoir, *Mapplethorpe*, Fritscher wrote that people freaked out over Robert’s

photographs not because they were about sex, but because they were about death in the manner of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. To keep an even keel that elevates ecstasy over freakout, Fritscher expects his erotica to be read the way he writes: dick in hand. It's no wonder that at the 1997 Key West Writers' Conference, yet another Mapplethorpe friend, Genet biographer Edmund White, fanning his flushed face in the tropical heat, came grinning up to meet Jack Fritscher for the first time and said the career-summing statement: "Is it just me, or have you all used up all the oxygen?"

While written sound effects often lack lustre, Fritscher uses sound effects judiciously well to keep the pop-art of "Sodom.cum" skipping along like a cartoon on some adult MTV channel. Perhaps a proper Irish *seanachie* would recommend reading "RoughNight@Sodom.cum" on a night of the full moon to understand the reverse-mirror and reverse-morality and reverse-pleasure of its story. "In the gay world," of course, as Fritscher writes, "everything is always reversed through the looking glass and over the rainbow." What makes Fritscher's writing important is that he writes great magazine fiction that transcends the genre and must be regarded simply as sparkling gay fiction that will be read a hundred years from now.

In the imploding title story, "Rainbow County," written in 1997, a particular group of people is observed historically at a particular place in a particular time: the first lift-off of gay culture at 18th and Castro in San Francisco. The barber shop fictionalized in this story actually had a base in fact, existing as it did on the southwest corner of 18th and Castro over the drugstore-pharmacy that became the Elephant Walk Bar where the San Francisco police beat up the patrons during the fiery White Night Riot, May 21, 1979. (At the following night's peaceful counter-demonstration, which was also a street-party celebrating Harvey Milk's birthday, May 22, 1979, Jack Fritscher first met Mark Hemry 100 feet away from 18th and Castro under the marquee of the Castro Theatre.) "Rainbow County" is actually a two-person performance piece. It reads like a treatment for a black-and-white movie at Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival, or an indie production at the Irish Film Centre. In this collection, "Rainbow County" is an unexpected surprise with its quiet, daylight sadism and brutality. It is a love *pas de deux* reminiscent of J. D. Salinger's "Franny and Zooey" spun out of a Holden Caulfield with a serial killer's (and a serial promiscuist's) mindset.

In the existential geography of "Rainbow County," the barber and the immigrant are both archetypes, as is the female painter, who is a sorceress and shape-shifter. The emblematic theme of leather jackets and fathers is

repeated *Rashomon*-like from other stories in other books told in other ways by Fritscher. The story is constructed almost purely in dialog by brilliant little tricks and ticks of small talk that make the characters' psychology stream on. Fritscher is a master ventriloquist with dialog. As a dramatist, he has a keen ear expressed in a diversity of voices. His two-character play, the actual title piece in Fritscher's First Fiction Collection, *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley and Other Stories*, is a minimalist classic performance script built solely on dialog. Historian Winston Leyland included Fritscher's complete one-act play, *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley*, in the literary canon of his critically-acclaimed master work, *Gay Roots: An Anthology of Gay History, Sex, Politics, and Culture*, 1991. Of the Second Collection of twenty-two short stories written by Jack Fritscher, critic Richard Labonté wrote in *The Advocate*, and said in review in *In Touch*: "In *Stand by Your Man*, Fritscher writes with a blessed combination of erotic ingenuity and poetic intelligence, depicting the most wonderfully suggestive sex scenes in a delightfully wry, ironic, sweaty, urgent and dirty voice...There's more range in this one book of 22 stories than in many anthologies with 22 different authors."