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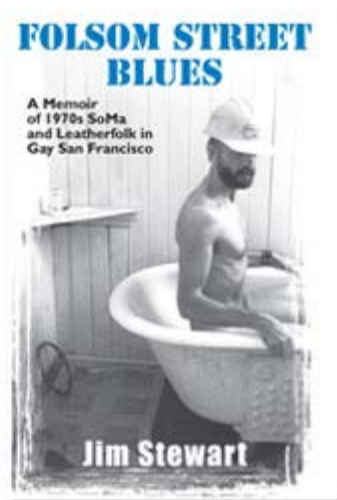


Book Marks: Speaking Out, Folsom Street Blues

By **BTL Staff** | October 20th, 2011 | **Entertainment**



by Richard Labonte



“Moffie,” by Andre Carl van der Merwe. Europa Editions, 368 pages, \$15 paper.

Young Nicholas Van der Swart, already scorned by his strict Afrikaans father as a moffie – a gay sissy – is an unhappy conscript into South Africa’s National Defence Force in the 1970s. Apartheid still rules, homosexuality is deemed abhorrent by both church and state and the segregated nation is fighting a dirty guerilla war along its border with Angola – not the best of worlds for a sensitive young man. Despite brutal military harassment and the suicide of a fellow conscript broken by grueling boot-camp training, Nick forges close friendships with

three other boys, and finds first romance with one, while defying every effort by one particular officer to humiliate him. Flashbacks to the narrator's boyhood reveal some good times, particularly before Nick's beloved and protective older brother dies tragically. For the most part, the military bullying is foreshadowed by schoolyard humiliations and a father's intolerance. But by story's end, this atmospheric fact-based fiction tells the gracious story of a boy growing into a man and of a moffie triumphing over internal fear and external prejudice.

"Speaking Out!," edited by Steve Berman. Bold Strokes Books, 284 pages, \$13.95 paper.

This anthology of fiction about LGBTQ youth facing down bullying and coming out into self-assured lives is certainly timely, after a sad summer of too many teen suicides. Edited with a craftsman's skill by Berman, the 13 stories embrace every letter of the queer community's tongue twister of an acronym: Rigoberto Gonzalez, one of the more accomplished contributors, opens the collection with "Lucky P," about relatively loving parents confused by their son's attraction to both girls and boys; Sandra McDonald closes the book with "All Gender U," about a boy with a preference for girl's clothes angling for a college recommendation letter. Dia Panne's "The Spark of Change," about a lesbian who shames her firefighter father for refusing to respond when a small town's lesbian couple's house is ablaze, is the book's most emotional; Lucas J.W. Johnson's "Subtle Poison," about a trans-boy's tortured relationship with both family and friends is the most (nearly) tragic. Queer and questioning teens are likely to find themselves reflected in one or more of this heartfelt anthology's stories; let's hope it finds a place on the nation's school library shelves.

"Folsom Street Blues: A Memoir of 1970s SoMa and Leatherfolk in Gay San Francisco," by Jim Stewart. Palm Drive Publishing, 224 pages, \$14.95 paper.

It was a time and a place that will never be again – freewheeling, pre-AIDS San Francisco, South of Market, an era echoed faintly today by the city's annual Folsom Street Fair but chronicled with gusto by a survivor with a splendid memory, an easy wit and a way with words. Stewart's jaunty memoir of his years living in the Folsom – with a short detour to the Russian River – is more personal narrative than it is sweeping history. And, as befits a man who in younger years photographed the butch and the beautiful, it's more a series of anecdotal snapshots than it is a linear narrative. Intertwined with Stewart's own occasionally bawdy memories are notable gay names of yore, including leather legend Jack Fritscher (publisher of this book almost four decades after meeting Stewart) and artist Chuck Arnett, whose manly mural for South of Market's Tool Box bar was featured in "Life"

magazine in 1964. For the author's peers, this is a breezy trip down memory lane; for younger readers, it's a proud remembrance of things past.

"Status," by Marvin K. White. RedBone Press, 180 pages, \$10 paper.

This amusing, reflective, quixotic, self-proclaimed collection of poetry (looks more like prose, though) is a splendid oddity. According to the back cover, the hand-sized book is "... an emergent poetic form, the Facebook status." So it's snippets of thought, then, suitable for posting (if not all actually posted) for White's friends and "friends" to see? Could be. Most of the entries are pithy: "Fall is forgiveness weather." Some are witty: "No, skinny jeans ain't Jesus but yes, you can rejoice in their second coming." Some ask questions of unfathomable depth: "Why is it legal for dogs to pee outside and not you?" Some assume the tone of a self-help thought-a-day book: "Take some credit for just being here" and "Cut this joy with water to make it last longer." And, most Facebookly: "Friend requests are 'Hello' and not marriage proposals or IRS audits. Enjoy the familiar spirit of Facebook and the nosy neighborliness of it all." Inventive, addictive and inspirational, this is one weirdly great book.

Featured Excerpt

"Imagine, Mal, if I could be lying next to Ethan, kissing him, feeling his hair, feeling him, just being there with him, you know. It's almost unthinkable ... especially here. Do you think it will ever happen?" "You and Ethan?" "No, just experiencing that feeling with someone you love." For sure it'll happen. Otherwise, what's the point of living?" A Hippo comes traveling towards us on the road we use for patrols. Dust billows from under the large tires. Tied to the front grill is something dark. Malcolm and I carry on talking but then we see that the dark shape is a man and he is alive. "It's an anti-landmine tactic, but it will only work if he planted the mine himself."

– from "Moffie," by Andre Car van der Merwe

Footnotes

It's a good season for books reflecting the gay Latino experience. Two recently published anthologies, totaling almost 50 stories between them, feature work by more than 40 individual writers – not much overlap, a sign of the emerging literary and artistic vitality by

the Latino community within the large LGBTQ community. From Lethe Press's Tincture imprint comes "From Macho to Mariposa: New Gay Latino Fiction," edited by Charles Rice-Gonzalez and Charlie Vazquez, featuring male authors; "Ambientes: New Queer Latino Writing," from University of Wisconsin Press and edited by Lazaro Lima and Felice Picano, offers work by both women and men. On the nonfiction front, there is "Gay Latino Studies: A Critical Reader," from Duke University Press, edited by Michael Hames-Garcia and Ernesto Javier Martinez, assumes a conversational tone despite its deep theoretical roots: essays on such topics as gay shame, sexual identity, the impact of HIV on the queer Latino community and dance and other art forms are paired with short responses from other scholars. Also of interest, also from Duke University Press: "Venceremos: The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba," by Jafari S. Allen, an expansive study of black sexual liberation and social intimacy in 21st century Cuba, as that country loosens state-imposed limitations on race, sex and gender.

About the Author: BTL Staff



Between The Lines has been publishing LGBTQ-related content in Southeast Michigan since the early '90s. This year marks the publication's 27th anniversary.

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