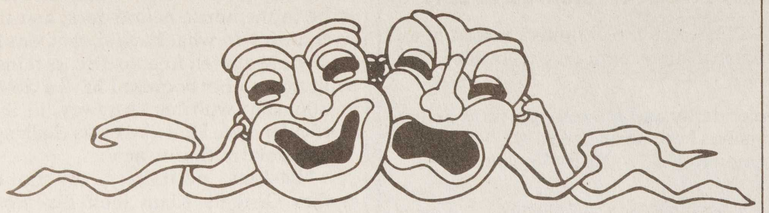


Picks and Pans

THE ALYSON ALMANAC, $7.00

The Alyson Almanac is a lively, entertaining, and informative compendium of information on many aspects of gay and lesbian life. You'll find topics in *The Alyson Almanac* that "Poor Richard" never thought of: practical tips on financial planning for same-sex couples; biographies of gay and lesbian people, past and present; and best and worst lists like the one below.

Richard Labonte's Ten Best and Five Worst Gay Books

Richard Labonte is a former Canadian journalist. He became a bookseller in 1979 when he helped start A Different Light bookstore in Los Angeles. He writes about books and publishing for *The Advocate*, *In Touch*, and other periodicals.

A BOY'S OWN STORY by Edmund White. The coming-out novel will always be a staple of gay fiction: *Better Angel* by Richard Meeker (Forman Brown) was published in 1933, and is among the best of the genre. But White's 1982 work sets the standard with its sexy meditation on the yearnings, confusions, and satisfactions of reconciling the emotional, physical, and intellectual selves — and all before the young narrator heads to college.

THE CELLULOID CLOSET by Vito Russo. Most of the books listed here are fiction. Film scholar Russo's accomplishment, however, is different. He has taken film, the American art form with the most appeal, and has detailed with saucy insight the undeniable presence of gay life both on the screen and behind the scenes. No community survives long without a sense of its history: Russo's 1981 survey (revised in 1987) is an invaluable exposition of one more aspect of a too-often-hidden gay past.

CITY OF NIGHT by John Rechy. Back before there were gay bookstores, gay bestseller lists, or gay publishers, there were of course gay writers writing books about gay life. None seized America's shocked, astounded, or secretly thrilled imaginations as much as Rechy's 1963 first novel. A resonant depiction of pre-Stonewall sexual style, this book is part history and part sociology, and it is completely compelling in its raw honesty and unabashed lack of inhibition. There were youngmen then, there are youngmen now. Fiction is history, too.

FADEOUT by Joseph Hansen. Hansen, arguably one of the finest writers to consistently hit the top of gay bookstore bestseller lists, has done more than give good mystery in his ten-book (as of late 1988) Dave Brandstetter insurance-sleuth series; he's also satisfied the lust of readers for easy genre entertainment, with dry wit, intelligent style and, since the first book (1970), occasional attention to community politics. Better yet, he opened the way for the likes of Richard Stevenson, "Nathan Aldyne," and Michael Nava.

GAY SPIRIT, edited by Mark Thompson. Not many books kick-start the collective conscious of a community: this 1987 collection of many essays (Harry Hay, Edward Carpenter, Malcolm Boyd, Dennis Altman, Gerald Heard, Christopher Isherwood, Mitch Walker, et al.), their theme of spiritual essence linked by Thompson's elegant introductions, ranks as the major anthology of the 1980s, charting a future while exploring our past and confronting the present. It's a book from which many others will be spun.

IN HEAT by Larry Mitchell. Not all best books are obvious and some are too diffident for their own good. It's time, then, to spotlight a tale of falling in love and of growing old with grace, set in a New York of hypnotic hues, peopled with men honest enough to fret and chat about the fearsome gulf between sex and love. Mitchell's 1985 novel quietly captures the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS world of pretty common gay guys, neither closeted nor, ahem, flamboyant, and does so with gracious, gorgeous writing.

THE MALE MUSE, edited by Ian Young. Culture is presence, culture is essence, culture is survival, and poetry is culture distilled. That's why Canadian poet Young's landmark 1973 anthology (see also *Son of the Male Muse*), while not the first and certainly not the last such collection, is a definite must on any discerning gay booklover's bookshelf. And, like any good pile of poetry, Young's choices have it all: coming out, falling in love, challenging norms, telling fictional tales, and exploring biographical fact.

ONE TEENAGER IN TEN, edited by Ann Heron. Honesty about self is the only way to fight homophobia; the first thing that haters deny is that children, if left to learn and grow without hate and prejudice and fear stunting them, may be gay women- and men-in-waiting. That's why this slim collection of young voices, a simple idea in itself, is among the most powerful political books of the decade. It gives form to the reality of gay generations and hope to every new generation of teenagers. Role models are rare, and they do make a difference.

A SINGLE MAN by Christopher Isherwood. Before the elegant snapshot of Andrew Holleran's *Dancer From the Dance*, or the slit-eyed reportage of Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, or the cultured romance of Mary Renault's *The Charioteers*, or the soap-opera aura of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Catch Trap*, there was this eloquent 1964 novel of the singular life of a gay man who had loved in his time. Each generation of gay writers crafts a masterpiece defined by its era. This one transcends.

TALES OF THE CITY by Armistead Maupin. Five, eventually six, books in one — a sneaky way of inflating a ten best list, no? Maupin's decade-spanning account of life, friendship, laughter, love, and death started in the San Francisco of 1978 but has a generous universality to it, as characters deal with growing up and growing older. Best of all, they do so with wit through *Tales, More Tales, Further Tales, Babycakes, Significant Others*, and, says the author, one more volume to close off the decade.

FIVE WORST

THE CLOSET HANGING by Tony Fennelly. There is a danger in even the most well-meaning of straight women portraying the gay life. In this mystery set in New Orleans, the absorbing atmosphere and readable banter don't mask the fact that Fennelly's main character can't help but think he'd be better off if he were, well, more of a man. Who needs self-hatred masking as light entertainment? Not us.

THE FRONT RUNNER by Patricia Nell Warren. It's an eternal bestseller, nurturing the fevers and the fancies of thousands and thousands of pubescent boys and men. It's a book about a young homo athlete, hence a useful role model for the teen jock yearning to be himself. Why, then, is it one of my five worst? Because. Just because. It's the idiosyncratic flip side to my choice of *In Heat* as one of the best.

THE GREAT URGE DOWNWARD by Gordon Merrick. Only the self-loathing symbolism of the title makes this particular one of Merrick's too-many sucky romances stand out. Merrick's heroes, from *The Lord Won't Mind* to *Measure of Madness*, teach none too subtly that being gay is a horrible way to live a life. Warning: reading Merrick will be hazardous to your development as a well-rounded gay person.

THE SMILE OF EROS by John Coriolan. Because many men define themselves only by sex, a lot of gay writing is about sex. Some (for example, the work of Samuel Steward, aka Phil Andros, or the sexy collections of Boyd McDonald) is raunchy fun. Most is a feckless bore. And Coriolan sets a sad standard here, with too many dozens of references to "dangling manthings" and no apparent self-parody in sight.

THE WORLD CAN BREAK YOUR HEART by Daniel Curzon. A boy is picked on by his snot-nosed peers, suffers miserable teen years, is ashamed of his sexual feelings, marries desperately, abandons his wife and kids, heads for Hollywood, finds no fame, fails repeatedly at love, rails against the world (it can break your heart, you know), and dies alone of AIDS. The author says it's reality, but it reads like a fundamentalist bigot's wet dream.

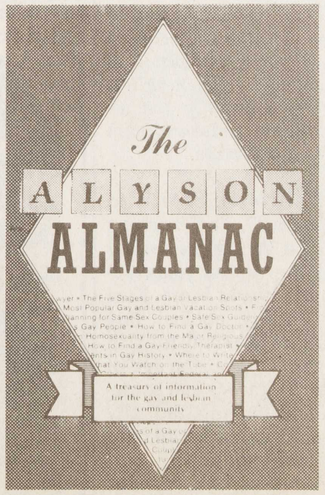
Everything You Could Want to Know

"The first lesbian and gay almanac of its kind. A really good idea. Chock full of valuable information and will make an excellent gift." — *Edge* (Los Angeles)

"A lot of fun. This 'treasury of information for the gay and lesbian community' contains just about everything a Gay person could ever want to know about Gay life. Readers are bound to annoy their companions by asking them: 'Did you know this?'" — *The Washington Blade*

"Let's hope that *The Alyson Almanac* will just keep growing in future editions." — *The News* (Los Angeles)

A reference book that's fun to read

The Alyson Almanac is the first gay and lesbian reference book that you can also read simply for pleasure. In addition to the best and worst gay books, listed here, you'll find similar listings for lesbian literature; gay and lesbian films, plays, and music, and much more. Like answers to these questions:

1. Every U.S. citizen (unless you live in Washington, D.C.) is represented by two senators and one representative. How well did these three people represent your interests? (pages 115-136)
2. Who was the first person in modern times to publicly and proudly come out? (page 14)
3. Are gay men really more promiscuous than lesbians? (page 88)
4. What are the most popular travel destinations for gay people? (page 101)
5. What's the scoop on J. Edgar Hoover, anyway; *was* he really gay? (page 169)
6. Who was the first openly gay elected official, and why is that honor variously attributed to any of three people? (page 22)
7. What's the phone number for New York's Lesbian Switchboard? (page 109)
8. What are the differences between hepatitis A and B? What are the symptoms of each? (pages 79 80)
9. When was the word *homosexual* first used? (page 94)
10. What are the policies of the major church denominations on gay issues? (pages 112-113)
11. When and where will the 1990 Gay Games be held? (pages 56-58)
12. When was the Daughters of Bilitis founded? The Mattachine Society? (pages 17-18)