

THE BOYS

EDMUND WHITE

ON THE RELEASE OF HIS MEMOIR *MY LIVES*, THE **ICONIC GAY WRITER** EDMUND WHITE PROVES HE CAN LIE DOWN WITH THE PAST AND HAVE AMAZING SEX WITH THE PRESENT

Rarely in this world does an interview take place while the subject is making a dinner of chicken stew for you and two friends, pouring wine (which he no longer drinks), and swapping stories about sex. But this is Edmund White, and much like his writing, his company veers toward the irresistible compulsion to take his hand and listen to every word he says (if it is indeed possible to be compassionate for someone who is light-years smarter than you). White would be the ultimate socialite, but, thank god, he got to the pen first and has since written twenty-some books, which not only chronicle sixty-five years of his life but often radically changed the times in which he lived them. Certainly 1982's *A Boy's Own Story*, the first in a coming-out trilogy, revolutionized gay literature. But even outside of the pink triangle, his biography of Jean Genet, his dissection of Paris in *The Flâneur*, and his turbulent account of love and loss in *The Married Man* proves that White can merely pick a genre and let the wind take him. Be warned. White is a romantic, but he's the best kind—he doesn't hide his secrets behind it. His latest effort is *MY LIVES*, a memoir of essays that run from shrinks to Cincinnati male hustlers, the life of Genet to the death of Foucault, anonymous blow jobs in the Meatpacking District in the '70s to semi-anonymous Internet sex circa last year. It's a boring word but here it is—*honesty*. White manages to get down the truth of the scenario even when it puts him in the direct path of embarrassment, pain, and self-deception. Take, for example, his chapter "My Master," where the writer recounts his love affair with an attractive young man half his age, which leads inevitably to the desire to own and the realization that you're owned by someone who no longer wants you. He writes: "We'd laid our bodies and souls bare to each other, so many times, week after week, that each time the needle tracked the spinning groove it dug it deeper. Or maybe that was happening only to me, not to him." White talks about AIDS, the gay culture we've forgotten, sex, and Susan Sontag around his dining room table with me and two other young writers. Consider it some sort of modern-day symposium somewhere safe in Chelsea. **Christopher Bollen**

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN You've been known largely as an autobiographical writer for much of your career. So why the memoir? Why now?

EDMUND WHITE To be crassly commercial about it, I thought I lost my core audience with *Fanny*, which was a straight historical novel. Nobody was interested in that, so I thought, Well, if I write about my life, I can win back my old audience. That was part of it. But it also happened accidentally. *Granta* asked me to write about my shrinks for an issue devoted to them, and then they asked me to write about my mother. I was on my way by that point. I always liked the title of a book by Gorky called *My Universities*. I liked the idea of my this and my that. Michael Ondaatje told me once he got the whole idea for *The English Patient* from a book on photographer Lee Miller called *The Lives of Lee Miller*. That idea of plural lives also seemed very contemporary, because I don't think people have just one

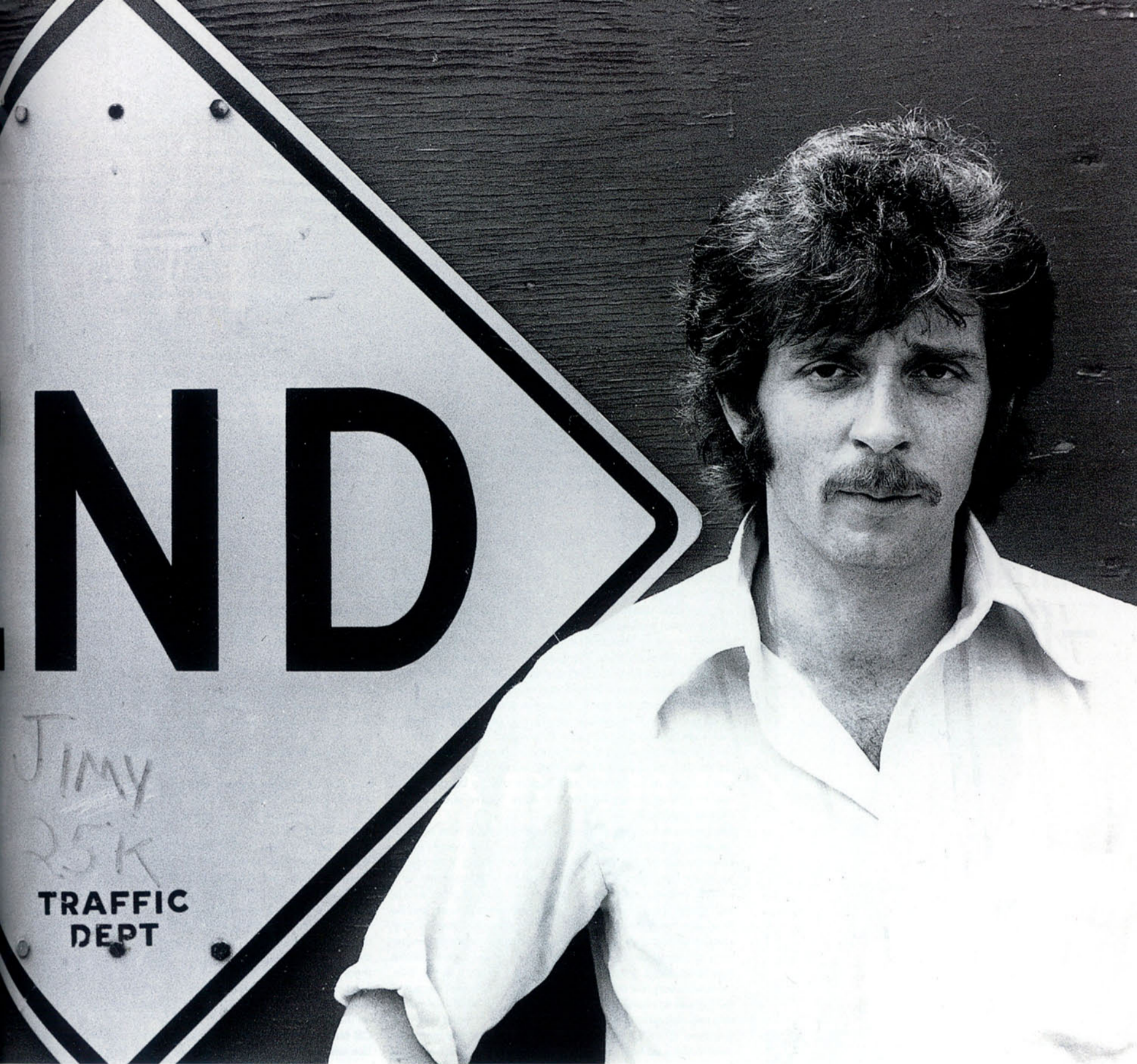


life anymore. I tried in my Genet biography to show that he had many lives. I think there is a tendency to chalk everything up to that time your uncle groped you when you were 4, and I just didn't want to do that. Genet was the one person whose life had rude interruptions. He was a professional thief. He wrote books, but not the kind you expected; he wrote the most elegant French books since Racine. Then he stopped everything and went into a depression for ten years. Then wrote four major plays that were totally unlike the novels—meaning they had no homosexuality in them. And then he had a twenty-year period of silence and ended up at the end of his life being a defender of the Black Panthers. So there is no way to make it all calculate or add up. My own life is much more restrained than Genet's. But the truth is lives aren't that predictable.

CB I don't think of you as someone who is very restrained when it comes to your private life.

GUEST 1 Were there parts of your life you couldn't really get at with your more autobiographical novels?

EW Those were novels although no one wants to believe that—as fiction, they were falsified. But I thought the real story was interesting too. For instance, in *A Boy's Own Story*, the boy isn't very precocious sexually. I was certainly precocious sexually. I had slept with a couple hundred people by the time I was 16. I thought if I put that in *A Boy's Own Story*, it would never be read by a whole generation of gay men because that would have seemed too strange. But I thought, once I write my own memoirs, I can put in totally odd things. For instance, I would have hesitated putting a chapter like "My Master" into a novel because it would



be hard to convince the reader that the same mild-mannered Princeton professor was also doing all of this crazy sexual stuff. But if it's an autobiography, you have the authority of it being your story. We don't question it. So I use the authority of this form to talk about strange corners of my experience that don't really compute.

GUEST 2 You write about things that are so heartbreaking in this book—the relationship with your mother, your psychiatrist in Michigan, your father. Clearly you still love these people even though they treated you terribly. How did you feel writing about them?

EW These people were all a great distance from me. One reason I put in "My Master" is because one time I was giving a reading in Germany, and a boy in the front row burst into a rage saying, "Everything you're writing about was a long time ago and you're very complacent. Why don't you write about your current angst?"—angst literature. I thought, Well, that makes sense. So one reason I put that chapter in was because I didn't want to only write about things where I'd already resolved my feelings. I wanted to report from the battlefield.

CB "My Master" is very explicit, very shocking—you go from S&M to paying for sex to really obsessive love. Were you brutally honest or even on those subjects were there things you couldn't write down?

EW I said everything I could think of and I wrote it close to the time it happened. It was almost a diary at certain points. I really thought it was a farewell to sex. As it turned out, I discovered silverdaddies.com after that. But I thought I wouldn't have any

more. I thought, I'm 65, this is the end of the road. I was rejected by a young man I adored and who seemed to adore me for a long time on some crazy level. We were very involved sexually—two or three times a week for two and a half years. Even marriages lose steam after that much time; ours didn't, it was just over...

CB I think no matter what age, with all relationships that end the fear is, that's the last one. You get so obsessive about keeping it because you think it's the last time it will come around.

EW You worry about your own feelings. But in a way I was almost proud I could still have a broken heart.

G1 You are an iconic person in gay literature. Do you get flack for the way in which you deal with sex so blatantly?

EW I think it kind of horrifies a lot of people. But I don't make bones about it. I have a strong sense of decorum. I'm more frank on the page than in life. People meet me at a party and they assume they can just ask me anything, and I don't want to talk about it. I turn all kinds of colors. I think one reason that people don't write more about sex is that the origin of literature itself is a sacred book. They feel they should put on their best manners when they approach the page. I also think it's a sacred form, but sacred to the truth. So I'm more willing to be truthful on the page than I am in life.

G1 I think there's a way gay writers feel they should approach writing about sex so as not to offend some cultural sensibility about perpetuating gays as hypersexed.

EW And yet they are the same people furiously scrolling through the personals of manhunt.net, where they are saying exactly what they

want to do in bed. I think there is a lot of hypocrisy still. So those who address sex on the page are still considered very alarming.

CB In your chapter "My Blonds," you talk a lot about your sex life in the '60s and '70s in New York. How did it feel to revisit those relationships? You talk about people you haven't slept with in decades and yet you remember them so vividly.

EW They were all key people. I was in love with them. The first one, Stanley, I lived with seven years. Jim Ruddy I was in love with for eleven years. Keith, I lived with for five or six years. So they weren't passing affairs. I obsess about sex, but the heart of those relationships wasn't sexual.

G2 Being with these blonds and saying these relationships weren't primarily sexual—what exactly do you mean?

EW My sister is blonde and my father's side of the family is blond and my mother's side is brunette. I always thought my father's side was more distinguished. I think in some Freudian way it was an ideal, this blondness, that I was striving after. I don't feel that way anymore. That wore itself out as a theme in my life. But I think I used to have a very banal taste for the boy next door. In every case, what I wanted was for them to be my lover because I thought that would show the world I was a better person. I was social climbing through love. It must have been part of my incomplete coming out and self-hatred that I always chose unattainable people.

G2 But you were living with these men at the time?

EW Yes, and that made it worse. Because the symbolism of having someone under the same roof is so powerful, you can't put them in any kind of perspective. You can't get over your obsession at all. You can't stop thinking about them. They are >

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always around—you see them day and night.

CB In many ways, much of this book is a recollection of gay culture as it emerged through the '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s—all the way to now.

EW The nature of being gay—as gay people aren't brought up by gay parents—is that there is almost no cultural transmission in a lot of ways. And because of AIDS and the death of a whole generation, there is an even more severe rupture. And now with the birth of body-fascism and gym culture, this rules out any contact between generations—even sexually. So it became less and less possible for people of younger generations to know what came before.

G1 I remember you once told me about Stonewall—that people imagine that “revolution” a lot differently than it actually was.

EW Stonewall was very small and it was the first funny revolution ever. Cops would come in a flying wedge down Christopher Street and everyone would go running behind them dancing the can-can. Yoo hoo!

G1 Didn't some people say, let's fight. And you said, no, stop.

EW I was the middle-class enforcer of repression then! At the same time I was strangely exhilarated. It got out of control even for me. Then I moved to Rome and came back a year later in 1970. Everything had suddenly changed. There were bars and clubs and go-go boys dancing under black lights. It was fabulous. Nothing like that had ever existed before. There were just a few dim bars like Stonewall with a jukebox in the corner and mafia guys at the door. Before, there were very few people who were visibly gay. All gay activists in those days were leftist. It wasn't until AIDS flushed them out of the closet that any middle of the road came out, because they could only lose by coming out—they lost their jobs, lost their social status. But AIDS flushed them out and they took over. All of the radicals died because they were having a lot of anal sex. It was such a small group. Fran Liebowitz said that anyone who read Andy Warhol's *Interview* in its first few years all knew each other. The downtown scene was tiny.

G2 How do you think the gay scene is different now?

EW There are so many different gay scenes now and some are highly publicized. You go to the opera and there are all these opera queens. A lot of leather guys go see Wagner. It used to be that in order to be gay you had to be cultured. That was the price of admission. It's not like that so much anymore.

G1 You're not supposed to say that so much of contemporary gay culture is so terrible and tacky—just as much as the rest of contemporary American culture. You're supposed to always support it.

EW There are so many different communities. Now after so many decades of black liberation, I don't imagine black people like to socialize with each other, the whole time thinking, I am black I am black I am black. They would think I'm a lepidopterist, or a famous swimmer, or a young executive at IBM. In other words, they define themselves more by their professional lives, less by their race, more through their friendship networks, less by their color. A lot of gays who are feeling empowered now don't mainly think of themselves as gay. We hear a lot of propaganda about how famous and great gays are. But the truth was, in the '50s, there were very few successful gays who one ever met because I think it was so traumatic to come out, you spent all of your mental and psychological energy on coming out that it would take until you were 40 or 50 and by then you were in a sea of martinis. I think it was hard then and now it isn't as hard and that frees up a lot of energy for things other than to be gay. It used to be that a bright, intelligent man would go to Chicago from some tiny town in Iowa, and he'd work at the ham-and-eggs diner the rest of his life because he was so thrilled about being gay and being able to bleach his hair and that was enough.

CB But what's interesting is that to this day, Edmund, the kind of life you lead is still considered outside the gay mainstream. You have an open relationship with your boyfriend, for one. In fact you have boyfriends and then you have this one constant.

EW I think that's because the model for me was bohemianism. I had this big argument with Andrew Sullivan once on stage in Philadelphia. He was saying, Come on, Ed, admit it, the worst moment of your life was when you were a teenager and you realized you couldn't get married to your boyfriend. And I said that wasn't the worst moment. I would never have wanted to get married, because the only straight people who were accepting of gays back then were bohemians. There'd be all these bearded guys and women wearing sandals smoking pot and they were great. They hated squares. Squares were married people. That was the world I wanted to join. That's what being an artist was. I knew by then I wanted to be a writer. They didn't get married and play mom and papa. Marriage doesn't work for straights, why should it work for gays?

G2 Maybe the desire to marry is some deep-seated desire to be accepted at some level.

EW I don't think it's a special gay desire to be accepted. I think it's a fairly broad cultural response to the main generators of myths—books, movies, and TV—which are all about romantic love. I think people growing up in this culture think there is something

wrong with them if they don't want to walk off into the sunset with one particular person. They feel they are somehow lacking if they don't. And of course there is an army of psychologists that will tell you, you are not mature if you don't want to settle down with one person forever. There is a whole indoctrination through all the main institutions of our culture. I don't think it's specifically gay either. I think there is a useful distinction, though, between people who want to play mom and pop, get a mortgage together, settle down, and adopt that child, and the people who want to have that ongoing project called love, which may or may not be happy. I like the latter. My whole life I've been in love.

CB So many times throughout this memoir you keep saying that sex wasn't the real goal. You just wanted to be in love.

EW I think with “My Master,” what devastated me there wasn't so much that the sex was coming to an end but that I was dropped. I felt like I was being pushed out of this tribe of young men. I had lulled myself into forgetting I was 60-something. I think gays, and urbanites, and bohemians—which are three groups I belong to in overlapping circles—have always had an extended youth. Certain primates have this very, very long childhood that's extended way into adulthood because it allows new knowledge to be invented and learned. Basically in the animal kingdom, when you hit maturity, which is very quickly in most species, all of your habits and patterns are set. The only chance of learning is to go on and on in this endless youth. Whether you look at it anthropologically or, in a wiser way, historically, there has been this aristocratization of middle-class life—aristocrats have always looked young and acted young and were capricious and had affairs way into their 70s and 80s. You see that with Voltaire.

CB Well they are also the class that can afford that luxury.

EW Absolutely. Orwell wrote a great essay about penny dreadfuls. You see that poor people go right away from being the honeymooners with bulging breasts and bright smiles to being toothless moms and dads. There is no intervening period in their mythology. Whereas the upper middle class go on and on being thin and beautiful and amorous. He talks about the great thing that happened in the 20th century—that we went away from a culture of duty and self-sacrifice to a culture of self-fulfillment. That's the real blow against religion and that's why religion is failing, despite these rearguard actions to shore it up.

G1 Do you think current gay culture is ultimately shallow?

EW There is this thing called commercial gay culture, which is very shallow and very unenriching. But I don't think that's the whole story about being gay in the 21st century.

CB For my generation, who became sexually active after the outbreak of AIDS, we always associated sex with AIDS and AIDS with gay people. It's hard to think of a time when that disease wasn't so associated with the act of sex in general and with a certain subgroup of people in the specific.

EW Susan Sontag once said to me that there was a period from 1965 to 1980 that was the fifteen years in all of human history when everyone could do what they wanted sexually because there was the birth control pill, antibiotics against STD's, and there was no AIDS. There was also a lull in religion. In this period there was radical politics, not so right-wing governments—at least not as now—and a large, articulate protest group devoted to liberation. It was the golden age of promiscuity. AIDS was far on the horizon.

CB Maybe it's not helpful to ask what life might have been like without AIDS. But you did say earlier that AIDS flushed people out of the closet. It also made people take stands. Do you think without AIDS gay culture would have meshed into the larger mainstream more easily?

EW I think for a long time there was a dispute in the gay community between assimilationists and those who believed in a special destiny for gays. I was one of the special destiny people. That group lost out to the assimilationists and I think that's partly due to AIDS. In a way it was a natural selection process, because the people who were really sexually experimental died. It was the people who were too alcoholic to ever get around to sex or too uptight or upset about their macho standing to ever play the so-called passive role—they are the ones who survived. What about all of those people in this city of my generation and the next generation who were infected before 1985? Those people all died off and that's a crucial link really because they all had been life-loving, experimental, courageous, fun people. There is a natural selection in favor of uptight, closeted people.

G1 There is a lot of mainstream writing about how AIDS mobilized gay culture.

EW I was one of the six founders of the Gay Men's Health Crisis. I was responding to AIDS. I mean, it changed everything. I found out I was positive in 1985. Sometimes I feel so Lazarus-like, because Peter Jennings did a story on TV about me in 1990 as this great writer who was positive and about to die. Now he's dead and I'm not.

Edmund White in New York City, 1972

Photography B. Coufino

MY LIVES is out in April 2006 from Ecco