



A Boy's Own Story

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The Work

Part fiction and part autobiography, *A Boy's Own Story* is the tale of a youth discovering his homosexuality in the 1940's and 1950's in America. The work is remarkable for its lyrical celebration of physical beauty and for its sharp criticism of a homophobic society.

In his teens, the boy Edmund enjoys a brief sexual relationship with Kevin, a slightly younger friend. Their intimacy is represented as natural and idyllic, undisturbed by the guilt and self-hatred that society will later impose upon Edmund because he is homosexual. The joyous experience with Kevin is something that Edmund will never be able to recapture, for society's prejudice and Edmund's internalized homophobia will make it very difficult for him to achieve a positive homosexual identity.

When he is an older teen, Edmund feels physically attracted to Tom, another male friend, but he dares not act on his desires for fear of being labeled a homosexual. Instead, Edmund tries to convince himself that he is in love with Linda, a popular young woman, and he indulges in escapist fantasies of a heterosexual marriage that will gain him society's approval. Edmund also turns to Buddhism in the belief that it will help him to escape all desire. Finally, Christianity and psychoanalysis fail to affirm his identity as a young gay man: Father Burke tells him that homosexuality is a sin, and Dr. O'Reilly tries to cure him, as if being gay were a disease.

Unfortunately, Edmund's father does not serve as a positive role model either. A chronic adulterer, the father eventually abandons Edmund's mother for another woman, leaving the family bereft of affection and money. The father considers his athletic daughter to be more like the son he had wanted, rejecting the bookish Edmund as a sissy. In the end, Edmund acts on his gay desires: He has sex with an older teacher, Mr. Beattie. Society has made Edmund feel guilty about his homosexuality, however, so he turns Mr. Beattie in to the school authorities. In this way, Edmund attempts to deny his sexual identity. Furthermore, he is unconsciously repeating his father's pattern of behavior, abandoning the people he loves.

A Boy's Own Story ends on a pessimistic note, with Edmund still unable to achieve a positive gay identity. His struggle to affirm his homosexuality is not over; a sequel, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* (1988), follows Edmund into the 1960's and the beginnings of the gay liberation movement.

Suggested Readings

Bergman, David. *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

Bonetti, Kay. "An Interview with Edmund White." *Missouri Review* 13 (Spring, 1990): 89-110.

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