

Introduction to *Some Dance to Remember*

by David Van Leer

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Size counts in gay male culture, and gay fiction embraces a range of small, medium, and large books of the kind written by a diversity of authors including Jack Fritscher in his novella *Titanic*, his short novel *The Geography of Women: A Romantic Comedy*, and his epic *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*. LGBT culture fits all sizes. We need minimalist authors who are delicate stylists like Jane Austen and Nathaniel Hawthorne who condense the universe into a glance or a phrase. We also need writers who paint sweeping strokes across an epic canvas after the fashion of giant literary masterpieces such as *Moby-Dick*, *Les Misérables*, *Ulysses*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*. Unlike poetry, drama, and film, only the novel permits true expansiveness in height, weight, depth, and length. The “Great American Novel” is “great” because it embraces an entire world, “universal” because it contains a universe. The “Great Gay American Novel” is no different. In truth, length may be especially important for minority writers because one goal of minority fiction is simply to get on the record “under-explored material” which offers minority readers a “history of their own” while introducing mainstream readers to a largely foreign way of life. It takes time to describe the countless details that make up a culture, a thousand words to tell one picture.

For this reason, when women first began to write in large numbers, the spacious form of the novel was most congenial to the kind of tale they wanted to tell. Charlotte Brontë needed time (and pages) to give a convincingly full account of Jane Eyre's education and romance for her male readers who knew little of women's lives, and for her female readers who reveled in finally seeing their own stories on the page. So, too, with

most writing that focuses on a racial, ethnic, or sexual minority: the sweep and scope of the novel have always seemed best suited to tell a new and unfamiliar story.

Jack Fritscher's *Some Dance to Remember* comes out of the same literary impulse to record an unfamiliar life that gave American literature Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It is also part of the renaissance in homosexual writing that attended sexual liberation post-Stonewall. Shortly after World War II, gay writers in America experimented at introducing sexual themes into mainstream fiction. Some of these novels—like Gore Vidal's trail-blazing *The City and the Pillar* and James Baldwin's elegiac *Giovanni's Room*—attempted to situate gay characters within a diverse community of homosexuals. But more commonly 1960s writers saw gay people in isolation from one another. In the poetic but tragic accounts of Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, James Purdy, and Truman Capote, homosexuals were trapped in an unsympathetic straight world where they were finally consumed by homophobia and self-hatred. In such worlds, as Williams so powerfully stated on stage, strangers might be "kind" but they could never be anything better than strangers.

It is worth noting that in 1967 Fritscher wrote the first doctoral dissertation on Tennessee Williams—even as he wrote the prescient 1969 short novel *Leather Blues*, a coming-out tale of initiation into the new ways of being gay. Already collecting notes for what would become *Some Dance to Remember*, he participated as an eyewitness gay journalist in the revolution that turned 1960s closeted gay life into 1970s sexual politics when, in 1968, as a founding member of the American Popular Culture Association, he made certain that gay popular culture was represented. In fact, it fits that Magnus Bishop, the narrator of *Some Dance to Remember*, is a university professor of popular culture at San Francisco State University because Fritscher's book is energetic in mining revealing details of gay popular culture.

The first "post-Stonewall" generation took the civil disobedience by drag queens and others outside the Stonewall Inn in 1969 as a symbol of the growing unwillingness to sacrifice political rights because of non-traditional sexual behavior. Fritscher chronicled this in his gay-history story, "Stonewall: June 27, 1969, 11 PM." In response to this new street emphasis on confrontation and openness, gay writers in their garrets began producing what might be called "the first generation of self-consciously 'gay' literature." These new works, proselytizing for the importance of explicitness

in sex narrative, also generated a new explicitness for gay identity and history. These first-decade pioneer books offered our first extended accounts of a fully developed gay culture and community. Although some of these novels still saw homosexuals as isolated, the best work of Edmund White, Felice Picano, Jack Fritscher, Andrew Holleran, Ethan Mordden, and Rita Mae Brown gave readers insight as well into a vibrant and fast-growing gay communal life. Among these literary peers, Fritscher is the first-born, the earliest published, the only documentary filmmaker, and the most explicit erotically. One of the forefathers of modern gay literature, Sam Steward, friend to Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, wrote of *Some Dance to Remember* that it is “quite possibly the great gay American novel.”

“Dancing” and “memory” lie at the heart of gay male culture. *Some Dance to Remember*, like its East Coast companion Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*, stands to memorialize the first flush of gay liberation on the West Coast. Yet, though very much part of the Gay American Renaissance of post-Stonewall literature, Fritscher’s novel is also different from the other novels, perhaps unique. Most obviously, it is a rare West Coast novel in a *belles lettres* movement that tends to assume that New York is the center of the gay literary universe. Only Armistead Maupin, in the Barbary Lane series that began with *Tales of the City* (1978), treated gay San Francisco. He did so by adopting a self-consciously unassuming “comic-book” style, and by fantasizing a utopian community of gays and straights, one in which misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination were pretty much absent.

Fritscher’s account of much grittier tales of the City is entirely more aggressive, realistic, sexually explicit, and historical than Maupin’s. It is this seriousness, even more than its pitch-perfect San Francisco setting, that sets *Some Dance* apart from other gay novels of the period. Even so, its text captures an abundance of the traditional humor of gay camp in the wise-cracking dialogue. No one, by the way, writes “bar banter” and “sex talk” better than Fritscher. His characters’ sense of humor makes most jokes rise above the bitch wit of *The Boys in the Band* to catch the melancholy undercurrent that ennoble the best of Oscar Wilde’s epigrams. Fritscher is a prose stylist whose characters know how to nail a line: his doomed Teddy says, “San Francisco is where you go to lose a lover” and his video pornographer Solly Blue insists like Prufrock that “I am not Saint Genet nor was I meant to be.” Solly Blue is, in fact, based on Fritscher’s longtime friend, David Hurles, who, as the shocking photographer “Old Reliable,” Fritscher introduced into gay popular culture, long before Taschen found Hurles, by publishing him in the pages of *Drummer*

magazine when Fritscher was its founding San Francisco editor in chief. So integral is Hurles to the kind of homomale culture so often denied by queens that John Waters has rallied after Fritscher and championed Hurles with a New York exhibition and a section in his book *Role Models*.

Fritscher, who for years was a university professor teaching American and British literature, has Oscar Wilde and Tennessee Williams as two stylistic literary precursors. Equally important to *Some Dance to Remember* are the brighter, affirmative rhythms of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville both of whom knew a “golden man” when they saw him. In fact, Fritscher takes several of Whitman’s lyrics and turns them into pop-song lyrics representing man-to-man bromance in the 1970s. Eschewing the perfumed faux-Proustian elegance that customarily infuses gay male fiction, Fritscher in his prose is effusive and aggressive, influenced by his mid-century education reading the inclusive rhythms of Whitman, the tempest-tossed drama of Tennessee Williams, the pop-culture assemblage of John Dos Passos’ *USA Trilogy*, and the conflicted masculine questions of what he calls “that struggling gay author, Ernest Hemingway.” As a filmmaker teaching cinema at university, he is also influenced in narrative arc, dialogue, and imagery by directors as underground as Kenneth Anger, and as epic as George Cukor and Victor Fleming. Cukor and Fleming turned *Gone with the Wind* into a film from Margaret Mitchell’s giant novel which is the avatar trope of *Some Dance to Remember*. Fritscher’s main character, in an homage to Margaret Mitchell, is named Ryan “O’Hara,” often called (behind his back) “Miss Scarlett,” and he lives against a backdrop of a civil war about gay identity while trying to win a man who doesn’t really give a damn.

Some Dance to Remember, which was a pioneer Lambda Literary Award Finalist, is actually three book-lengths in one, and might have been published as a trilogy over a three-year period. First and foremost it is, as Michael Bronski has observed, a novel of ideas. Some of these truly-reported 1970s ideas are radically reflective of the historic period in a book that was completed in 1984, the decade before queer theorists invented themselves as gay community activists. As such, the debates in the heads of these pre-queer characters deserve respect, dramatically framed as they are “back in the day” when LGBT culture was on a steep learning curve about its diverse nature. Rejecting the cool distance of some authors, Fritscher, who invokes Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty in his writing and his films, sets out in his S&M-themed novel to shatter the false “given” realities of gay culture. In the way that Artaud wanted to burn the theater down to find its truth, Fritscher upends gay tropes. Using the metaphor

of bodybuilding, he invokes Artaud's "athletes of the heart" eroticizing the kind of Artaudian "affective athleticism" at the core of 1970s gay sex. He embeds within the novel a passionate apologia for what he calls "homomascularity" which deconstructs clichés of shifting gay identity. If feminism redefines women, so can masculine-identified homosexuality redefine men. Such arguments in the novel are the characters speaking their parts reflecting the times, and they are not spokesmen for the author who is no ventriloquist, and has written that he is neither feminist nor masculinist, but humanist. In the parallel universes of fiction and reality, Fritscher's Ryan edits *Maneuvers* magazine and publishes a pointedly satiric *Masculinist Manifesto*, and Fritscher, as editor in chief of *Drummer*, created the first gay-male gender identity magazine. Satire about masculinity is different from erotica written for men.

As embodied in Ryan's *Masculinist Manifesto* and Kick's career as bodybuilder, the Pirandello-influenced characters are in search of their own authenticity as they argue passionately for the legitimacy of a masculine-identified character in emerging gay male culture inventing itself in the new world of the 1970s. While Fritscher's characters look askance at the queeniness of absolutist camp culture, they force the reader to consider if there are other ways of being gay than being drag, or camp, or effeminate. Nor do his characters suffer gladly those who, swayed by the power of the rising feminist-separatist movement, try to define gay men as "bad as straight men" or as "sisters" of heterosexual women. In the text, Fritscher exhibits the same positive attraction to women that he exhibited in *The Geography of Women*. He creates memorable female characters including the cabaret singer Kweenie, modeled after Sharon McKnight; the TV documentarian, January Guggenheim, loosely based on Helen Whitney; and the housewife Sandy Gully. Even while keeping his civil rights take on women in proportion to his archetypal male visions, Fritscher's character Ryan O'Hara tells us "the ultimate ritual act of worship in the twentieth century is a grown man, stripped, naked, stoned on grass, with poppers by his side and clamps on his tits, greasing up his dick, kneeling on the floor with his face four inches from the video screen, masturbating to glorious close-ups of bodybuilders flexing and posing." (Has Internet porn and medical marijuana fulfilled this 1970s prediction?)

Like a virtual Tarot card, this "masturbating man" is a powerful image of worship, unashamedly erotic and masculine, and one that does not back down, even in the face of the health crisis that informs the second half of the narrative. But masculinity is not the whole novel. *Some Dance to Remember* signals from its first sentence that it is about being

human: “In the end, he could not deny his human heart.” We are asked to consider seriously the possibility that some degree of gay culture might be masculinist, even misogynist, but immensely human even as all the queer genders continue to fight the age-old binary “battle of the sexes.” But we are not forced to agree. For the world-view of Ryan and Kick is only one of the novel’s threads. The central story of their love is ultimately a tragic one, grounded in Ryan’s partial misunderstanding of Kick’s motives. For those who do not share Ryan’s fixation on muscles and masculinity, the novel offers other approaches to fluid sexuality.

If the novel is a novel of ideas, it is also a family novel, one which places the romance of the two central characters within a larger context. Ryan, of course, has other lives—as a former Catholic seminarian and as lover to the drug-addled Teddy. He retains strong bonds to his biological family, with especially important relations to his father, Charley-Pop; his sister, Kweenasheba; his brother, Thom; and his mother, Annie Laurie, who floats like an angel above the narrative. This family emphasis is itself revisionary. Traditionally gay novels reject the influence of the heterosexual family. If the family does play a role, it is largely in terms of a (Freudian) notion of the gay man’s obsessive relation to his mother. In Fritscher’s narrative, mothers seem less important to sons than are fathers—but only to a reader not paying attention. In his sexualized exchanges with his brother and his sister, Ryan complicates the traditional family model, which imagines no sexual relations between gay and straight brothers—much less a pregnancy between one’s straight sister and one’s gay male lover.

Ryan’s biological family is balanced by his relationships to a diversity of Castro friends who form an extended family. Although he continues to attend to his parents, brother, and sister, Ryan’s strongest “familial” tie is ultimately to his photographer friend Solly Bluestein who is king of San Francisco pornographers. “Solly Blue” offers up an erotic rough-trade alternative of straight men as checkmate to the Platonic ideal of Ryan’s questions about gay masculinity: can a gay man have a masculine identity, or not? Ryan writes the novel’s significant topic sentence: “The hardest thing to be in America today is a man.” It is Solly’s personal history, more than that of Kweenie, Thom, or Charley-Pop, that determines Ryan’s development in the novel because Solly is Ryan’s foil. In a similar way, the shadowy figure of Magnus Bishop, the pop culture professor who, struggling for an omniscient point of view, serves as a narrator for large sections of the novel. As a detective trying to piece together gay civilization even as HIV is ravaging it, Magnus, in the final pages, emerges into the plot to replace both Kick and Ryan’s family as the focus of Ryan’s emotional

life. But is he real?

Some Dance to Remember stands, then, as both an intellectual meditation on the nature of masculinity and as a double family novel, considering the roles of both the nuclear and the extended family. But the novel has one final purpose, one which, although occupying the fewest pages, may ultimately be the most important function of all. For, finally, *Some Dance* is an historical novel, treating the recent past history of the gay community in the Castro from the 1960s through 1982.

The passages of general history and sociology seem brief, compared to the more extended narrative passages dealing with homomascu-
linist philosophy or Ryan's personal history. However, these historical passages of street life and nights on the town are finally the most impressive, and important, of all of Fritscher's epic coverage of the first decade of gay liberation in San Francisco. As an academic scholar treating alternative history fictitiously, he breaks the ancient curse that minority cultures do not usually fare well at the hands of establishment historians. Though the lives of kings and generals are fully recorded in historical documentation, those of women, the lower classes, ordinary males, and ethnic and sexual minorities are rarely written down. We know little of how undervalued people passed their lives.

So with homosexuals. Only since Stonewall has it seemed possible, valuable, or, even, survivable, to write down systematically the "forbidden" day-to-day histories of gay men and women. We have few sure records of what ordinary gay people did before Stonewall, and even the daily practices of homosexuals between 1920 and 1950 are quickly being erased as gay seniors die unrecorded. *Some Dance to Remember*, however, takes care to record the social ecology and histories of representative men and women such as Ryan, Solly, Kick, and Kweenie. More important, Fritscher, an early eyewitness journalist of gay history, includes "oral history" mini-essays on life in the Castro and on Folsom Street between 1970 and 1982. Some of the people memorialized are famous—Rudolph Nureyev, Divine, Randy Shilts with whom Fritscher sometimes worked, and Robert Mapplethorpe who was Fritscher's bi-coastal lover, and to whom the novel is dedicated. The insightful peeks into history in *Some Dance* are original, and may be of use to historians and anthropologists for years to come because Fritscher is a plain speaker about what he witnessed and wrote down in his journals and turned into this novel. Only someone who lived through the 1970s in San Francisco could cut through all the subsequent post-1970s revisionist myths about that happily politically-incorrect period to recall the prelasparian moment when the handsome

Dan White was admired by gay men for his boxing skills, while Harvey Milk was merely a loudmouth New Yorker trying to “Manhattanize” San Francisco, using his cute boy friend to attract patrons to his shop and voters to his cause.

Some historical observations are unique in gay documentation. Few historians of the period have recorded as well as Fritscher the importance of performer Sylvester and artist Chuck Arnett to the formulation of a “gay” sensibility in the 1960s, especially in the years before Stonewall. And no author, historian or novelist, has detailed with such love and care the importance of now forgotten figures—like the Fey-Way gallery director Robert Opel who streaked the Oscars, or the bartender and artist Robert Kirk—in the development of the Castro. These moments are not triumphs of aesthetics; nor do they lie at the heart of Fritscher’s own project. But in the broader history of gay literature and culture, these little memorials to a life that did not survive the health crisis may represent the most important contribution of this entertaining novel.

To have created characters as lively as Ryan and Solly is the measure of the novel’s literary achievement. To have placed such characters within a broader context of family politics is a mark of its intellectual sophistication. But to have understood the place of such people and politics at a particular moment of gay history is a triumph of the historical imagination—a reason not simply to enjoy the book, but to be grateful that it exists to offer us a window on a world now lost.

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SOME DANCE TO REMEMBER

The COSMOS. The SOLAR SYSTEM. The EARTH.
NORTH AMERICA.
CALIFORNIA. SAN FRANCISCO. 18TH AND CASTRO .
FOLSOM STREET, SOUTH OF MARKET.

The Golden Age
1970-1982

A Drop-Dead Blond Bodybuilder
A Gay Magazine Editor
An Erotic Video Mogul
A Penthouse Full of Hustler
A Famous Cabaret “Chanteuse Fatale”
A Hollywood Bitch TV Producer
A Vietnam Veteran
A Trailer Park Wife
An Epic Liberation Movement
A Civil Way between Women and Men...and Men
A Time of Sex, Drugs, & Rock 'n' Roll
A MURDER
A CITY
A PLAGUE
A LOST CIVILIZATION
A LOVE STORY