

Spring 2016

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The Violet Quill Club: Constructing a Post-Stonewall Gay Identity through Fiction

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Senior Honors Thesis

Spring 2016

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**Abstract**

It's difficult to define "literature," let alone "gay literature." Nonetheless, a group of seven gay male authors, dubbed the Violet Quill Club, met at informal roundtables in New York City to critique each other's work in the late 1970s into the early '80s, creating a set of works that redefined the way Americans read "gay" novels. These authors published their seminal works during this time, a unique era of sexual freedom in the United States that fell between the Stonewall riots, which mark the beginning of the modern gay rights movement, and the AIDS crisis, which took the lives of four members of the group. The fiction published by the Violet Quill Club established a new gay identity born of New York's gay culture, which emphasized sexual liberation and freedom from traditional heterosexual institutions such as marriage. Although this constructed identity was narrowly construed, it influenced a generation of gay men and still resonates within today's LGBT rights movement.

## Introduction

The definition of “literature” has never been fixed. “Literature is embedded in the question, ‘What is Literature,’” Michel Foucault told an audience in December 1964 at the Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis in Brussels. “Literature is not at all made of something ineffable, it is made of something non-ineffable, of something we might consequently refer to, in the strict and original meaning of the term, as ‘fable.’” “Literature” is an even more nebulous category for gay authors producing works with gay themes. In early 1980, Felice Picano, a gay author who published novels in the 1970s and ’80s, wrote, “gay literature is still a hotly disputed subject—*The New York Times*, for example, doesn’t believe that it exists” (53). Robert Ferro, another gay author and contemporary of Picano, wrote, “As a novelist I am best advised to ignore most conceptions of what gay literature may be, just as any writer had better ignore most of literature if he or she expects to get anything done. It is useful to understand the market, the reader, and even somehow academia, but in the end literature—gay or otherwise—is never a question of perspectives or trends but of free creativity, individual art” (*The Violet Quill Reader* 387). No matter which way you look at it, literature is never as complete as it needs to be—the literary canon is always lacking a certain perspective, author, or theme. This essay looks at one specific slice of history often forgotten in the literary canon: Gay male literature. As the United States and the rest of the world rethink their attitude toward what it means to be homosexual in modern society, a canon is emerging—there’s a “Gay & Lesbian” category for movies on Netflix, and many libraries have an “LGBT” section. This canon isn’t necessarily “new,” however, because of how many gay writers and gay narratives are nestled between the hallmark works of “literature.” Henry James and Oscar Wilde, for example, wove gay subtext throughout their works, without any explicit mentions or depictions of homosexuality.

This paper focuses on seven gay male authors, the so-called “Violet Quill Club.” These seven men—Christopher Cox, Robert Ferro, Michael Grumley, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, Edmund White and George Whitmore—created their most enduring and well known works in the late 1960s, ’70s, and early ’80s. Although one or two of them produced works into the ’90s and even the new millennium, this paper is constrained to the 1970s and early ’80s. This period is uniquely situated in the formation of modern gay male culture, which is built on the hallmark works of these authors, among others. The 1970s, nestled between the Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the beginning of the AIDS crisis in the early ’80s, are a bubble of sexual liberation unique to the decade. All of these men were gay, all of them were writers, all of them lived in New York and all of them met on several occasions in the early ’80s to read nascent works to each other and solicit feedback. Although it would be reductive to call these authors the pillars of the modern gay canon, several of them created works that still shape gay culture today, and their collaboration was the first of its kind among gay writers. Most of the writers thought the idea of being part of “gay literature,” let alone a gay canon, laughable, but some of them landed there nonetheless. “I myself am in favor of desacralizing literature,” wrote one of the Violet Quill Club, Edmund White, “of dismantling the idea of a few essential books, of retiring the whole concept of a canon. A canon is for people who don’t like to read, people who want to know the bare minimum of titles they must consume in order to be considered polished, well rounded, civilized” (382). Picano downplayed the work of the Violet Quill in his other writings. For example, in one essay Picano describes a near-car accident at the Jersey shore, when almost the entire Violet Quill Club was riding in Robert Grumley’s Firebird. According to Picano, the authors joked about their legacy in the wake of the near miss: “‘Careful,’ Edmund chided. ‘If we all died in this car, think how long it would take gay literature to recover!’ A moment of silent

thought was followed by one of us saying ‘Ten minutes! At the most!’ ‘Five,’ someone else piped in... And finally, ‘It wouldn’t even notice!’” (*Queer Representations* 318). These authors wrote in a unique period of sexual openness and freedom in the United States, between the Stonewall Riots—what many consider to be the beginning of the modern gay rights movement—and the beginning of the AIDS crisis. The Violet Quill Club has attracted relatively little formal scholarship, but their work had impacts far beyond the years in which it was published. Three of the authors still live and write today: Felice Picano, Andrew Holleran, and Edmund White. The other four authors died of AIDS during the epidemic. In a 2007 interview with Frank Pizzoli of the *Lambda Book Report*, White said that New York is dull now because the high cost of living drove out all of the young people, and because “a lot of the really interesting gay people died off in the 1980s” (4). The Violet Quill Club’s legacy was the formation of a new gay identity, one that played upon the dominant culture in the New York City of the 1970s. This gay identity played upon ideas of sexuality and love, and subverted the institutions that traditionally defined heterosexual romance, including marriage and nuclear family.

Homosexuality became its own identity around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*. By the mid- to late-1960s, gay culture had taken root in America, most notably in major cities like New York and San Francisco. In both cities, as well as other metropolises like Los Angeles and Chicago, an underground gay community existed, evidenced by gay bars, clubs, and bathhouses. On the night of July 27, 1967, New York police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village. When the patrons of the bar and their supporters resisted the police, it set a movement in motion. In the words of Edmund White, after the Stonewall riots “the big news [in America] is Gay Power” (A Letter to Anna and Alfred Corn). In a July 8, 1969 letter written to friends in France, White wrote describing the

night: “The cops raided the Stonewall... so brazen and so conspicuous that one could only surmise that the Mafia was paying off the pigs handsomely.” White, rather poetically, continues by describing the ensuing riots, which went on for three nights: “Some adorable butch hustler boy pulls up a *parking meter* [emphasis White’s], mind you, out of the pavement, and uses it as a battering ram... A mad Negro queen whirls like a dervish with a twisted piece of metal in her hand and breaks the remaining windows.” Even if the Stonewall Riots weren’t the absolute beginning of the modern gay rights movement, the event does provide a helpful watermark for New York gay culture in the late ’60s. The Stonewall Riots resonate in the collective consciousness even today, especially in the wake of a historic 2015 Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States. The riots were even chronicled in a (much-maligned) Roland Emmerich-directed movie released the same year as the decision for marriage equality.

After Stonewall, homosexual life and culture, including writing, became more visible to the American public. Gay writers have always existed and have always been writing, but the era of sexual liberation presented an until-then unique field of possibility for gay writers. By some accounts, the only explicitly gay fiction from the pre-Stonewall area told stories of murder, suicide, alcoholism, and sex. White wrote, “Before Stonewall there were by and large only two kinds of gay male novels—the apology (aimed at mainly straight readers), a genre designed to prove that gay men are doomed, sensitive creatures who usually have the good grace to commit suicide so, hey, let’s not beat them up; and the pornographic rag, aimed at the gay reader, and sold at an exorbitant price under the counter” (qtd. in Bergman 43). Before the *Violet Quill*, gay fiction was often tacit or understated. The authors of the *Violet Quill* created personality through homosexuality, capturing a specific culture that thrived in New York in the 1970s and ’80s.

Earlier gay authors had no such culture; in the 2007 interview, White said, “you have to wait until you get to (Christopher) Isherwood in *A Single Man* before you can find a picture of a guy that’s just a guy” (Pizzoli 3). Isherwood depicts “a life like any other,” six years before the gay liberation movement that inspired and enabled White and the other writers in his cohort.

It’s easy to draw a set of other trend lines across the Violet Quill Club: All of the authors worked to some extent as journalists. They all also wrote semi-autobiographical work. While there are few explicitly autobiographical works among the authors, they all work, to some extent, from the material of their own lives. The autobiographical aspect of so many of the Group’s novels gives valuable insight into not only their lives but the lives of many gay men at the time. While the lives of just seven authors can’t create an accurate model of 1970s gay culture, they can at least provide a tenuous mapping of what gay male life was like at the time. The Violet Quill was also, as was typical of New York gay society at the time, interspersed with sexual and romantic relationships. Robert Ferro and Michael Grumley were together for many years, and at the time of the Group’s meetings Edmund White and Christopher Cox were also lovers. The group did not stay together forever, of course. Aside from the obvious problem of the rapidly ballooning HIV/AIDS epidemic in the late 1970s, early ’80s, and beyond, the authors were soon too busy to meet as they once had. Differences also arose among members of the Violet Quill. Some, for example, enjoyed more commercial success—and fame—than others. Breakups also marred the group’s synergy; Felice Picano and George Whitmore had broken up early in the club’s life, and Edmund White and Christopher Cox broke up after a few meetings. Rivalries also arose between the writers, some petty and some literary. Felice Picano writes in an essay about the Violet Quill that, in the end, “It required but one utterly stupid argument for the group to end. It happened in my apartment. George Whitmore was reading and stopped suddenly and



asked where Holleran was. After a search, Holleran was discovered behind my big sofa on the floor. I couldn't tell whether he was laughing himself into hysterics or simply holding his ears because he didn't want hear what was being read. George walked out of that meeting, and a series of telephone and in-person negotiations followed to try to keep the group together.”

The problems that ended the group were deeply rooted: The story Whitmore had been reading, “Getting Rid of Robert,” was about a gay couple’s breakup and its effects on their group of friends. The story was, apparently, a little too close to the story of White and Cox’s actual breakup. In many ways, the interplay between members of the Violet Quill Club permeated their writing, which depicted a gay society interwoven with sexual and romantic relationships.

The Violet Quill—or the Lavender Quill, as they were sometimes also called—had enough influence as a literary group to attract a certain amount of criticism. In a sizeable essay, a cover story for *The SoHo Weekly News*, critic Denis Altman called the Violet Quill the “Fag-Lit Mafia.” Although the term was used lightly, it took on more serious connotations as the years went on. In his essay “The Real Violet Quill Club,” Felice Picano wrote that serious critics of the group “were often disillusioned by their failed attempts to break into publishing, their work having been rejected by the same book and magazine publishers who so regularly, and to them so egregiously, featured the work of the New York seven. No wonder they came to believe that this group controlled gay publishing in the country, though even a cursory study of the industry would reveal otherwise. No wonder they came to blame the writers for their own lack of success... all of it a conspiracy to establish a stranglehold over American gay literature” (Picano). Picano emphasizes in the same essay just how alone the seven writers were, as the first openly gay novelists of their time: “At the time, the seven of us found ourselves in the position of being just about the only serious openly gay authors we knew of with whom we could discuss

how to present the gay material we were struggling with. Even a writer as sociable and well-connected as Edmund found little camaraderie or comfort in this area from the older, better known, mostly closeted gay authors he dined and partied with.” The Violet Quill were not the first gay writers, by any means, but they were arguably the first gay writers who used each other for support during a period of cultural and sexual expression like America’s 1970s. In a 1994 essay, White wrote that other writers warned the Violet Quill of “ghettoizing themselves:” “Literary friends told us that we were betraying our high calling by ghettoizing ourselves. After all, the argument ran, many great writers had been lesbian or gay, but Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bishop wrote for all humanity and would have found any minority label demeaning. It would be absurd to call them lesbian writers, just as it would be grotesque to call E.M. Forster or Henry James gay writers” (*Queer Representations* 378). These conditions produced a set of works that, studied together, provide valuable information about New York City gay culture at the time and what it meant for the LGBT+ rights movement in America, and how those influences are still rippling in the much-changed American of 40 years later. The Lavender Quill Group defined a gay identity in their novels that was based on their experiences as gay men in New York City at a time unlike any before it. Although this identity was by no means absolute, it impacted urban gay culture through the AIDs crisis and still underlies a gay male culture that, today, faces growing acceptance from the American public.

As the seven authors of the Violet Quill Club gained influence in both gay and straight literary circles, their work opened a new market for other up-and-coming gay authors. “Every gay book that succeeded in selling beyond a first printing or getting excellent reviews lifted a half dozen other books in its wake, and the executives of St. Martin’s Press and random House and Delacorte soon recognized a new ‘market’ opening up,” Picano wrote in his essay (315).

Picano himself started a gay publishing house, SeaHorse Press, with the profits from the sales of his novels. Picano used this platform to publish gay plays, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction that had been deemed not “commercial enough” by larger publishers. SeaHorse press was soon followed by other independent presses, and what Picano calls a “second generation” of talent following the Violet Quill. Although this narrative comes from Picano’s own writing—and is therefore subject to his own obvious bias—the effect that the Violet Quill had on gay and lesbian writing, and literature more generally, is undeniable. After Stonewall, the United States entered a period of unprecedented sexual freedom that ushered in the modern gay rights movement. Part of this movement was a new canon of gay literature, which capitalized on the sexual liberation of the seventies and early eighties while still being fraught with anxiety stemming from the complicated relationship between homosexuality and psychoanalysis. The writing of the Violet Quill Club is underpinned with psychoanalytic themes that, for many of these seven authors, defined their understanding of their own sexualities. Until the early 1990s, homosexuality was commonly seen as a disease, one that could be unpacked and treated with the same psychoanalytic framework that runs throughout the fiction penned by the Violet Quill. The relationship between psychoanalysis and the formation of sexuality in the novels of the Violet Quill Club is essential to the gay male identity created by those works.

### **Autobiography in Gay Fiction**

In 1982 Edmund White published *A Boy’s Own Story*, one of the most well known books produced by a member of the Lavender Quill Group and the first in a three-part series. The book is still in print today; it tells the semi-autobiographical story of an unnamed protagonist’s coming-of-age. *A Boy’s Own Story* was part of a trilogy; it was followed by *The Beautiful Room*

*is Empty* in 1988, and then *The Farewell Symphony* in 1997. In an interview with *Interview* magazine when *The Farewell Symphony* was published, White made clear the differences between direct, factual memoir and autobiographical fiction. “If I had told [readers] in advance this was a memoir, and then put in all those details about the precise way a boy’s hair was combed, how he slouched around the room, the precise words he said, how he smelled, how he sat down, and so on, you would laugh at me, because no one could possibly have remembered all that,” White told *Interview* magazine (Qtd. in Bergman 73). Fiction, White said, is better for capturing memory, because it can capture specificity and individuality while creating larger contexts and an overarching narrative that give experiences more meaning (73). White is not the only member of the Violet Quill who relied on his own life as source material; it was more common than not among the seven authors to weave autobiographical material throughout their novels.

In *A Boy’s Own Story*, the namelessness of the narrator gives the narrative the power of being applicable to any who reads it and finds himself feeling in a similar way, namely other gay male readers. Robert McRuer pointed out in a 1994 essay, however, that White’s novel isn’t actually universal; it’s set apart by something almost completely invisible in the narrative—its whiteness. “[The narrator’s] identity is rendered representative precisely because the ‘naturalness’ of his racial identity is maintained through White’s ‘god-trick’ of ‘invisibility,’” McRuer writes. Early in the novel, when the narrator’s maid’s daughter survives a bloody fight and needs help, White seems poised to expose the dynamics of white power and privilege upon which the life of his constructed narrator is built. Instead, the narrator co-opts the experience “to facilitate the protagonist’s own developing sense of self,” McRuer writes. “In this entire section, racial difference is not so much ‘exposed’ and challenged as it is safely contained,” McRuer

criticizes, noting that in the one other section of the novel in which the narrator directly confronts race, when he visits the black whorehouse while away at boarding school, race remains contained as it was in this first racial incident of the novel. White's racial blindness is by no means unique among the Violet Quill. Only one of the authors, Felice Picano, was nonwhite, and by-and-large the view of gay life modeled by the collected works of the Violet Quill shows a world in which whiteness is the standard of normality, and race is pushed to the periphery. Such racial blindness is by no means limited to White's work, either. Although the Violet Quill creates a new gay male identity born of their own experiences in New York's gay community, it's an identity narrowly focused on the experience of white, successful gay men. The limits of this identity are clear in novels such as *A Boy's Own Story*, which, McRuer points out, is based on a narrative that is universal only until a certain point.

*A Boy's Own Story* was part of a larger trend of autobiographical fiction among the Lavender Quill Group. George Whitmore, another member of the Violet Quill Club, also wrote at least one novel semi-autobiographically. *The Confessions of Danny Slocum or, Gay Life in the Big City*, was published in 1980, telling the story of the eponymous Danny Slocum who, as his name suggests, has trouble reaching orgasm with his lovers—a case of “delayed ejaculation.” The premise of *The Confessions of Danny Slocum* is, by most standards, unusual. As was typical with novels of the Violet Quill, *Danny Slocum* mirrored Whitmore's own life in more ways than one. *Danny Slocum* began as a two-part, non-fiction article in *Christopher Street*, a contemporary gay periodical. Michael Denenny, the first out-of-the-closet editor in commercial publishing, asked Whitmore to expand his stories into a book. As he transformed his articles into a novel, Whitmore made what had been a nonfiction account into a fictional adaptation. George Whitmore himself was a so-called “slow cummer;” and, according to Bergman's book-length

study on the Violet Quill Club, “Whitmore wasn’t just a slow cummer, but rather unable to have an orgasm whenever anyone else was present” (Bergman 186). To remedy his condition, Whitmore (and the fictional Danny Slocum) saw a sex therapist. For Whitmore, the therapist was Charles Silverstein, who co-wrote *The Joy of Gay Sex*, an extensive manual on gay culture and sexuality, with Edmund White in 1977. Interestingly, a fictional version of Silverstein also appears in White’s *The Farewell Symphony*, the third novel in the trilogy that starts with *A Boy’s Own Story*. Danny’s Slocum’s therapist, the fictional mirror image of Silverstein, was a man named Virgil. Slocum actually references *The Joy of Gay Sex* in the novel: “My trusty *Joy of Gay Sex* (for all the good it’s done me) tells me that a ‘late comer’ like me ‘exercises such tight control over his feelings as well as his body that he avoids anxiety, but may suffer from such displacements of anxiety’” (Whitmore 20). Whitmore, like White, addresses the autobiographical nature of his novel, writing in *Danny Slocum*’s brief afterword, “What was evolving out of the original material was not so much a piece of autobiographical journalism as it was a full-blown novel... not quite the-whole-truth-and-nothing-but-the-truth in the standard tradition of confessional literature but, I hope, an honest attempt to portray a slice of life at a particular time and in a particular place, however fictionalized the characters or highly colored the locals might be” (Whitmore 215). It’s worth noting that *The Confessions of Danny Slocum* suffers from some of the same issues of gay identity politics as *A Boy’s Own Story* does. That is to say, Whitmore’s novel caters to an audience of gay men who are educated, white, and who, demographically, reflect the membership of the Violet Quill. One of the key shared experiences for this limited group is a psychoanalytic approach to their sexuality, which is a major element of their representation of gay men throughout their works.

Picano played on psychoanalysis and the formation of gay identity in a different frame with his breakout novel *The Lure*. Picano published *The Lure* in 1979, which, although also a psychological thriller like his first three novels, is the first of his books to include explicitly gay characters. In *The Lure*, Noel Cummings, a professor of sociology at New York University, becomes wrapped up in a web of crime and is recruited by the deep cover operation Whisper. As part of Whisper, Cummings must infiltrate the gay underworld of New York, getting a job as a bartender on the lower West side to work his way closer to persons of interest. Cummings eventually develops a relationship with Eric Redfern, who Whisper operatives believe to be a drug kingpin and violent serial killer. Cummings, who shares all the qualities most attractive to gay men of the time, spends much of the book discovering why he became part of Whisper in the first place. By the end of the novel, Cummings learns that he is a deeply closeted homosexual plagued by subconscious guilt and anxiety, who is manipulated by the people behind Whisper to take down Redfern and his empire. Whisper, however, is less a force for good and more an anti-gay operation meant to kill the leaders of a growing gay liberation movement by using other gay men as their assassins. *The Lure* doesn't follow the blueprint laid out in many other books by writers in the Violet Quill Club—it is, for example, one of the few crime thrillers produced by the authors, with a psychological angle rooted in homosexual desire and the construct of the closet. Cummings finds himself a pawn of Whisper, and has to defeat his own internal wiring to avoid betraying and murdering the people that he has become close to during his time undercover. “I’m a human time-bomb,” he realizes when he begins to uncover the plot after colluding with the wife of a dead Whisper operative. Although *The Lure* isn't a coming of age novel like *A Boy's Own Story*, it is still a narrative of sexual discovery. Cummings is forming his own identity throughout the novel, one that is molded by the psychological manipulation of his

handlers. Although Picano's thriller steps outside the bounds of a traditional coming out narrative or even a story of self-discovery, it constructs gay identity as Cummings begins to understand his own sexuality and identity.

Although *The Lure* wasn't inspired by Picano's life specifically, it still takes its cues from his experiences and what he's learned about the gay community. In his preface, Picano writes that the web of crime and conspiracies depicted in *The Lure* is based on what Picano says are conspiracies that actually existed. Picano's guide to the West Village's gay underworld was Bob Lowe, a friend who became head bartender of a gay bar, the Cock Ring—much like Cummings in *The Lure*—and soon became part of “the interconnected world of gay bars and clubs” (Picano xi). While Picano was doing his research, Hell, a gay bar, was the scene of the “execution-murder” of four staff members, similar to the brutal execution-style murders depicted in *The Lure*. Picano did some of his own investigating, and through various connections and friends caught wind of an undercover unit of the NYPD, even speaking to an informant within the police. At this point, Picano has a draft of his novel, which, he writes, was the victim of the threatened NYPD: “They were sufficiently threatened that when the book was published after receiving very strong pre-pub reviews and blurbs—including one from Stephen King—they managed to arrange for one of their patsies to review *The Lure* in the Sunday *New York Times* book section, calling its concept a total fantasy” (Picano xii). The author of the review, Evan Hunter, Picano claims, was both sympathetic to the police and a “closeted queer, so he performed two betrayals simultaneously” (xii). “The suspense here is as threadbare as a male hustler's jeans, and the psychology is five-and-dime-store stuff,” Hunter writes in his harsh review. “Mr. Picano seems to have been undecided about whether to write ‘Last Exit to Brooklyn’ or ‘The Manchurian Candidate.’ He has settled instead for an episode of ‘Mission



Impossible.’” The drama surrounding *The Lure* continued after its publication; according to Picano many “gay politicians” felt that the novel aired their dirty laundry. Soon after the novel was published, Universal began work on a film called *Cruising*, based on a decade-old novel by a straight author. Picano claims, however, that the movie worked off of source material from *The Lure*, which Picano had shown to producers in Hollywood before he began working on the novel. This intrigue is noteworthy because it demonstrates how *The Lure* was born of Picano’s own life and experience within New York City’s gay community, regardless of whether this network of gay leaders and business owners, dogged by undercover police, is real or just a conspiracy theory. As Bergman wrote in an introductory paragraph to Picano’s journal in *The Violet Quill Reader*, “Picano has an eye for detail and a nose for news, as well as an ear for gossip and a taste for the juicy story” (28). The conspiracy that Picano describes, and its parallel in *The Lure*, play off of gay self-loathing and the construct of the closet. The book critic who maligned Picano’s novel is, Picano claims, a “closeted queer” steeped in self-hatred. In many ways, the novel’s protagonist can be described the same way. In this narrative, Picano conflates the closet and the suspicion of foul play, whether from the police or various gay business and thought leaders.

Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*, like many novels of the gay quill, is also a sort of bildungsroman, telling a story of identity formation. Beyond *A Boy’s Own Story*, *Dancer from the Dance* is one of the Violet Quill Club’s most enduring works (although Holleran published *Dancer from the Dance*, which brought him significant literary acclaim, before the first formal meetings of the group). Published in 1978, *Dancer from the Dance* is about Malone, an extremely attractive young gay man looking for love in New York City. Malone finds companionship in Sutherland, an effusive, evocative, and drug-addicted drag queen who helps

him gain his footing in the city. *Dancer from the Dance* begins and ends with a series of letters that frame the novel, giving context for the story. Holleran, Bergman writes in *The Violet Hour*, modeled this correspondence after his own exchanges with Robert Ferro, whom he met at the Iowa Writer's Workshop in 1965 and with whom he remained lifelong friends. According to Bergman, "It was a correspondence they both cherished, each preserving all of the letters. In fact, Ferro kept Holleran's letters in a small wooden box especially reserved for them, a practice he followed for no other correspondent, and Holleran was equally careful, if not as ritualistic, in preserving Ferro's letters" (Bergman 13). The letters, both in Holleran's actual life and in the fiction of *Dancer from the Dance*, are a mark of the gay community that the novel inhabits and portrays.

Autobiography is an important part of the Violet Quill's fiction. The fact that so many of these seven authors chose to root their seminal works in their own lives shows a link between gay identity and fiction that was largely established during the beginning of the gay rights movement. Autobiographical themes also serve to make these novels "gay," in that they deal with gay themes and involved gay characters that operate in a gay community. This distinction is important, given how little work by gay authors before the Violet Quill Club was considered "gay." Much of the work produced by the Violet Quill Club, however, was intended for a gay audience. They "write primarily for a gay readership, and they make the sexuality of their characters central, as if to lay stress on this as the core feature of their identity" (Brookes 1). And, many of the author's books focused on sex in one way or another. Dale Peck, another gay author and contemporary to the Violet Quill Club, wrote about the difference between a gay writer during the sexual revolution and a closeted gay writer before Stonewall: "Sex is the bottom line. It's what makes us gay writers. Think of your favorite closeted writer who doesn't

write about gay people; Henry James, for example, who never wrote a gay sex scene and probably wouldn't be on this panel were he alive today. Yet you can go through his work and find all kinds of gay themes" (Peck et al. 375). The works of the Violet Quill, unlike the works of James or any other similarly closeted gay writer, are not implicit in their descriptions of gay life and culture. As a result, these novels are the first works of "gay" fiction to explicitly portray a community and outline a framework of gay male culture and identity.

It's easy to contrast the Violet Quill Club with both the writers who came before them and their contemporaries. "For those now at work tie into earlier accomplishments, consciously or not," Ferro wrote about the Violet Quill's relationship to earlier gay writers: "Most immediately as a consequence or reaction to those who came immediately before us: or on the shoulders of those who connect to us an earlier but similar reality, an earlier literature" (*The Violet Quill Reader* 388). Henry James is a classic example of a gay writer in the early 20th century who never depicted explicitly gay themes in his novels. The Violet Quill Club represents the first departure from the tradition of novels that deal with homosexuality only in buried subtexts. When asked why early portrayals of homosexuality had to be heavily coded, Edmund White responded in the 2007 interview, "They're all filters. The gay author had to go to fairly extreme measures... before gay liberation there really aren't that many books that show homosexuality in a positive light." Closer to the Violet Quill in terms of timeline were writers like Jean Genet, a French author who published novels throughout the forties. Several members of the Lavender Quill cite Genet as an early influence. (White even wrote a biography of Genet, published in 1994.) Like James, Genet never wrote his works to be explicitly gay, but rather coded them for gay readers. In his personal journal, Picano wrote about a workshop in 1980 where four panelists chose their favorite pre-Stonewall gay voice. Among the novels chosen

were Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, and Hubert Selby's 1964 novel *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (53). Isherwood was another novelist who had a measure of influence on many members of the Violet Quill, and Selby, like Isherwood, published his most significant works as the authors of the Violet Quill came of age. Isherwood's seminal work, *A Single Man*, was published in 1964. The novel tells the story of a middle-aged English professor who lives in Southern California, and is coming to terms with the death of his young partner. *A Single Man* tells the story of a gay man, but without pigeonholing the novel as a "gay book." Isherwood's novel had considerable staying power; it was adapted into a critically acclaimed film in 2009, directed by Tom Ford and starring Colin Firth. "The difference between the so-called gay writers like me and those earlier writers is that there is a tremendous network now of gay and lesbian bookshops throughout the United States with an enormous mail order business," White said about his predecessors in a 1990 interview. "It's a highly packaged, self-conscious, self-declared culture. Those guys back then were writing about rather lonely individuals combatting society" (Bonnetti and White). Finally, the writing of the Violet Quill is markedly different from that of their contemporaries. In 1979, Larry Kramer (author of the well known play *The Normal Heart*, adapted into an HBO-produced movie in 2014) published *Faggots*, the same year as Andrew Holleran's quintessential *Dancer from the Dance*. *Faggots* is a satire of gay life, and uses graphic (and shocking) descriptions of sex and hyperbole to criticize gay New York City culture. *Dancer from the Dance* tells a similar story—that of a gay man trying to navigate the waters of the city's gay culture—but stacked with metaphors in a way that makes a commentary on the culture without the ribaldry of Kramer's novel. In this way, Holleran strikes a balance between the understated homosexuality of Isherwood's work and the caricatures of Kramer's.

In 1978, when *Dancer from the Dance* was published, Paul Robinson reviewed it for *The New Republic*: “*Dancer from the Dance* is a homosexual novel, and who wants to read homosexual novels? Homosexuals, naturally. But I can’t imagine anyone—anyone who has read a novel, that is—not enjoying this book, which is beautifully written, singleminded and at once evocative and hilarious” (Robinson 1978). The fact that Robinson identified the novel as a “homosexual novel” but still recommended it to mainstream audiences—and the fact that it was reviewed in a nationally read publication such as *The New Republic*—demonstrates the beginning of a shift in how gay authors and gay literature were characterized. With *Dancer from the Dance*, Holleran accomplished something unprecedented: He wrote a gay novel that had appeal beyond a gay audience, while still including explicit depictions of gay life. *Dancer from the Dance*, like *A Single Man*, is a gay novel. And, like *Faggots*, *Dancer from the Dance* is not shy in its depictions of gay life, and especially gay sex. Still, Holleran’s novel was popular among more than just gay readers, because it showcased facets of gay culture notable to both gay male and heterosexual readers.

### **Malleable Sexual Identity**

Many narratives of the Violet Quill focus on the formation of sexual identity, whether it’s as a child or as an adult. White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* begins with the boy in a powerboat on a lake with his father and another boy, Kevin, a family friend. The protagonist is 15, and Kevin is 12. Sleeping on cots together in the basement, they have the unexpert sex of young teenagers. When it’s the protagonist’s turn to “get cornholed,” he’s at peace: “I turned my back to Kevin and could hear him spitting on his hand. I didn’t particularly like getting cornholed, but I was peaceful and happy because we loved each other. People say young love or love of the moment

isn't real, but I think the only love is the first" (19). The story is written from the first-person perspective, and the protagonist is an aspiring writer. The boy's parents are divorced; his father is wealthy and his mother is flighty. Because the novel takes place in the 1950s, the boy's homosexuality alienates him. He longs to love and be loved by men, and, on some level, longs to have relations with his father. As the boy grows older, he makes his way into a private boarding school and starts seeing a largely incompetent psychiatrist. According to the narrator, "I desperately needed a new beginning.... If my homosexuality was due to a surfeit of female company at home (for so ran the most popular psychological theory of the day), then I should correct the imbalance by entering in all-male world. In order to become a heterosexual I decided I should attend a boys' boarding school" (White 127). White's protagonist spends *A Boy's Own Story* exploring his sexual identity through experimentation, relationships with others, and a course of psychoanalysis. This narrative belies a trend in the work of the Violet Quill Club, whose work strives to capture the search for an identity more nuanced and complex than simply "gay" or "straight."

The natural conclusion of *A Boy's Own Story* is the boy coming to terms with some kind of sexual identity. The boy's experiences at boarding school (including seeing a black prostitute at a whorehouse with some of his classmates) and during psychotherapy lead to the climax of the novel, in which the boy seduces a visiting jazz teacher at the school and then betrays him so that he is fired: "At five-thirty, after I'd betrayed Mr. Beattie, I'd return to have sex with him. The next day he'd be fired. He'd learn of my denunciation and wouldn't be able to say anything against me. He wouldn't be able to discredit me by saying I was a practicing homosexual since we would have practiced homosexuality together. He'd be powerless" (191). It's easy to see how the narrator seized the opportunity to exercise power that he had lacked his whole life as he

discovered his own homosexuality. The boy falls into what Eve Sedgwick calls a “minoritizing” view of homosexuality, the view that “apparently homosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones” (Sedgwick 85). The problem with such a view comes when it meets the contradictory “universalizing” view of the homosexual, which is based on the “supposed protean mobility of sexual desire and on the potential bisexuality of every human creature; a mapping that implies no presumption that one’s sexual penchant will always incline toward persons of a single gender” (84). The boy wondered about the other boys that he met and lived with—“Who will ever know if any of those Eton boys ever longed for one another as they lay sleepless in their separate cells, each strumming the guitar of sex and humming who knows what tune or if they felt desire as I did during wrestling practice for the wiry, crew-cut boy”—but still saw himself overwhelmingly as a minority figure, almost a pariah (White 137).

White himself, in an essay published over twenty years after *A Boy’s Own Story*, wrote that he thinks the book only succeeded because it filled the niche of a “coming out story.” The coming out narrative was, and still is, essential to gay literature. The closet is the structure that defines gay oppression in the 20th century, Eve Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, and as such, stories of the closet resonate with gay and otherwise queer readers who were at one point themselves closeted. “The epistemology of the closet,” Sedgwick writes, “has also been, however, on a far vaster scale and with a less honorific inflection, inexhaustibly productive of modern Western culture and history at large” (68). White’s novel’s protagonist came out in several explicit instances, to his psychotherapist, to a priest, to a teacher and finally, in a way, to the institution of his boarding school, when he manipulates a visiting teacher into having sex with him. When he convinces his father to send him to boarding school, the boy “put the decisive

card on the table”—he comes out— by telling him, ““I’m not turning out... as I should. I need to be with men”” (White 128). *A Boy’s Own Story* is a coming out narrative. The novel’s protagonist comes out to his father, his school, and, at some point, himself. The closet was omnipresent in works of the Violet Quill, and played a key role in the formation of gay identity in *A Boy’s Own Story*.

Coming out of the closet wasn’t just a theme in White’s fiction. In 1977, Edmund White co-authored the gay lifestyle manual *The Joy of Gay Sex* with Dr. Charles Silverstein. White’s writing in *The Joy of Gay Sex* has echoes in his novels. He writes, for example, under the heading “Emotional Problems of Gays,” “Everyone has problems, but gays have special difficulties as members of a minority group that has been discriminated against for centuries. Sometimes negative attitudes toward homosexuality have been internalized by gay men; as a result, they become anti-homosexual homosexuals” (*The Joy of Gay Sex* 65). White is essentially describing the repression that defines the narrator of *A Boy’s Own Story*. Throughout the nineteenth century, both men and women suppressed same-sex desire to the point that, by the end of the century, homosexuality was conceptualized as secrecy itself. White’s explanations of secrecy, and its resulting psychological problems, stem from his own experience coming out, which is reflected in *A Boy’s Own Story*. As White writes in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, “The secrecy under which many homosexuals continue to live, either out of necessity or fear, only exacerbates their emotional problems” (65). For many homosexuals, secrecy is an inherent part of their identity that, even past coming out, changes the way they think and conceptualize sex. In *A Boy’s Own Story*, the boy comes to a realization at the end of the novel and equates sexuality and knowledge, even if the sexuality is his own homosexuality: “I had at last drunk deep from the adult fountain of sex. I wiped my mouth with the back of an adult hand, smiled and walked up to



the dining hall humming a little tune” (White 196). When the titular boy in *A Boy’s Own Story* comes to terms with his own homosexuality, it’s the culmination of his coming out narrative, which is parallel to White’s own coming out narrative, as both an adolescent and then later as an open gay writer in New York.

In *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, Whitmore depicts a character at a different stage in the process of discovering his sexual identity. The novel begins with Danny picking up a failed trick: “It happened again tonight. I can still smell him on my sheets” (Whitmore 1). The book is written in first person; Danny is writing his story down at the suggestion of Virgil, his sex therapist. (“He knows me well enough to know that if I don’t write things down they don’t seem real to me”) (5). As part of his therapy, Danny is paired with a partner—someone with the same problem as him. Danny’s partner is Joe, an “Italian Stallion,” a “nice-looking guy, about six feet tall, warm brown eyes, a head of thick brown-black hair, slender (great forearms)... and sunburned from last weekend at the beach” (20). Although Danny’s therapy roughly follows the course of Whitmore’s, there are differences. Whitmore, for example, didn’t quite solve his problem in sex therapy, while Danny does. Although Whitmore did eventually find the kind of fulfilling relationship he desired later in his life, it wasn’t until his twilight years. “After so many years in therapy, I still don’t know just exactly why I can’t yet be happy. To at last sort out what comes from outside, what from within. That must be the secret,” Whitmore wrote in his personal journal on July 13, 1985, five years after *Danny Slocum* was published and only four years before Whitmore would die of AIDS in 1989 (Qtd. in Bergman 190). According to Bergman, “*Danny Slocum* is the example *par excellence* of the Violet Quill’s practice of envisioning a state of psychological health they could achieve at the time only in their imaginations” (Bergman 186). The goal is for Danny and Joe to progress from touching to massaging to, eventually, full-

on sexual contact. At that point, sexually satisfied, they will go their separate ways. Bergman reads *Danny Slocum* as the antithesis to the marriage plot that has so long defined the English-language novel. Relationships like Danny and Joe's are nontraditional, and, Bergman writes, emblematic of the new forms of relationships that gay men were establishing at the time. Danny and Joe, Bergman writes, "struggle to imagine a different sort of love relationship, one in which sexual affection is valued, not as a sign of possession but as a gift meant to be passed around" (Bergman 188). Ultimately, Danny is trying to combat loneliness. Loneliness was a common part of life as a gay man. "The usual kind of aching loneliness is something we ourselves have created," *The Joy of Gay Sex* explains. "This loneliness is our rejection of other people, our refusal to let them become a significant part of our lives. A lonely man might say, even when he is surrounded by thousands of other gays, that he cannot relate to any of them" (114). Danny is lonely, and feeling isolated from his gay peers because of his sexual dysfunction—although "One of the most common forms of loneliness among gay men afflicts those who consciously desire to have nothing but anonymous quick sex," according to *The Joy of Gay Sex* (114). Danny is caught between the loneliness of actually being alone, and the loneliness bred of promiscuity endemic to the New York gay community at the time. The problems central to *Danny Slocum*—the broken relationship that caused Danny's problem in the first place, Danny's ambiguous relationship with Joe, Danny's journey through sex therapy—are all representative of the sexual revolution that took hold in cities like New York after the Stonewall Riots. Danny, like all of the gay men around him, is bound to sex without procreation by the nature of their homosexuality. In addition to this freedom—if it is, in fact, freedom—they crave freedom from emotional attachment, sex without love or emotional intimacy. Still, *Danny Slocum* and a host of other novels written by the Violet Quill, show hesitation surrounding the prominent gay sexual culture.

Gay men like Danny and Malone, the star of Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, crave love, after one too many tricks or orgies. "*Danny Slocum* is a novel about sexual liberation," Bergman writes, "not sexual liberation as it developed in the clone culture of the seventies, but sexuality liberated from fear and shame, conformity, instrumentality, and interchangability of gay sexual culture in the seventies" (Berman 190). *Danny Slocum* is a novel about a gay man who's out of the closet and knows his sexual identity. He still, however, struggles. Danny Slocum's struggles are rooted in the dearth of intimacy around him, a byproduct of the free love of the '70s. *The Confessions of Danny Slocum* depicts Danny finding a revised identity that plays on the sexual liberation of the community around him without necessarily buying into it.

*The Lure* provides a different kind of window into the city's gay culture. Picano's novel is written in a way that makes it friendly to non-gay readers: Cummings is a sociologist whose excuse for spending so much time in the gay world of lower Manhattan is that he's writing a book, with the support of his department chairman at NYU. As he does his "research," Cummings learns what it means to "cruise" and what a "fag hag" is, along with a litany of other gay terms and cultural markings. As Bergman writes in *The Violet Hour*, "He can treat the reader to a grand tour of gay institutions—backroom bars, bathhouses, Fire Island, glitzy discos, and dark, urinous leather clubs—as part of Cummings' education" (195). The fact that *The Lure* is a crime novel also gives it broader—if somewhat lowbrow—appeal beyond a gay readership. In his preface, Picano writes, "The other thing you should know is that there was no such thing as a gay novel in 1977 when I set out to write *The Lure*" (Picano x). *The Lure*, Picano points out, came out a year before Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, one of the best-known works of the Violet Quill, a novel that gave an unadulterated portrait of gay life in New York to readers both gay and straight. Cummings, like straight readers of the novel, is discovering the gay world

of New York and how it's constructed. Cummings, however, is also discovering his own sexuality in the process. Bergman notes the nuance Picano shows in this process; Cummings begins the novel as a "paragon of heterosexuality," but is forced by his undercover position to perform sexual acts with men. It's also revealed that Cummings went through several incidences in his childhood and in college of same-sex relations. Cummings also, however, shows genuine bisexual attraction, to men and women. He falls in love, for example, with both Eric Redfern and Redfern's companion Alana, a glamorous and enigmatic supermodel. "*The Lure* is not about a closet case who finally comes out," Bergman writes. "Although by the end of *The Lure*, Cummings identifies himself as a *gay* man, we should not interpret that identification as synonymous with being exclusively homosexual but, rather, as a person who resists the very imperative to classify sexual orientation—in short, as much closer to the way some people today use the term *queer*" (Bergman 196). Modern narratives of homosexuality emphasize its inevitability: The homosexual, gay rights advocates argue, is born, not made. Being gay, that is, is not a choice. Some queer theorists, however, try to divorce themselves from this "constructivist vs. essentialist" argument. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick writes, "It would seem to me that gay-affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals" (Sedgwick 41). In *The Lure*, Picano also avoids such questions of identity construction. For him, sexuality is, if not malleable, fluid and often ambiguous. While the dangers of a constructivist argument—the argument that gay people are not born as such, but rather shaped by culture—has clear dangers rooted in institutional efforts to "change" or "fix" gay people, the same arguments also create a space of gay identity that is absent from the essentialist argument. Sedgwick positions the opposition between essentialist and constructivist arguments as one of the dichotomies that

defines 20th-century understandings of sexuality, both hetero and homo. This opposition, she writes, is “the most recent link in a more enduring chain of conceptual impasses, a deadlock between what I have been calling *universalizing* and *minoritizing* accounts of the relations of homosexual desires or persons to the wider field of all desires or persons” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 91). Sedgwick notes that the result of the deadlock—the illusory “right answer”—is less important than the effect of the questions it raises about sexuality. It would be unfounded to write that Picano is presenting a solely constructivist argument in *The Lure*; he is, however, showing a “coming out” story that defies quintessential narratives of sexual discovery (like White’s *A Boy’s Own Story*) and explores how cultural context shapes a man’s identity and creates an exclusively gay identity.

Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dancer* also raises questions around the formation and discovery of sexual identity. The novel begins with a story of finding sexual identity that’s never quite resolved. The novel’s protagonist, Malone, “had done all those things a young man was supposed to do—a young man from a good family, that is, a family that had always had in every generation since it transplanted itself in Ohio from a rural town in Germany, a doctor or two, a judge, and a professor” (Holleran 58). Before he moved to New York, Malone lived a typical middle-American life. He had wealthy parents, was raised in large part by black maids, and came from a family of devout Catholics. Malone himself “did not think his childhood any different from others he heard of which produced heterosexuals from the same, if not worse, tensions” (62). Malone decides that his homosexuality came about after “a witch had passed a wand over him as he lay sleeping one evening in Ceylon,” for lack of a better explanation for his attraction to men. Malone didn’t know he was gay growing up; he didn’t suffer from the tensions that defined so many repressed homosexual childhoods (“The bible says, a man divided is unstable in

all ways. The child did not know this” [63]). Malone went to Yale (Holleran himself was a Harvard graduate) and then law school and then business school, following in his father’s footsteps. When Malone realizes his sexuality at the ripe age of 30 and lands in New York, he finds the love he’s looking for with Frankie Oliverio, an Italian-American native of Bayonne. Malone and Frankie live together (after Frankie leaves his wife and child) in what seems like complete bliss, until Malone finds a string of new lovers. Malone and Frankie live right across the river from New Jersey, in a section of the city with “more parked trucks than human beings,” an “institutional graveyard” (89). Malone is content until one day he walks a few streets over to buy a watermelon and finds a man “as beautiful, as strangely moving, as Frankie” (89). Malone makes love to the man, and then a string of others, each afternoon. Malone transitions from a monogamous relationship to his companionate relationship with Sutherland, who takes him in after he escapes the quick-to-anger, abusive Frankie. At the same time, Malone becomes part of the city’s pervasive gay culture, one that foreswears heterosexual institutions like marriage and the nuclear family, instead focusing on freedom and autonomy. “Marriage” is so absent from this gay culture that it doesn’t even merit an entry in the otherwise comprehensive *Joy of Gay Sex*. Under “Lovers,” however, White writes, “Other gay couples feel that marriage of the conventional sort is failing even among straights, who have been trained for it since birth. These gays are searched for innovative forms that will minimize jealousy and competition and enhance intimacy, understanding, and personal growth” (115). Malone searches for just such a relationship, one that is intimate without breeding the heterosexual vices of jealousy and competition. Malone begins *Dancer from the Dance* in the closet, and ends the novel in a space that is, in many ways, even more ambiguous. Malone never quite finds what he’s looking for in New York’s culture of sexual intimacy free from romantic love, and his fate in *Dancer from the*

*Dance* carries much the same message as Whitmore's critique of the city's gay culture in *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*.

Already, Malone subverts different models of heterosexual relations. He doesn't get married to a woman, despite an Ivy League education and model Ohio Catholic upbringing, and he doesn't remain in a steady relationship with a man, one based on the heterosexual idea of marriage. Instead Malone, like so many other gay men in New York, commits himself to a "gay lifestyle," one that shuns monogamy for sexual freedom and an escape from the repression that had hounded so many gay men for so much of their lives. *Dancer from the Dance* is often compared to Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, which was published the same year and paints a similar portrait of gay life in New York. *Faggots*, however, is tongue-in-cheek and satirical, while *Dancer from the Dance* is, in the end, a classic tragedy. The novel focuses on creating an identity for oneself; the title is pulled from Yeats's "Among School Children." The quote, Bergman says, alludes to "Yeats's formulation of Asian concepts about the indivisibility of self from the universal flux" (Bergman 67). Formation of the self is at the heart of Holleran's work, which shows how Malone's self is lost in the "flux" of New York City's gay community. Malone is constantly trying to define himself and navigate the waters of his sexuality, but is nevertheless plagued with loneliness and loss. And Malone, for all his attempts at redefinition, is a fixed character. He doesn't change; he doesn't find love—there is the ultimate tragedy of *Dancer from the Dance*, which ends with Sutherland's death by overdose on Fire Island, and Malone's disappearance (and presumed death).

In the letters that frame *Dancer from the Dance*, the novel's "author" and narrator writes from the Deep South, where he moved to escape the New York City lifestyle. Years after writing *Dancer from the Dance*, Malone fulfills the prophecy set out in these letters: In the late '80s,

Holleran left New York to care for his ailing mother in a small town outside of Gainesville, Florida. Although he kept an apartment in New York, Holleran infrequently returned, partly because many of his friends had, by then, died of AIDS, and partly because the city has lost its allure. Holleran told *Publishers Weekly*, it felt like a crime in New York to go to bed single—if he were going to bed alone, more often than not he'd get up again to cruise. Living away from the city, however, Holleran said, “The highest compliment I can pay to a book is to take it to bed with me” (Goldstein). And besides, Holleran said, living in New York isn't that important when everyone can just talk on the phone anyway. In *Dancer from the Dance* the distant friend writes, “Let us not, after all, dignify Malone too much: He was in the end a circuit queen... Once that life is in your blood, my dear, it's hard to live elsewhere” (249). Malone was addicted to the circuit—the never-ending string of gay parties, orgies, and clubs that defined New York's gay nightlife—and addicted to attempting to find love. Holleran's move from New York puts him outside of this circuit, which defined the lifestyle that led to tragic ends for both Malone and Sutherland. The author does, however, dignify him. Malone is a tragic hero, one with whom the reader can't help but to emphasize. “His whole tragedy,” the narrator writes, is that he was “too genuinely affectionate” (246). In his review for *The New Republic*, Robinson writes, “If I am not mistaken, it [*Dancer from the Dance*] marks an important shift in the homosexual community's self-image, a kind of coming of age in which concerns of political expediency have been set aside for the sake of art... it lacks political shrewdness—it tells the truth” (Robinson 1978). Robinson also writes in his review that Malone lacks development; “Innocence and jadedness coexist in Malone until right to the very end, and one experiences less a development of character than the simple superimposition of one personality on another.” Malone's obstinacy, however, is the root of the novel's tragedy and Holleran's commentary on gay culture. Robinson



notes that Holleran refutes the “liberal trivialization” that homosexuals, if left on their own, are just like everybody else. Instead, Holleran creates a gay identity through Malone, the ingénue who, like the boy in *A Boy’s Own Story*, is both exceptional and universal. Malone and Sutherland are unapologetic characters, who show a world that has grown comfortable, even celebrates, moving away from heterosexual traditions. Homosexuality doesn’t espouse the traditional institutions of heterosexuality—in many cases, as with marriage, they can’t—but rather espouses its own traditions of beauty and liberation.

The formation of a gay identity was essential to the Violet Quill. After the Stonewall riots, a gay identity began to emerge in New York and elsewhere. The protagonists of the novels of the Violet Quill are wrapped up in defining and redefining themselves, along the dimensions of sexuality, relationships, and love. In *A Boy’s Own Story*, the boy’s formative question is why he loves men and how he can reconcile himself with this reality. This theme is carried throughout *The Confession of Danny Slocum*, *The Lure* and *Dancer from the Dance*, albeit in widely different forms. The protagonist of White’s coming-of-age novel understands his own gay identity when he understands the power that he yields through his sexuality and his knowledge of it. In *The Lure*, Picano’s thriller, Noel Cummings similarly comes to understand his own sexuality through the power it grants him—in his case, he was psychologically manipulated to weaponize his coming out narrative. George Whitmore wrote about sexual identity in the *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, in which Danny understands himself—and unravels his problem as a “slow cummer”—by finding an identity outside of the high-sex, low-romance culture of New York. *Dancer from the Dance* doesn’t have an ending as neat as either Picano’s, White’s, or Whitmore’s novels; in Holleran’s book Malone disappears without fully understanding where he stands as a gay man. All of these identities have similarities; in each

novel the protagonist creates a homosexual identity through sexual actions. Some authors, however, espouse the city's gay culture more than others. *Danny Slocum*, for example, can be read as a criticism of the culture that breeds Danny's problem, while *Dancer from the Dance* is more of a tragic ode to that same scene.

### **Psychotherapy**

In his 2007 interview, White wrote that for many gay men of his generation, attention from psychotherapists was often meaningful, even if it reflected negative views of homosexuality. "It's like if you were black you were thrilled to see *Step 'n Fetchit* in the movies because there were no other images and it was at least something, some image," White said. "So in the same way, gays would say 'Oh, now this is an important psychiatrist and he's a heterosexual and he's thinking about our problems, so we should all be very flattered.' That's where they were in their consciousness" (Pizzoli). This answer explains some of the fixation that the boy shows in *A Boy's Own Story*, and the prominence of psychotherapy in other novels by authors of the Violet Quill. White even writes in *The Joy of Gay Sex* that psychotherapy can root out the problems of many gay men. Under the heading "Emotional problems of gays," he writes, "As long as a person makes no attempt to overcome any bad feelings he may have about being gay he will not be able to relax properly and enjoy his sexuality. He can join a consciousness raising group or see a gay therapist, but he must do something" (65) Consciousness raising groups are "patterned after similar groups organized by feminists," the guide says, and focus on a single topic, like coming out. After everyone in the group has spoken about his experience, "the members attempt to discover in general discussion the ways they have suffered from straight

oppression, either applied directly or internalized and exercised as self-oppression” (54). Under the heading of “Guilt” in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, White expounds upon the ways that guilt can create problems for gay men. “If participation in gay groups does not relieve feelings of guilt,” he writes, “then psychotherapy is recommended” (95). However, White and Silverstein recommend seeing a *gay* therapist, rather than a straight one—White makes it clear in *A Boy’s Own Story* how much damage a wayward straight psychotherapist can do.

In *A Boy’s Own Story*, The boy’s psychiatrist is painted as a fool—“There was nothing about this actor that couldn’t be read from the top balcony,” the boy writes about his therapist (149). The psychiatrist, Dr. O’Reilly, “was not a good listener. He was always scooping up handfuls of orange diet pills and swallowing them with a jigger of scotch. As a great man and the author of several books, he had theories to propound and little need to attend to the particularities of any given life” (150). The narrator, despite his contempt for Dr. O’Reilly, trusts him. “I wanted to overcome this thing I was becoming and was in danger soon of being, the homosexual.... I subscribed to [Dr. O’Reilly’s] theory, I put myself entirely in his care, because learning his ideas was less frustrating and less perilous than teasing out my own” (151). The boy understands that his doctor is a farce, in many ways. Yet he trusts the doctor—however naïve or misplaced this trust may seem—because, it seems to him, he has no choice if he wants to overcome his own homosexuality. According to White in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, “Guilt breeds a fear of intimacy and the self-contempt that underlie so many [negative] behaviors” (94). For White and other members of the Violet Quill Club, this kind of guilt was an essential and inevitable part of the gay identity formation in their novels.

Many of the boy’s decisions, which were meant to make him less homosexual, come from his therapy. The irony of a young man trying to avoid homosexuality asking to spend more

time with men is a product of the boy's psychotherapy, and the prevailing theory that spending too much time with women—especially mothers and sisters—sapped man's masculinity. "What I wanted to show," White wrote about *A Boy's Own Story*, "was the harm psychotherapy had done to homosexuals and the self-hatred that was forced on a young gay man by society that could conceive of homosexuality only as a sickness, sin, or crime" (White 380). White, like many authors in the Violet Quill, wrote consciously about his experience with psychotherapy and the shame produced by living in a society where homosexuality was still considered an illness—homosexuality was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), which is published by the American Psychological Association in 1973. The placement of homosexuality in the DSM means that every member of the Violet Quill Club, and every gay man of their generation, grew up and came to understand their own sexuality at a time where their homosexuality marked them as diseased. White's writing "reveal[s] the ways socially and culturally imposed restraints on gay freedoms essentially deny gay subjectivity and isolate in gay men an idea of homosexual self as Other that they themselves conceive as being different from their apparently essential selves," according to Nicholas F. Radel's essay on identity politics in White's work (Radel 176). White deals intimately with issues of the closet in *A Boy's Own Story*; he writes that he was able to write it when he realized that "the personal is political," coopting a slogan coined by second-wave feminists that emphasized the link between personal experiences and the political institutions that shaped them: "In one sense, most of the fiction I like and all the fiction I write is political." "We also learned that what we'd live through was not a neurosis in need of treatment but a shared experience that called for political action," White wrote in 1994. In this case, the political action was the publishing of *A Boy's Own Story* and its two companion novels, *The Beautiful Room is Empty* and *The Farewell Symphony* (which wasn't

published until 1997). In writing these novels, White decries the mode of psychoanalysis that he went through as a young adult, the therapy depicted in *A Boy's Own Story*. Still, White encourages psychoanalysis in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, albeit from a gay therapist—in Whitmore's novel, *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, gay psychotherapy is the main framework by which Danny Slocum comes to terms with his own sexuality. Although psychoanalysis marks gay men of Whitmore's generation as "sick," it is pervasive in his work and that of his cohort, making it a useful framework for understanding how such fiction builds a gay identity.

White explores the self-hatred that plagues many homosexual men as part of their coming out narratives, and how it is bred by the kind of psychoanalysis portrayed in *A Boy's Own Story*. "I see now that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual," the boy says in *A Boy's Own Story* (151). "What I required was a sleight of hand, an alibi or convincing act of bad faith to persuade myself I was not that vampire. Perhaps—yes, this must be it—perhaps my homosexuality was a *symptom* of some other deeper but less irrevocable disorder. That's what Dr. O'Reilly thought" (152). The boy, despite the satirical portrayal of his psychotherapist (At the end of the novel we learn that "Dr. O'Reilly, who of course turns out to be a speed freak, has a breakdown one day and is hauled off to a rehabilitation clinic for several years" [193]), leans on the man's ideas as a possible freedom from the homosexuality that burdens him. The shame that comes bundled with the boy's view of himself as diseased—a common theory of homosexuality at the time—led, in part, to the culture of sexual openness that marked the post-Stonewall period of sexual revolution. Sexual liberation was a reaction to guilt for many gay men. In *The Joy of Gay Sex*, White and Silverstein write, "Guilt manifests itself in other aspects of gay life—compulsive cruising, an inability to succeed in business, a sexual fascination with straight men, an exclusive taste for quickie sex, a penchant

for ‘hopeless’ love affairs with unobtainable partners, and so on” (94). Many of these guilt-driven problems are the same ones that define the sexual culture of the seventies, including cruising, quickie sex, hopeless love affairs, and a fascination with the machismo and sexuality of straight men. Shame is bred of guilt, which itself is born from the early repression White and those like him experienced. Although *A Boy’s Own Story* is set in the 1950s, when White himself was coming of age, it’s emblematic of the ideas that shaped White (and his writing), as well as the other members of the Violet Quill Club. The titular boy in *A Boy’s Own Story* felt the weight of his homosexuality as part of his identity. In the novel, the boy attributes his sexuality to some of the most widely believed psychoanalytic theories of the time: “I blamed my sister and my mother—my sister for eroding my confidence (as though homosexuality were a form of shyness) and my mother for babying me (homosexuality as prolonged infancy)” (White 125). Overall, the boy blames his homosexuality on having too many women in his life; he asks his father to go to boarding school because he is “too involved with Mommy” and “need[s] to be with men” (128). The boy’s identity as a homosexual is rooted in psychoanalysis, the theories of which emphasized the ties between personal identity and sexuality. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault marks the 19th century as a turning point for homosexuality as personal identity. It was then that the homosexual went from being an aberration to being a person: “Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature” (Foucault 43). For the boy in *A Boy’s Own Story*, this gay identity was the problem—he feels throughout the novel that he is irrevocably marked in a way that makes him different from mainstream, heterosexual

society, and longs to eschew his homosexuality. The boy cannot divorce his identity from his sexuality—a tenet of psychoanalysis—creating anxiety about his irrepressible sexual and romantic attraction to men.

The framework of an identity rooted in sexuality is clear in the boy's therapy sessions. White also writes into his psychoanalytic scenes what Foucault calls the "*perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*" (emphasis Foucault's) created by the interaction of the psychotherapist and his diseased patient. "The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it, Foucault writes" (45). In *A Boy's Own Story*, Dr. O'Reilly's power is clear, and the pleasure he gains from exercising it over the boy. He insists that the narrator sit with him for three sessions a week; sometimes the boy even stays overnight and wakes the doctor up for a morning session. At the same time, the boy—who is desperate for a solution that can divorce him from his gay identity—relishes his ability to unravel his sexuality. In his essay on identity politics, Radel quotes Thomas Szasz, a psychoanalyst who wrote that doctors confused disease as a "biological condition" with disease as a "social role"—doctors, essentially, were making themselves "agents of social control" when they claimed that homosexuality was a disease (Radel 177). Dr. O'Reilly is, in his own eyes, an agent of social control. His actual control, however, is limited. At the end of the novel, when the boy uses his sexuality to entrap and ruin the visiting jazz teacher, Mr. Beattie, he's seeking the pleasure of resisting Dr. O'Reilly's attempt to deconstruct his sexuality, and subverting Dr. O'Reilly's power as an agent of social control. In the end, the boy's takedown of Mr. Beattie is a way for him to reclaim power, over his own sexuality, Dr. O'Reilly, and Mr. Beattie. On the last page of the novel, White writes, "Beattie was a friend of sorts, or at least an accomplice, but he

was also a stand-in for all other adults, those swaggering, lazy, cruel masters of ours” (White 196). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault outlines how the knowledge of sexuality became synonymous with intelligence and knowledge in general, and therefore power. In *A Boy’s Own Story*, it’s clear that the boy equates sexual knowledge and experience with power. The conclusion of the novel is, in many ways, a model for coming out during the post-Stonewall period, when the gay man was forming a collective identity across America, and, for White, in New York City specifically. Sexual power and knowledge—a keystone of a culture that leaned heavily on sex as a mode of communication, representation and identity—was a commodity for the gay men of the ’70s, many of whom were raised in the same repressive structure as the protagonist of *A Boy’s Own Story* (and, by extension, White himself).

Although *Danny Slocum*’s jocular take on sex therapy is starkly different from *A Boy’s Own Story*’s bildungsroman, both novels share a narrative built on anxiety and shame, endemic to gay culture. In *A Boy’s Own Story*, the protagonist seeks out therapy to find the root of his homosexuality, which he would do anything to quash. In *Danny Slocum*, the narrator has come to terms with his sexuality, but cannot come to terms with gay culture as it exists in New York City in the late 1970s. Both characters are defined by their shame. Danny is ashamed of his sexual dysfunction, which precludes him from participation in a culture that prizes sex. In White’s novel, the boy comes to term with his shame—at least in part—by exercising his sexuality with his jazz teacher. Danny can’t exercise his sexuality in the same way, leading him to seek out the sex therapy he undergoes with his sex therapist, Virgil, and partner in therapy, Joe. Part of Danny’s reconciliation with his problem is a consideration of what sex is in gay culture. Joe, for example, has an orgasm in front of Danny, but doesn’t consider it “real” because he achieved it by masturbating. Danny’s “feminist friend” points out that sex as defined by men is a patriarchal



construct regardless: “You don’t call it real sex unless you come every time, do you? It’s just so typically male” (Whitmore 16). Danny’s therapy, however, is meant to “fix” Danny’s problem, rather than re-examine the social structures that create such expectations for sex in the first place. For Danny, as with White’s protagonist, psychotherapy is a means to overcoming shame. Even the title of Whitmore’s novel, *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, alludes to shame. “From the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession,” Foucault writes. “A thing that was hidden, we are told” (Foucault 61). Edmund White wrote about a time “When no homosexual could defend his identity as anything other than an illness, a sin, or a crime” (Pizzoli 1). Like the boy in *A Boy’s Own Story*, Danny draws a (largely implicit) distinction between being a homosexual and loving other men. To the gay man, loving a man seems natural. The acts inherent to homosexuality, however, are what create the separation between homosexual men and traditional heterosexual society. In the early pages of *A Boy’s Own Story*, the protagonist has sex with Kevin, the family friend a few years his junior. Kevin is not a homosexual, but the boy’s intercourse with him is portrayed as wholesome and largely free of guilt, at least on the protagonist’s end. The boy’s seduction of his jazz teacher, however, is shrouded in layers of manipulation and sexual liberation. The difference between the two encounters lies in the boy’s choice of partner; Kevin is heterosexual, and therefore separates homosexual acts from an identity as a homosexual. For both the boy and Danny, this dichotomy is an inherent part of their shame. Danny cannot reconcile his identity as a man who loves other men with a culture that embraces sexual freedom and promiscuity, promoting homosexual acts between two men.

Like Danny Slocum, *The Lure*’s Noel Cummings has to work through the shame surrounding his sexuality. As *The Lure* reaches its climax, at the star-studded, extravagant

opening of one of Eric Redfern's clubs, Noel realizes both that he has real homosexual tendencies and that several different people in several different directions are manipulating him. When Noel realizes what his true purpose for Whisper is, "He felt as though he were splitting into two selves. One Noel was absolutely astonished, crushed by this final disaster, the last blow of months of confusion and pain and uncertainty, the knowledge that he was being controlled by someone else; worse, turned into a robot with a deadly mission. But the other half—his professional, intellectual self—was utterly fascinated" (Picano 283). For the rest of the novel, Noel often feels this "split" into two personalities. One that is "programmed" to kill Redfern, who is referred to by the Fisherman, the Whisper handler who controls Noel, as Mr. X, and the other that values his new identity and the relationships he's formed over any other baked-in psychological inclination. The Fisherman's manipulation of Cummings builds off of the central tenets of psychoanalysis, which relies on unpacking the subject's unconscious desires. Although psychoanalysis often worked against the "diseased" gay men of the sixties and seventies, in some ways Freud created a framework that allowed people to understand sexuality with a nuance that wasn't available to them before. In his *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, Jeffrey Weeks unpacks Freud's theories of sexuality: "Freud's theory of the mind opens the way to a concept of sexuality and sexual difference which is alive to the body, aware of social relations, but sensitive to the importance of mental activities. As a result, psychoanalysis offers the possibility of seeing sexuality as more than the irrepressible instincts which wrack the body; it is a force that is actually constructed in the process of the entry into the domain of culture, language, and meaning" (Weeks 128). Weeks's analysis of Freud points to why so many novels of the Violet Quill are rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis. Picano and White are both trying to show how the

gay man is constructed by the society and culture that surround him, and how his desires reach beyond “the irrepressible instincts which wrack the body.”

*A Boy's Own Story* is considered by many critics to be the quintessential coming out story. *The Lure* is also a narrative of coming out, and, although couched in a vastly different plot and premise than White's work, holds some of the same basic tenets. For Cummings, coming out is a fight against repression and guilt, common markers of the coming out narrative. “One of the most pervasive problems [that accompanies coming out] is guilt,” White writes in *The Joy of Gay Sex*. “As it happens, if guilt feelings are not faced they will cause distortions in behavior and perception and retard the process of personal growth” (50). White's work on *The Joy of Gay Sex* is clearly shaped by the psychoanalytic frameworks he grew up with, and which were still commonly applied to homosexuals when Picano wrote *The Lure*. For Cummings, guilt is the driving force behind his potential psychological “explosion.” In 2003, Picano worked on an updated version of *The Joy of Gay Sex* with Dr. Silverstein. Picano's version of the manual was updated for a generation of gay men still reeling from the impact of HIV/AIDS on gay lifestyles and culture. According to Picano, “When a person is isolated from the gay community, he has a much reduced chance of dealing with his guilt feelings” (118).

*Dancer from the Dance* doesn't contain the same overtones of psychotherapy as *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, and *The Lure*. Malone, the novel's main character, is a model of the American dream as he grows up Catholic in Ohio. Malone's peaceful and successful childhood and coming of age lay in stark contrast to the boy's in *A Boy's Own Story*. Malone was never subjected to psychotherapy, and does not discover his own sexuality until much later in life, when he is working for a firm and falls for his young gardener. Still, Malone deals with many of the same issues of repression and internalized shame as the boy,

Danny Slocum or Noel Cummings. Before the events of the novel, Malone graduated from a series of prestigious schools and was living comfortably. “He had suppressed some tremendous element in himself that took form in a prudish virginity,” the narrator describes. “While his life was impeccable on the surface, he felt he was behind glass: moving through the world in a separate compartment touching no one else. This was painful” (64). Malone was, essentially, trapped in the closet. He leafed through copies of *Playboy* and was “utterly untouched,” but when he walked in on his proctor nude in the middle of the night was “unstrung.” When he lived in a house in Connecticut, “he felt himself so utterly alone, he could not imagine anyone being sadder” (69). In a desperate bid to escape his loneliness, Malone started seeing a woman, but with her “he felt more depressed than he did when he spent the evening alone” (70). Malone eventually dealt with his solitude by gardening, at which point he met and fell in love with an 18-year-old. When the boy left for college, Malone was devastated. “It was of course completely wrong, the completely inconvenient sort of love; it was the one thing he—who had succeeded at everything else, who had been so virtuous, such a model—could not allow. It was as if he had finally admitted to himself that he had cancer” (72). The analogy of homosexuality as cancer isn’t insignificant—Malone is realizing that he’s “diseased.” After his realization, he leaves everything behind to move to New York, where he spends the rest of the novel looking for the love that’s so desperately absent from the city’s gay circuit.

Although Malone doesn’t receive psychotherapy, his narrative works within the framework of the closet and the coming out narrative. Like many other novels by Holleran’s peers, *Dancer from the Dance* questions the legitimacy of the sexual liberation and promiscuity that defined New York’s gay culture in the 1970s and ’80s. Malone, formerly a successful Catholic businessman, becomes a product, and in many ways a symptom, of the community and

culture he tries to lose himself in. When Malone, now 30, quits his job at a prestigious law firm, he does it under the guise of pursuing a career in journalism but really wanted “a career in love.” He vanished to his former friends and family “as if he had gone to Bali, or died in a traffic accident.” Malone was looking for the only success that had eluded him thus far: success in love. Malone’s story, in many ways, is typical for gay men of his race and class. (*Dancer from the Dance*, like other works of the Lavender Quill Club, focuses narrowly on the upper-class white male that, for men like Holleran, was typical of gay society.) Holleran himself wasn’t out of the closet completely when he published *Dancer from the Dance*, his first novel, in 1978. He used a pseudonym—his real name is Eric Garber—to avoid the repercussions of being known for such a clearly and unabashedly gay novel (Goldstein). Holleran’s own shame was wrapped up in *Dancer from the Dance*, which ends not with a “successful” coming out like *The Lure*, *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, or *A Boy’s Own Story*, but rather with the death of Sutherland and the disappearance of Malone. Malone’s quest for love ends tragically—Holleran didn’t see an easy way to reconcile guilt and shame with the sexual culture of gay New York in the 1970s.

The Violet Quill Club itself was short lived. After the group’s natural dissolution, bred from infighting and literary jealousy, the AIDS crisis marked the irrevocable end of the author’s friendships, and, for four of them, their lives. In the few years that the members of the Violet Quill published their best-known works and met with each other, they were part of a movement that contributed to and, in some ways, defined a larger shift in literature. These seven authors wrote novels that showed gay male life with unprecedented frankness, many of them using New York City, where the authors lived, as their center stage. The Violet Quill Club was by no means a representative sample of gay men in the 1970s and ’80s. They were almost completely white

(with the exception of Felice Picano) and lived with comfortable incomes in Manhattan. These biases are reflected in their work, which often erases or looks down on gay men who aren't white—a problem that still plagues many gay male cultures today. Their work, then, gives a window into the gay culture at the time that many heterosexuals saw as the only gay culture, one of free love, sexual autonomy, and urban living. Their writing, however, influenced a nascent New York City gay culture, and gives a convenient yardstick for the New York homosexual of the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDs era.

The work of the Violet Quill Club had several threads running through it. An undercurrent of shame runs through many of the Group's novels. For all of the authors, homosexuality was a disease—it wasn't until the mid-1970s that homosexuality was removed from the American Psychological Association's official classification of mental health disorders, and many of the seven authors underwent "treatment" for their homosexuality. In their novels, this meant recurring themes of psychotherapy and repression, and the interplay between "coming out" and the shame that, for many years, defined "gay culture" before the Stonewall Riots and the beginning of the gay rights movement. In *A Boy's Own Story*, Edmund White's bildungsroman and a quintessential coming out story, the protagonist undergoes treatment with a crackpot, speed-addicted therapist. In *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, George Whitmore's novel about a man who has a problem with "delayed ejaculation," the titular Danny sees a gay sex therapist to treat his condition. Whitmore turns the kind of psychotherapy White portrayed, which is meant to "treat" or "fix" homosexuals, inside out, by writing about Danny Slocum seeing a gay sex therapist to work on his intimacy issues with other men. The novel closely matches Whitmore's own experience; he originally wrote *Danny Slocum* as nonfiction and later adapted it into a novel. Felice Picano's *The Lure* is a psychological crime thriller about Noel

Cummings, a university professor of sociology who becomes the pawn in a complicated plot to bring down influential gay business and political leaders. When Cummings realizes that he's being psychologically manipulated, he has to come to terms with his own sexuality to stop himself from murdering the target that he's become close to as he worked as undercover agent for the NYPD. Beyond creating a new market for explicitly gay literature, which featured gay characters and themes explicitly in a way that the works of older, closeted authors never had, the Violet Quill took their own experiences with gay male life in post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS epidemic New York and psychoanalysis to create a framework of coming out and gay culture that was unique up until that point, forming a gay identity that reacted to the shame and repression wrapped up in their sexuality by espousing a culture of free love and promiscuity. Although authors of the Violet Quill Club rejected psychoanalysis as "treatment" for homosexuality, they embraced its role in lessening the guilt or shame that defined the gay culture they lived in.

Another prevalent thread in the work of the Violet Quill Club was autobiography—almost all of the authors took inspiration from their own life to create their most staying works, creating novels that play off of their own lives in 1970s New York, and coming of age in an era of homosexual repression. These semi-autobiographical works also draw from the author's own experiences with coming out and navigating the waters of gay culture and romance. The Violet Quill Club shows a culture that operates outside of heterosexual institutions like marriage and the nuclear family, creating a uniquely gay identity founded on freedom and unabashed queerness. In Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, Malone is looking for love in a way that would not be familiar to many heterosexuals. In the beginning of the novel, he breaks out of the closet, then settles into a de facto "marriage" to another man, before leaving him to look for love in all

the wrong places around New York City and Fire Island, including in hallmarks of gay culture like bathhouses and circuit parties.

For the authors of the Violet Quill Club, psychoanalysis was an inevitable part of gay life and coming to terms with a gay identity. Their works, strongly rooted in their own coming out narratives and experiences as gay men in New York City, rely on psychoanalysis to understand how gay men realize their identities through their sexuality. The gay men who populate the novels of the Violet Quill Club are navigating an urban culture that emphasizes sex and physical intimacy over more traditional romances, a shift in priorities that actively rejects the tenets of heterosexual culture, including marriage and the nuclear family. For some of the authors, this isn't necessarily a good thing—in Holleran's *Dancer for the Dance* and Whitmore's *The Confessions of Danny Slocum*, the protagonists don't find the emotional fulfillment they're looking for among New York's culture of gay promiscuity. Even the framework for looking at homosexuality itself was questioned by the Violet Quill Club. In *The Lure*, Picano shows a man who "coming out," but still loves women and doesn't understand his own sexuality. Throughout *The Lure*, the protagonist's sexuality is ambiguous, moving itself outside of the hierarchy of gay, straight, or even bisexual. The Violet Quill Club was short lived, but their seminal works defined an identity for gay men living in New York in the 1970s, one that celebrated homosexuality instead of repressing it, and eschewed heterosexual institutions in favor of sexual liberation.



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