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- > [Philly Pride celebrates 20 years](#)
- > [Philadelphia Dyke March celebrates 10 years](#)
- > [Matters of Pride](#)
- > [New York gov orders agencies to recognize gay marriages](#)
- > [Trans woman claims bias at Kmart](#)
- > [ACLU hosts national conference on LGBT rights, freedom](#)
- > [ACT UP Philadelphia: 25](#)

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MAY 30 - JUNE 5, 2008

Martin, the Pulitzer Prize-finalist author of "The Bright Forever," explores what happens when a past that you've tried desperately to conceal suddenly comes back to haunt you.

Sam Brady is a reclusive 65-year-old gay man who lives with his dog, Stump, in a small town in Illinois. Sam's lonely life is interrupted when his next-door neighbor, Arthur, finds himself suddenly widowed, and the two look to one another for friendship — something Sam hasn't seen in many years.

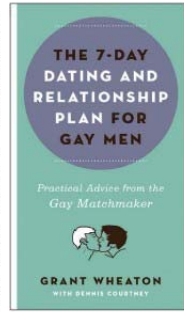
When Sam's brother Cal, to whom he hasn't spoken in years, returns to town, he brings a shared past that Sam had tried to forget — one that threatens to disrupt the life he's created for himself.

Dewey Finn, Sam's childhood friend, died as a young teen in suspicious circumstances, 50 years before "River of Heaven" begins. As the story develops, it becomes evident that Dewey's death shaped most of Sam's life, as he struggled to bury in his memory the events surrounding his friend's death. The truth begins to come out piece by piece, however, as Sam and Cal grapple with what role their past plays in the present.

While at times the plot, which includes hostage situations, antiques dealers and militia members, seems convoluted, the depth of the characters makes up for any pitfalls. Sam is a well-crafted, complicated character, and as each piece of the puzzle falls into place, he becomes even more intriguing.

— J.C.

The 7-Day Dating and Relationship Plan for Gay Men
By Grant Wheaton
Self-help

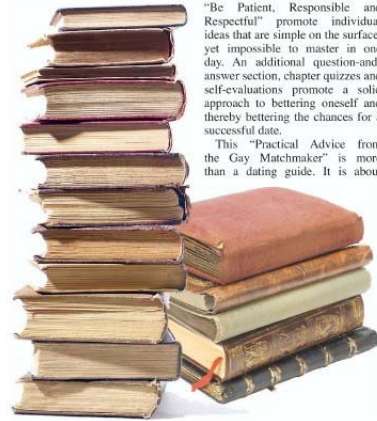


At first glance, this petite 140-page book would appear to be a comical look at gay dating. A quick flip through the book supports that idea, with statements under alliterative aliases such as Drew Drama, Irving Image, Paul Pushover and Arthur Apathy.

But author Grant Wheaton is a successful matchmaker and the founder of ManMate in New York City. The steps he suggests in "The 7-Day Dating and Relationship Plan for Gay Men" are conceptually sound and solid.

Chapter topics such as "Live in the Now," "Balance" and "Be Patient, Responsible and Respectful" promote individual ideas that are simple on the surface, yet impossible to master in one day. An additional question-and-answer section, chapter quizzes and self-evaluations promote a solid approach to bettering oneself and thereby bettering the chances for a successful date.

This "Practical Advice from the Gay Matchmaker" is more than a dating guide. It is about

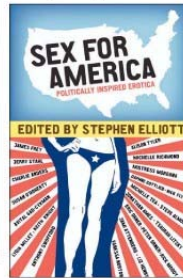


PHILADELPHIA GAY NEWS

self-examination, identifying expectations and being able to have intimate or casual relationships that are honest and real.

— S.D.

Sex for America
Edited by Stephen Elliott
Erotica (anthology)



According to Merriam-Webster, "erotica" is "literary or artistic works having an erotic theme," erotic being "of, devoted to or tending to arouse sexual love or desire."

Considering that what evokes desire can differ greatly from person to person, the essays in Stephen Elliott's compilation "Sex for America: Politically Inspired Erotica" come across as scatter-shot, trying, like Harolds, to be All Things for All People, Everywhere.

As with many anthologies, the writing styles and subject matter vary greatly; as with many erotica anthologies, some will ring a bell, while others won't ring at all.

The eclectic collection starts with a backroom homosexual tryst with Dick Cheney (not sexy). From there, it careens to the Iraq war with "Music From Earth" and "Escape and Evasion." In the former, by Michelle Tea, a disenchanted San Francisco lesbian visits Florida post-Katrina and has sex with a young man about to ship out for the Army whom she isn't even sure she likes.

"Just someone I got stuck with while at my mom's in Florida, because what else do you do while at your mom's in Florida except forget you're gay and fuck a hick?" The latter, by James Frey, is disturbing as only man-on-man, military gang rape can be.

In "An Open Letter to the Bush Administration," Mistress Morgana takes President Bush to task for the detriment his policies have wreaked on her small dominatrix business: "You are bad for my corporate image, and are disenfranchising me from the American Dream of profitable small business ownership."

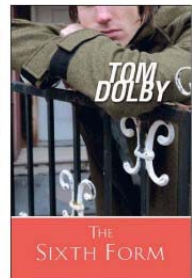
Also notable is "Fear and Loathing

in Chelsea" by Eric Orner, author of "The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green" comics. This strip questions political correctness, and what happens when it goes too far.

Other highlights include a couple's erotic challenge to win over voters, taking opposite-party lovers, balking political donations and a 2004 election-night BDSM encounter.

— S.B.

The Sixth Form
By Tom Dolby
Fiction



Tom Dolby's "The Sixth Form" follows the lives of two students and a teacher at a New England prep school who are each struggling to define themselves and their future.

Ethan Whitley, a shy 17-year-old from California, finds his life turned upside down when his Stanford-professor parents send him to a boarding school in Massachusetts for his senior year. Ethan has trouble fitting in with his wealthy classmates until he strikes up a friendship with Todd Eldon, the son of a famous fiction writer and one of the most popular students in the senior class, or "sixth form."

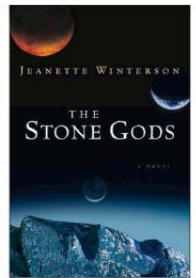
Todd, who considers himself heterosexual, is unexpectedly attracted to Ethan; Ethan, however, is drawn to Hannah McClellan, a young English teacher at the school with a mysterious past. Ethan befriends Hannah and as their relationship pushes the boundaries of teacher-student and Todd grapples with his resentment, all three find that their futures are inextricably intertwined.

"The Sixth Form" uses the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" to illustrate how dangerous a youthful naïveté can be, especially in the face of temptation. While the characters of Todd and Ethan easily fit into the roles of the inquisitive youth, Hannah's characterization as the witch who lures them to danger is a bit contrived due to her

underdeveloped and ill-explained past. Todd's struggle with his sexuality, however, is a believable and realistic subplot, as the teen tries to sort out his new feelings without disrupting his accepted place in the straight-laced school. Both teens eventually find that by the end of senior year, what they had originally envisioned for their lives after high school is drastically different.

— J.C.

The Stone Gods
By Jeanette Winterson
Novel



British author Jeanette Winterson continues to explore sexual identity as well as humanity's disregard for the environment with her latest genre-hopping science-fiction novel.

Part cautionary tale, part scathing commentary, "The Stone Gods" opens among the vain and consumer-driven inhabitants of a polluted planet who are looking to colonize a newly discovered pristine Blue Planet, but have to go about eradicating the indigenous dinosaurs that live there first.

Billie Crusoe plays the heroine in the form of Spike, a female artificial life form ("robo sapien") in tow. Spike's evolving sense of self and emotions, along with the complexities of her relationship with Billie, play out as the rest of the novel spirals into a

See **SUMMER READING, Page 29**

