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My Days and Nights with Henry Darger

December 1, 2013

My Days and Nights with Henry Darger

by [Jim Elledge](#)

I first learned about Henry Darger in April 2002, when I lived in New York. A friend mentioned having just seen an exhibit of his art at the American Folk Art Museum in Manhattan and promised me that I would be intrigued because, as he put it, "Darger painted little girls with penises."

I searched for articles about Darger via the Internet and discovered that, while he had emerged as one of the most acclaimed "outsider" or self-taught artists of our time, critics thought he was a pedophile, a sadist, or a child killer because his canvases depicted adult men strangling, torturing, crucifying, and eviscerating children. However, none of the critics ever explained why the scenes of such carnage suggested such a thing to them.

As I wound my way through the huge exhibit, I was fascinated by Darger's use of color and of popular-culture figures, and also, as my friend had promised, by the "little girls with penises," especially the blonde Vivian "sisters."

While Darger sometimes depicted them at home in an Arcadian landscape, he more often depicted them as subjects of adult-instigated violence. Usually dressed in Confederate-soldier-like uniforms and wearing mortarboards associated with academic dress, men savagely attack children in scene after scene.

Unlike writers before me, I did not see the mind of a pedophile, sadist, or serial killer at work on Darger's canvases.

Because of my research for two earlier books, *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Myths from the Acorna to the Zuñi: An Anthology* (New York: Lang, 2002) and *Masquerade: Queer Poetry in America to the End of World War II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), I knew gay men had used the hermaphroditic figure, specifically a female body with male genitalia, to represent themselves and to explain why they were sexually attracted to other men as heterosexual women are.

In fact, they developed the concept of "a female soul enclosed in a male body" to explain their sexual orientation, and from the mid-1800s through the 1930s, physicians accepted the gay men's explanation, but called it "psychic hermaphroditism."

When I saw Darger's "little girls with penises" fighting off, running from, and being caught and physically abused by adult men at the exhibit, I realized that the figures were not "little girls" at all. Human beings with penises are male, *not* female, although all previous writers—all men, by the way—ignored that fact.

I was left, then, wondering if Darger might have been gay and developed the unique figures to represent psychic hermaphrodites—i.e., gay boys. I set out to investigate the possibilities and hoped, in the process, to disprove the accusations that he was a pedophile, sadist, or murderer.

Little did I realize then that I would spend the next ten years doing just that.

Initial Research

Through my initial Google search, I had also learned that Darger had written three books and meant his art to illustrate the first two. No one had investigated the novels and their relationship to the paintings, and so my first step toward understanding Darger was to read them. Although none had been published, microfilmed copies of the manuscripts are available at the American Folk Art Museum's Darger Study Center in Manhattan and some of his paintings and other items related to his life are stored at the Darger Archives in Brooklyn.



Henry Darger. Photo by David Berglund, c. 1970.

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For a month, I sat at the Darger Study Center every Friday from 9:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., reading the 15,000+ pages of Darger's first novel (*The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*).

After that month, I realized that novel had only a little to offer me and began reading the second, *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House*.

Immediately, I knew I had struck gold, stopped reading, and began photocopying the book, all 10,000+ pages of it. The same happened with his third book, the 5,000+-page *The History of My Life*. I photocopied them so I could read them whenever I had the time, in bed late at night, on the subway on my way to work.

The Story of the Vivian Girls

Darger's first book, written from 1910 to 1932, depicts a war between evil Gladelinians and godly Angelinians. Gladelinians have kidnapped millions of Angelinian children, forced them to work naked as slaves, and routinely crucified, strangled, and eviscerated them. After they are no longer useful as slave laborers, some become sex slaves.

The novel's heroes, the six Vivian "sisters" and their brother Penrod, all children under the age of eleven, are spies for Angelinia. The six "sisters" appear on almost all of Darger's canvases and often naked, which allows us to know they are not really "sisters" at all but, because they have male genitalia, "brothers."

Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House

The Vivians are also the heroes of Darger's second novel, written from 1932 to 1968, and it reveals a great deal about their sexuality. In this novel, the Vivians, who are still children, attempt to exorcise a haunted house.

Set in 1911 in the neighborhood in which Darger spent his childhood, most of the six Vivians are involved in same-sex sexual relationships. One of the characters describes Angeline, the oldest of the Vivians, performing a live sex show naked with a group of other boys. Angeline and Joice, another of the Vivian children, go on dates with adult men.

Near the end of *Crazy House*, Darger depicts a man named Bill and his friend who run into yet another Vivian "sister," Jennie, at a corner. As they pass her, Bill's buddy thinks she's a girl and begins to tell Bill how beautiful she is, but stops in mid-sentence. He's realized "she" is a cross-dressing "he" and expresses disgust. However, Bill appreciates Jennie and comments about how alluring and beautiful "she" is.

Penrod also has sex with other males, including the adult Jerry Monahan, who is married and a father, and Webber George, a boy Penrod's age. Before having sex with Jerry, Penrod asks him if he's a cop, a procedure gay men followed to avoid entrapment by the police. To underscore Penrod's sexual orientation, Darger has yet another of the Vivians, Daisy, brag that *all* boys from Abbieannia, which includes Penrod, often fall in love with one another.

Because Darger included information in *Crazy House* that only a gay man of the period in which he wrote would know and because all of his major characters—the six Vivian "sisters" and Penrod—are males attracted sexually to other males, it seemed likely to me that Darger was probably gay.

After all, most straight writers of the time would not use gay boys as their protagonists, and if they did, the gay boys would have died at the end of the novels, not vanquished the evil Gladelinians and the demon that haunted the crazy house. Still, I needed to discover if anything in his life pointed to his sexual orientation. As it turned out, I discovered much that did.

The History of My Life

Written from 1968 to 1971, Darger's last book, *The History of My Life*, begins like a typical autobiography, recounting the basic facts of his life, but he suddenly announces that he had forgotten to address something very important, and with that, he begins the tale of Sweetie Pie, his third novel. While that section of the book offers little that might throw light on Darger's sexual orientation, the autobiography proper gives many clues.

At the same time that I was reading it, I began searching through the Darger Archives to see what I might find there that would help me piece together his life.

Darger's Life

The facts of Darger's childhood are disturbing. He was born into utter poverty on April 12, 1892. By the time he was four years old, his mother and younger brother, Arthur, had died and strangers had adopted his sister. His grieving father, already prone toward alcoholism, abandoned himself to the saloon and his son to Chicago's darkest vice district, West Madison Street, where they lived.

By the time Darger was eight, he had accrued a substantial record of run-ins with the law, including being caught returning home late at night after one of many rendezvous with an adult guard at a lumber company with whom he had formed a relationship. Unable or unwilling to control his son's behavior, his father gave the boy over to the care of the priests who ran the Mission of Our Lady of Mercy in June 1900. Of his time at the Mission, Darger said that had he known what the boys at the Mission were going to do to him, he would have run away.

At the Mission, Darger was a problem child from the get-go, culminating in his forming a sexual relationship with three other boys. When the priests discovered the ménage, they demanded that the father find someplace else to put him. A physician diagnosed the twelve-year-old as being afflicted with "self abuse," code at the time for homosexuality, and with that, his father was legally able to confine Darger to the Illinois Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children 165 miles away.

At the Asylum, Darger lived with other boys who were not mentally disabled at all, but who were truants, headstrong, sexually precocious, and otherwise problems for their families and society. He slept in the same room that they slept in, along with a large number of men, all convicts warehoused at the Asylum because there was no room for them in Illinois' overcrowded prisons. Summarizing his life at the Asylum, Darger said that he would have run away if only he'd known what he would experience there, echoing his response to the Mission.

In fact, Darger did begin running away from the Asylum in 1908 and, a year later, succeeded. Penniless, he walked back to Chicago, where he found a job as a janitor in a hospital, the first of the many menial jobs he would hold for the rest of his life. In his spare time, he wrote his first novel and created its illustrations.

In 1911, he met William Schloeder, who was thirteen years older and became his "special friend," code among gay men at the time for "lover." Darger stated that they spent every minute that they weren't at their jobs together and that he paid their way when they went to Riverview Amusement Park, a popular site for dating couples. Their relationship lasted forty-eight years.

When Schloeder—who was the character "Bill" in the scene in which he and another man run into Jennie on the street corner—died in 1959, Darger wrote to his beloved's sister about how lost he felt, how nothing held any meaning for him, and how he was barely able to deal with the death.

Almost immediately, Darger's own health began to fail, and he was forced to retire in November 1963. He hated retirement, but he kept busy, continuing to work on *Crazy House* and then on *A History of My Life*, as well as painting.

Freed from his ten-hour shifts at the hospital where he had worked, he became a dumpster-diver and hoarder and so withdrawn that he often refused to respond to others.

Those who remember Darger knew nothing about his life, how his father had abandoned him to institutions where he was physically and sexually victimized, that the love of his life for nearly half a century had died, and how his body was so racked with pain that it sometimes incapacitated him, keeping him in bed for days.

Unable to care for himself, in December 1972 Darger moved out of his one-room apartment, in which he had lived for forty years, into a nursing home. He died there five months later, the day after his eighty-first birthday, April 13, 1973. His death certificate states he succumbed to heart disease and senility.

Posthumous Fame and Misconceptions

His landlord hired a neighbor to clean out Darger's room, and he found the 300 paintings that Darger produced and for which he has since become acclaimed, as well as the manuscripts to his books, journals, letters, and ephemera.

Reviewers of Darger's first (posthumous) exhibit in 1977 latched onto the fact that he had been confined to an asylum, although they did not bother to find out why, and with Darger's depictions of the strangled, eviscerated, and crucified children before them, one after another decided in knee-jerk fashion and without any research into his life that he had been a pedophile, sadist, or serial killer.

Although I had learned a great deal about Darger from his second novel and the autobiography, I needed to understand his world to understand him better.

More Research and *Throwaway Boy*

Using the resources of various libraries and archives (such as Newberry Library, Chicago Public Library, the special collections departments of the libraries of the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago, the Chicago History Museum, the New York Public Library, etc.), I read countless medical articles from the mid-1800s through 1939 about sexuality, pored through newspaper reports about social and cultural conditions during Darger's life, and

was overwhelmed by a 1,000+-page report summarizing (with testimonies, letters, excerpts from medical reports, etc.) an investigation of the Asylum by the Illinois state government while Darger was confined there.

In addition, I discovered and devoured over a dozen monographs and dissertations about such diverse topics as vaudeville, burlesque, white slavery, vice, saloons, and kidnapping—all in Chicago. I even hired a lawyer to sue—successfully, as it turned out—the state of Illinois for access to Darger's records at the Illinois State Archives, where the Asylum's records are held. (For the \$2,500 that the lawyer charged me for her services, I received eight photocopied pages, the only recorded info about Darger during his stay at the Asylum that still exists.)

By the time I was done with my research—ten years after I had decided to write something about Darger to set the record straight—I had accumulated a great deal of evidence proving that he was not a pedophile, sadist, or murderer. He was, instead, a gay man who was the victim of sexual and physical abuse from an early age until he was seventeen.

The children he depicted on his canvases represent him (and other gay boys) and the abuse he (and others) suffered at the hands of adults and larger boys.

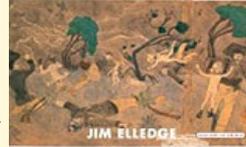
The result of my research—and my many days and nights pondering Darger, his work, and the culture into which he was born and grew into adulthood—became *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist*, published in August 2013, over ten years after my friend mentioned Darger to me.

Trailers for Two Documentaries

The trailers below for two documentary films, Jessica Yu's *In the Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger* (2004) and Mark Stokes's *Revolution of the Night: The Enigma of Henry Darger* (2011), propagate many misconceptions about the artist's life and illustrate the traditional approach to Darger, which emphasizes the sensational content of the canvases.



HENRY DARGER
Throwaway Boy
THE TRAGIC LIFE OF AN-OUTSIDER ARTIST



Henry Darger: Throwaway Boy by Jim Elledge
(Overlook, 2013).

[Androgyny](#)

[American Art: Gay Male, 1900-1968](#)

[Chicago](#)

[Children's Literature](#)

[Darger, Henry](#)

[Jansson, Tove](#)

[Sendak, Maurice](#)

[Subjects of the Visual Arts: Androgyny](#)

[Subjects of the Visual Arts: Hermaphrodites](#)

[Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Males](#)

[Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Females](#)

[Third Sex](#)

About Jim Elledge

Jim Elledge is author or editor of twenty-four books, including a textbook on publishing, four anthologies on queer culture, and numerous poetry collections and chapbooks. His *H*, a collection of prose poems, was issued by Lethe Press in 2012, and his *History of My Tattoo: A Poem* won a Lambda Literary Award in 2006. With David Groff, he is editor of *Who's Yer Daddy? Gay Writers Celebrate Their Mentors and Forerunners*. He is currently director of the M.A. in Professional Writing Program at Kennesaw State University. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.



Jim Elledge.

About Henry Darger, *Throwaway Boy: The Tragic Life of an Outsider Artist*

Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy is published by Overlook Press and may be ordered directly from the [publisher](#) and from bookstores, as well as from Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.

The book is described on the publisher's site as follows: "Henry Darger was utterly unknown during his lifetime, keeping a quiet, secluded existence as a janitor on Chicago's North Side. When he died his landlord discovered a treasure trove of more than three hundred canvases and more than 30,000 manuscript pages depicting a rich, shocking fantasy world—many showing hermaphroditic children being eviscerated, crucified and strangled.

While some art historians tend to dismiss Darger as an unhinged psychopath, in *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy*, Jim Elledge cuts through the cloud of controversy and rediscovers Darger as a damaged, fearful, gay man, raised in a world unaware of the consequences of child abuse or gay shame. This thoughtful, sympathetic biography tells the true story of a tragically misunderstood artist. Drawn from fascinating histories of the vice-ridden districts of 1900s Chicago, tens of thousands of pages of primary source material, and Elledge's own work in queer history, the book also features a full-color reproduction of a never-before-seen canvas from a private gallery in New York, as well as a previously undiscovered photograph of Darger with his life-partner Willie.

Engaging and arresting, *Henry Darger, Throwaway Boy* brings alive a complex, brave, and compelling man whose outsider art is both challenging and a triumph over trauma."

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