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Thirty-five short memoirs comprise *Love, West Hollywood: Reflections of Los Angeles* (Alyson, 2008), an anthology edited by James Berg and Chris Freeman.

Contributors include well-known literary luminaries such as Patricia Nell Warren, John Morgan Wilson, and Terry Wolverton, but some of the more surprising essays are written by unknowns including two queer foster kids whose work appears in print for the first time.

In September 2008, I spoke with Chris Freeman, who now teaches at the University of Southern California, about the book, what drove him to move to West Hollywood, and the state of the queer literary community in Los Angeles.

Wikholm: With 35 first-person essays by a wide range of authors, *Love, West Hollywood* gives a kaleidoscopic view of West Hollywood and Los Angeles. How did you decide what to present?

Freeman: We printed what people gave us. We got the pieces through friends of friends. As in any city, the Los Angeles literary community is interconnected.

We had several people in mind we wanted to talk with. For example, I wanted Tim Miller to write an essay about highways. He wrote a marvelous piece about that. We did the book in miniature clusters and planned to arrange the book in sections. We tried to force it into an outline, but decided to create the most readable order instead. We started with history and put the sports pieces together.

We put the kids from GLASS (Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services) together. We were thrilled to get these high quality pieces from these two very interesting kids. We found them through Teresa Decrescenzo, the founder of GLASS. The foster kids wrote excellent pieces, and I'm especially pleased to have included them since their voices are rarely heard in the community.

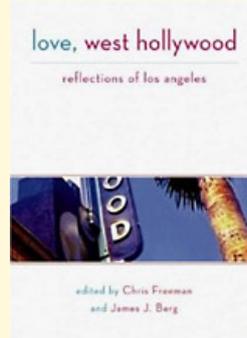
I knew I wanted Terry Decrescenzo to write about her relationship with Betty Berzon. Betty, who was widely known both as a psychologist and an activist, died a couple of years ago after a long battle with cancer. She and Terry have both been activists as well as psychotherapists. Terry isn't a writer, but I'm an editor so I was sure we could do something together. We ended up with a wonderful piece about Betty refusing to let Cedars-Sinai log her into their computer system as a single woman.

Wikholm: That's a kind of activism you don't see every day.

Freeman: Yes, it's the kind of micro-level pain people need to know about. When Jim Berg, my co-editor on the project, and I met with Terry at the Abbey for lunch to talk about the piece she was writing about Betty, we told her we would like to have a piece or two by some of her teenaged clients. She pulled out her Blackberry, called Karen Minns, a social worker and writer who works with GLASS, then handed the phone to me. Karen volunteered to edit the pieces by Dalton Fronterhouse and Eva S. and write an introduction to their work.

Wikholm: In doing so, you gave a voice to young people who are often seen, but rarely heard from.

Freeman: Exactly. Their stories are so important to the book since we wanted to look forward as well as backwards. We talk about the past in articles like Malcolm Boyd's piece—he's eight-five years old—who agreed to write about his relationship with Mary Pickford, but I also asked him to include something about being a gay elder. So we have pieces from a kid of 15 and a senior citizen of 85. Another remarkable aspect of the book is that we didn't pay any of the contributors a dime. They all volunteered.



Chris Freeman is co-editor of *Love, West Hollywood: Reflections of Los Angeles* (Alyson, 2008).

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Wikholm: The absence of an overarching narrative in the book gives voice to many different points of view, but perhaps it reflects the nature of Los Angeles as well.

Freeman: Yes, we cover a lot of real estate. That's why we discuss the boulevards in our introduction. We deliberately applied the subtitle of the book—"reflections of Los Angeles"—and decided that if it fits in Los Angeles, it belongs in the book. Given the gruesome nature of the publishing business today, we thought of the book as a place where these important stories will be preserved.

Wikholm: The story of your own life intersects with the vision you had for the book. You left a tenured position at St. John's University in Minnesota to move to West Hollywood in 2005. What drove you to do that?

Freeman: Here's what happened. The common wisdom about Los Angeles is that it's a superficial city, sort of the square root of New York culturally speaking. I've had a bizarre and lucky introduction to the city. I got to know Los Angeles as a college professor doing research, which placed me in the circle of Christopher Isherwood, Don Bachardy, and Paul Monette. I was meeting their friends, some of the most interesting, cultured, literate, sawy people of the twentieth century.

Take, for example, the story I have from Jack Larson in the book. He was an actor in the studio system of the 1950s and a long-time friend of Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy. When I called him to do something for the book, he suggested a piece that was supposed to run in *People* magazine ten years ago. For some reason, they never published it. It's a very sweet story about Marilyn Monroe, Montgomery Clift, and Hollywood in the 1950s and early 1960s. We have it in print for the first time.

Wikholm: It was a sweet recollection of Marilyn Monroe.

Freeman: Yes, Marilyn Monroe as a sweet, kind, and sober human being just days before her death.

Wikholm: So it wasn't Tinseltown that drew you to Los Angeles. It was the literary community you discovered there.

Freeman: Yes, but the literary scene in Los Angeles is inextricably linked to Hollywood. Isherwood, for example, made a living for fifteen years writing scripts for the studio system. Paul Monette came to Los Angeles to be a screenwriter. I have met many people here who have been extraordinarily supportive and I haven't experienced a social scene that's a marketplace driven by "what can you give me or do for me" that some might expect.

Wikholm: So Hollywood played a significant, though unintentional, role in cultivating literary talents like Isherwood and Monette. It became a magnet for creative talent.

Freeman: Yes.

Wikholm: To an outsider like me, it seems that gay literature exploded in Los Angeles around the time of Isherwood. Does Los Angeles still foster literary creativity as it once did? Is there still cross-pollination from the entertainment industry?

Freeman: That's a difficult question. A couple of months ago, I attended an informal lunch at the California Pizza Kitchen to which about 25 or 30 writers working in Los Angeles were invited. The meeting was organized by Charles Flowers, Executive Director of the Lambda Literary Foundation, which is now headquartered in West Hollywood. It was interesting because there were people there that I knew, people I had heard of but never met, and people I had never heard of. I think everybody there had that experience.

It was a wake-up call. There are writers here, there are people who share common interests, but we have to make a deliberate effort if we want to have a writing community. There are a lot of people doing good work here—poets, novelists, screenwriters, and playwrights.

I would not say that the quality of work today is not as good as it once was. Think of someone like John Rechy, certainly one of the most important writers in the last fifty years.

In creating *Love, West Hollywood*, we discovered a real community aspect. People wanted to write for this book, and they wanted to be part of the story. In some ways, Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons's book *Gay LA* (Basic Books, 2006) helped us. Many of our contributors were interviewed for that book, so they already had a stake in being part of Los Angeles literary and cultural history.

Wikholm: So in some ways your project served as a catalyst to support an emerging literary community.

Freeman: Absolutely—and to help organize it a bit. A book is a location of a sort, a gathering of people working to accomplish a goal. We're even tossing around the idea of doing a documentary

based on the book. We think the book has great potential as a documentary film.

Wikholm: Since the essays in the book are told in the first person, it seems like it could be adapted to a documentary by a skilled filmmaker.

Freeman: Memoir is a form I am obsessed with and absorbed by, and it's a form of our time. Some of the book's essays are personal, some are historical, and some are a blend.

Wikholm: Thank you for taking the time to talk about *Love West Hollywood*. I enjoyed the book immensely.

Freeman: Thank you. You know, it's been a labor of love. It was a joy to do for both Jim and me. We're both proud of it. It is our love letter to West Hollywood, to gay Los Angeles. We really believe the story of gay Los Angeles is a microcosm of the story of gay America.

Wikholm: That's a wonderful way to end an interview.

Freeman: Thank you so much, and we appreciate your support for the book.

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