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point of view

Eric Patterson on *Brokeback Mountain*

January 1, 2008

**"My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys": Men Who Love Men, Westerns, and *Brokeback Mountain***by [Eric Patterson](#)

In popular literature, movies, television, advertising, music, and virtually every other form of American commercial entertainment, the Cowboy has been constructed as the epitome of what supposedly are archetypal American values of masculinity and individualism. The central place of the Cowboy in the dominant ideology of gender and what amounts to the civil religion of nationalism probably was a particular cause of many straight men's dislike and ridicule of the beautiful film that Ang Lee and his associates based on Annie Proulx's brilliant short story, *Brokeback Mountain*.

Although many who ridiculed and condemned the film expressed disgust that male love even could be thought of in connection with types of images of men and landscapes that are enshrined in the national mythology, this certainly was not the case for singer Willie Nelson. Not only did he provide the version of the poignant vernacular elegy, "He Was a Friend of Mine," that closes *Brokeback Mountain*, but on Valentine's Day 2006, in the midst of the film's debut, he also released a song written and recorded years earlier that playfully celebrates the importance of male love in the mythology of the Cowboy and in the lives of many American men, "Cowboys Are Frequently, Secretly (Fond of Each Other)."

As he seems to have realized, in both its versions *Brokeback Mountain* compels Americans to consider the significance of love between men, and particularly to consider it in relation to American constructions of masculinity and the heroic national ideal of the Cowboy, where male love supposedly is unthought and unthinkable, unspeakable and unspoken.

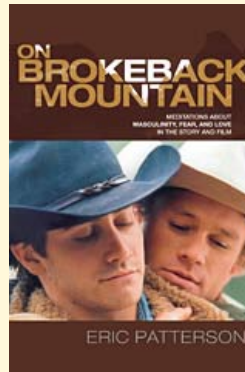
Willie Nelson is right: love between men is part of the experience of many of the sort of masculine men who identify with the American national fantasy of the Cowboy. The story and the film point up the fact that, though homophobia constructs love between men as negating masculinity, there are many conventionally masculine men who have sexual and often emotional relationships with other men.

**Homosexuality and Gender Behavior**

Not only in the West, but all over the country, in every racial and class and cultural group, there have been and continue to be men like *Brokeback Mountain's* protagonists, Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, who desire men and who are largely invisible to the majority because they do not fit its constructions of the "homosexual." Some of these men may identify as gay, but many others do not. The latter keep their male relationships as clandestine as possible, and sometimes deny their significance even to themselves.

The majority in America has defined "homosexuality" in terms of those members of sexually different groups who are visible to it because of different gender behavior, but in fact sexuality and gender are not necessarily connected. Some men who love men do not fit the stereotypes of effeminacy that seem to be so necessary to many of those who identify as heterosexual.

Society unfortunately imposes many penalties on those who, whatever their sexual orientation, do not fit its exacting standards of gender. Sexually different people who also differ in gender expression face particular hostility, and need particular strength, and also deserve particular respect, especially from those sexually different people who seem straight to the majority.

**Sexual Interactions between Cowboys in the Past**

Eric Patterson is the author of *On Brokeback Mountain: Meditations about Masculinity, Fear, and Love in the Story and the Film*.

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Social historians who have explored the types of sexual relationships that have existed in the past have found that before the construction of the highly negative medical-legal category of homosexuality (and its supposedly "normal" opposite, heterosexuality) in the later nineteenth century, many kinds of same-sex interaction were relatively accepted. Though certain forms of sexual interaction were condemned as "sodomy," some types of physical and sexual intimacy between men seem to have been tolerated, perhaps even endorsed, in some contexts.

For American men who lived in rural areas, the extended family and local community often provided a context for male-male sexual relationships, and sex between men was common in some all-male work communities, such as those of loggers, sailors, and hoboos.

Evidence concerning those in the cattle and other livestock businesses is not as definite about sexual relationships, but memoirs, photographs, and other evidence clearly show that actual cowboys lived on much more intimate terms with each other than many of the fans of the Cowboy today would find acceptable, bunking with each other, grooming each other, dancing together, and posing for photographers in remarkably affectionate ways.

Just as the mythic construction of the Cowboy has tended to erase the presence of the many African Americans and Hispanic Americans in the cattle business, typically presenting the Cowboy as an Anglo, it has also erased the presence of men who loved men. In choosing to write about love between Western men who work with stock (though Ennis and Jack are shepherders, not "cowboys") in her short story, Annie Proulx reminds contemporary Americans of this invisible history of male love in male work communities.

As she has noted in her essay on the story and the movie, she was partly inspired to write *Brokeback Mountain* by the comment of "one old sheep rancher, dead now, [who] used to say he always sent up two men to tend the sheep 'so's if they get lonesome they can poke each other."

### The Cowboy and Homoeroticism

*Brokeback Mountain* also reminds Americans of the persistent, though usually unmentioned, element of homoeroticism in representations of the Cowboy. In contrast to most male clothing, Western styles accentuate and decorate the male body, encasing it in form-fitting denim and leather, often with strikingly ornate leather and metal work such as chaps, buckles, and conchos. Western movies not only present male bodies in Cowboy finery, but display them in action, frequently in the course of their stories only partly dressed, as when the hero washes or recovers from his fights and other ordeals.



Like *Brokeback Mountain*, *Atlas* by prominent American artist [Delmas Howe](#) renders the unspoken homoeroticism of the Cowboy explicit.

While women are significant in Westerns, particularly as representatives of the allegedly superior values of white society, the Western hero often flees the responsibilities they represent, and sometimes does so with a male sidekick, though there is never any overt suggestion of a sexual relationship between them. Still, for far more men than ever will admit it, the Western provides a secretly satisfying display of male bodies and intense male relationships. (Of course, this also is the case with Professional Bull Riders, Inc. and other rodeo shows, and indeed generally with sports like football and baseball whose polyester and spandex uniforms reveal the musculature and sensuality of male bodies.)

Another source of the disturbance caused by *Brokeback Mountain* may be the way it outs the homoerotic appeal of masculine entertainment such as the Western.

### Passing

Because the cultural constructions that became dominant in the twentieth century treat masculinity and male homosexuality as categories that exclude each other, and because of the status and advantages American society confers on men who are perceived as masculine, many men who desire men feel forced to try to pass for straight. Passing can keep a man's masculine credentials intact, but it exacts many costs, for the men who do it and for the men and women with whom they are involved.

Although neither the story nor the movie of *Brokeback Mountain* depicts much about the lives of Jack and Ennis before they meet, it is relatively easy to guess what they would have been like. For young people growing up, heterosexuality is compulsory. Often at home and always at school, those who differ in gender behavior and

sexual orientation are targets of ridicule and harassment, and many who are not visibly different but who feel same-sex attraction learn to hide what they feel and to pass.

Even today, with greater visibility, more positive role models, and support organizations such as Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools, accepting sexual or gender difference can still be very difficult, and it was far more so 45 years ago. Ennis and Jack both face hostility from homophobic fathers, and while the movie does not go into their fathers' behavior in as much detail, Proulx suggests that it may have come from a sense, when the boys were small, that they somehow were not aggressive or masculine enough.

Neither father confronts his son directly, and neither son shows any noticeable unmasculine traits, but as is the case for many boys who grow up to be sexually different, they are aware that their fathers sense something that causes them to be antagonistic and violent, and so neither boy experiences his home as a place that is safe or supportive.

A young man like Ennis or Jack would have been pressured into acting as butch as he could and into going to school dances and church socials. He would have felt he had so much to lose by allowing anyone to know he was different—if he even knew it himself—that he would try hard to conform.

When they meet, Ennis already is engaged to Alma, though both versions suggest he may not be sure this is what he wants: Proulx indicates that one of the first things Ennis notices about his new friend Jack is the impressive muscularity of his thighs and butt, and in the film, when the two men get drunk and joke about sex and sin, Ennis tells Jack "he ain't yet had the opportunity." When he gets to *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis apparently is a virgin, and what he finds there is a passionate relationship with another man who reciprocates his passion. But then Ennis rejects Jack and marries Alma.

### **Homosociality and Homoeroticism**

Like Ennis, Jack is masculine in self-presentation and behavior, trying to make a living as a bull rider, a career that certainly demonstrates he is as tough as his old man or more so, but it is important to note that, as Proulx says, Jack is "infatuated" with rodeo: it may be that part of what draws him to the sport is not only the intense competition between men, but also the intense camaraderie on the rodeo circuit.

For some men who desire men and identify as masculine and are perceived as heterosexual, organizations that are largely or all male, such as the armed forces, the police and firefighters, sports teams, and fraternities, exert a powerful attraction, allowing them the strong connections with other men that they desire while simultaneously reinforcing their masculine identity, to others and to themselves. As scholars who have studied such homosocial organizations and activities have noted, most men value and often crave the bonding with other men that they provide, since it gives them support and can help to advance their careers.

But such environments also stimulate attraction between men, which is intolerable for many given the homophobia that pervades American society. Homosocial environments usually are charged with erotic tension, and many of the men in them engage in intense teasing, which can amount to a kind of flirtation, and frequently culminates in grabass horseplay that can be sexually arousing. This horseplay usually must be disavowed as mere "fooling around," and the possibility of any more serious physical or emotional involvement is subject to intense ridicule and scorn.

Homosocial environments thus simultaneously generate both homoeroticism and homophobia. Building on psychological character types, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl has described the pattern of narcissistic homophobia that results, in which anxiety about homosexuality takes the form of trying to disavow and exclude it. Of course, this is impossible, since men who desire men can be in virtually any homosocial environment, and such settings strongly encourage erotic feelings between men.

*Brokeback Mountain* must be especially threatening to narcissistic homophobes, since it shows how the comradeship of men in a homosocial environment can become erotic. The society tries to define a strict boundary differentiating friendship between men and sex between men, but in fact friendship often and easily becomes desire. Homosexuality cannot be relegated to the category of the stereotypical effeminate "faggot" who is reassuringly "Other," but is a potential in many apparently "normal" masculine men.

In this regard, both Proulx and the filmmakers deserve credit for not evading representation of sex between Jack and Ennis. Her story is more direct and explicit in its acknowledgment of the pleasure they both take in anal intercourse, but the filmmakers had the courage to depict the first time the men have sex much as she describes it, though they do make Ennis concerned right afterward about his

involvement with Jack, which departs from the story.

The scene where they make love in the tent lacks Proulx's amazing touch of Jack's comic ejaculation, "Gun's goin' off," which indicates his appreciation of Ennis's performance, but still, if you watch it closely, Heath Ledger (as Ennis) and Jake Gyllenhaal (as Jack) clearly present the sex as something the men want and enjoy, not as a "rape" as some obtuse critics have claimed. And what follows the next night is a scene as loving and tender as any in a movie between a man and a woman.

The directness of the story and the movie about anal intercourse seems to have been particularly provoking to many straight men, who have made this aspect of *Brokeback Mountain* the target of particular complaint and ridicule. "Personalities" like Don Imus and "Michael Savage" (Michael Weiner) excoriated the movie as "Fudgepack Mountain" and "Bareback Mounting." Though they claim to be horrified or disgusted by anal sex, their insistence on it in their reactions to *Brokeback Mountain* and indeed to man-loving men in general indicates that they seem to be unable to stop thinking about it, which suggests that it may be considerably more interesting to them than they want to admit.

### **Homophobia**

Another valuable aspect of the story and film is the power with which they depict homophobia. Usually straight people seem to want to think of men who desire men as dangerous sexual predators, pathetic AIDS victims, or silly effeminate clowns. They seldom consider the ways that the homophobic hostility that surrounds those who differ in terms of sexuality and gender actually affects them, especially what it feels like to love somebody and to be made afraid to let that love become visible to others.

Most significantly, *Brokeback Mountain* presents the full spectrum of homophobia, starting with its subtlest form, the disapproval directed at men who are not aggressive enough, as seen in the movie in the casual nastiness of the sour old farmers who think Jack's a "piss-ant" because he does not try to act like the "stud duck." Next is the suspiciousness aimed at men who seem "too friendly," depicted in the cold reaction of Jimbo, the rodeo clown, to Jack's awkward attempt to indicate his interest in him by buying him a beer.

Then there is the more active hostility of Joe Aguirre, a blowhard who drives a doofy little Rambler sedan. He insults and bullies men who need work from him, keeps them under surveillance, and knows he can get away with abusing Jack when he has found out he is a "queer."

Ennis's and Jack's fathers are a lot like Aguirre, bullying their sons (Proulx relates that Jack's father, in a rage, beat him and urinated all over him when he was a child of three) and endorsing homophobic violence. Ennis's father deliberately makes an example of a gay man's murdered corpse, taking his sons to see it, and Ennis thinks his father may even have "done the job." Similarly, after Jack's death, his father makes it clear to Ennis that he knows what has happened to Jack and is not at all sorry.

Jack's visibility provokes his murder, much as happened to the gay man cited by (and perhaps murdered by) Ennis's father—and to Matthew Shepard, and to scores of other gay men, lesbians, and other people who differ in sexuality and gender.

Most disturbing of all, *Brokeback Mountain* shows the violence some men who desire men may feel toward other man-loving men, even toward their lovers: to a man like Ennis who wants to pass, Jack's increasing openness is threatening, since it may make his own sexual difference visible. When Ennis confronts Jack about Jack's trip to Mexico, Ennis threatens to kill him, which places Ennis nearly at the same point on the spectrum as his father and the men who murder Jack.

### **Heterosexual Relationships**

Men who feel forced into passing frequently become involved in heterosexual relationships that can be difficult for all concerned. A young man who feels attraction to his male friends may become involved with women, hoping that he will feel enough attraction to them to make the relationships work. If he does, he will not, he thinks, have to forfeit his identity and status as a straight man. But the involvement with women under these circumstances is frequently bad for him, for the women, and for any men he gets involved with too.

Both Ennis and Jack can be understood in this way. After a summer of profound sexual and emotional involvement on *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis withdraws, violently rejecting Jack and trying to make a marriage with Alma work, though as the story and movie both show, he wants to have sex with her the way he did with Jack. Many couples count on strong sexual attraction to help them



overcomes the problems and obstacles life puts in their way, but this does not work well when someone is passing for straight. Long before Jack writes to Ennis to renew their friendship, it is evident that sex, instead of bringing Ennis and Alma closer, actually creates tension between them.

Jack, like many men who pass, stumbles into his marriage, being unable to go to places where he would meet men who desire men, and going along with it when a woman pursues him. In the film, it is clear that he is flattered by Lureen's interest in him, and feels some in return, though her father's money may be equally attractive.

As they are depicted, the relationships the two men have with their wives lack the sexual and emotional strength of what they feel for each other. But while Jack is willing to risk it, the visibility of living together is too threatening to Ennis, and so they and their wives and children are stuck. Certainly not all men who pass experience—and create—as much frustration, disappointment, and pain as those in *Brokeback Mountain*, but the story and film have shown straight readers and audiences one of the many costs of homophobia.

### Other Consequences of Passing

You do not have to look far in contemporary America to see what passing can lead to. The only sexually different man Ennis threatens is his own lover, but, sadly, some men who desire men and who try to pass become active accomplices of homophobia, attacking in others what they cannot accept in themselves. Anyone who learns a bit about the history of sexual/gender minorities in the U.S. will discover the stunningly sad stories of vicious homophobes such as Roy Cohn and New York City Archbishop Francis, Cardinal Spellman, and there are plenty of examples in recent headlines.

For those who collaborate with and promote homophobia, failure to continue to be perceived as part of the sexual majority risks public scandal, humiliation, and ridicule. In most cases this occurs in a local context, but it sometimes happens on a spectacular national scale. Recent instances include Virginia Republican Congressman Ed Schrock, an outspoken foe of gay rights and friend of Pat Robertson, who decided not to run for re-election in 2004 following revelation of recordings of his calls soliciting sex through a gay phone sex service. Or Mark Foley, the relatively moderate Florida Republican Congressman who had made a name for himself by denouncing child pornography and sexual predators and who then had to resign in 2006 when salacious, inappropriate emails he had sent to under-aged male House pages were publicized.

Or the Reverend Ted Haggard, pastor of the New Life Church in Colorado Springs, head of the National Association of Evangelicals, and frequent advisor to the Bush White House, who was outed by Mike Jones, a gay man who had worked as a prostitute. According to Jones, Haggard had paid him to have an extended sexual relationship and had bought illegal drugs from him.

Of course, Democratic leaders, such as New Jersey Governor James McGreevey, also have been outed amid sensational circumstances, but their generally more positive policies toward consensual relationships between adults of the same sex prevent them from being charged with the same degree of hypocrisy that has been the case with Republicans.

Finally, consider the grotesque mess in which Larry Craig, the ultra-right-wing U. S. Senator from Idaho, embroiled himself in the summer of 2007. The American public was given the bizarre entertainment of transcripts and tape recordings in which a senior member of the nation's highest legislative body tried to describe and explain his toilet habits to police. Some have rightly pointed out that the arrest raises important questions about apparent entrapment practices by police, but that has not prevented Craig, who first announced his resignation and then refused to resign, from becoming an object of national hilarity.



Public inquiries into his toilet habits made Sen. Larry Craig (R-Idaho) an object of national hilarity in 2007.

Interestingly, Craig was born in 1945, a year after Proulx indicates Ennis and Jack would have been born. Though more prosperous, he grew up in a social context not unlike those Proulx depicts for Ennis and Jack, on a remote family hay and cattle ranch more than twenty miles from the tiny town of Midvale, Idaho.

Unlike Craig, Ennis never becomes an active, public homophobe, but his fear of what he and Jack share causes him repeatedly to reject Jack's invitations to make a life together, which would be better not only for them but for their families. He ultimately drives Jack away and into the attempt to be involved with another man, which leads to Jack's murder. Only then, when it is too late, does Ennis fully realize

what he has done and what he has lost.

### ***Brokeback Mountain* as Romantic Tragedy**

The story and the film both present Ennis's grief with great power, as he creates a simple shrine to Jack with the bloody shirts and the postcard of the masculine landscape of *Brokeback Mountain*. Indeed, what Proulx and the filmmakers do is extraordinary. They place love between men in the genre of expression that the majority reserves for its most exalted depictions of heterosexual love, the romantic tragedy.

Straight people privilege their passion by presenting it as almost sacred, dramatizing its power by contrasting it with destructive forces that oppose it. In poetry, opera, and ballet, in thousands of movies, in song, and above all in the archetype of romantic love, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, love between man and woman is constructed as a force that can triumph not only over social conflict and injustice, but over death itself.

Though the realism of *Brokeback Mountain's* presentation of the love between Ennis and Jack is far humbler, the story and film nevertheless construct their love as a powerful force, a "force of nature." In the movie, this force helps Ennis finally learn to love his daughter, and in the story it brings Jack back to him (as he was when he was young and sexy and they fell in love) in his dreams so strongly that he gives him the strength to stand what he cannot fix.

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#### About Eric Patterson

Eric Patterson teaches American literature, American cultural studies, and glbtq studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. He has written on the construction of authority in the police movies of Clint Eastwood, on a gay perspective on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and on approaches to reducing homophobia at colleges and universities. His book, *On Brokeback Mountain: Meditations about Masculinity, Fear, and Love in the Story and the Film*, has recently been published by Lexington Books, a division of Rowman and Littlefield. He received his B.A. from Amherst and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale. Since 1988 he has lived with his partner, T.R. Forbes, a soil scientist and writer, near Ithaca, New York.



Eric Patterson

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