



Ames, Jonathan (b. 1964)

by George Koschel

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Performance artist, story teller, essayist, and novelist, Jonathan Ames is ostensibly "straight," but his three novels and many of his autobiographical essays explore that gray area in human sexuality where the boundaries between gay and straight identity become blurred. Ames says that he is "probably the gayest straight writer in America."

Born in 1964, Ames grew up in a Jewish family in suburban New Jersey. He attended Princeton, where he studied with Joyce Carol Oates. His first novel, *I Pass Like Night* (1989), was his senior thesis. He also studied at Columbia University with novelist Richard Price. He is the father of a teen-aged son.

Ames credits writers such as Edgar Rice Burroughs and J. R. R. Tolkien with influencing his fantasy life as a child. Later literary influences include Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Kerouac, and Charles Bukowski. Of the latter, Ames has commented, "I ate up the work of Charles Bukowski and like him, got a newspaper column, where I tried to be as dirty and honest as he had been."

But perhaps more significant in his development as a writer than particular literary influences was the late onset of puberty. He was almost sixteen when he entered puberty. This condition is not only the subject of the first essay in his "memoir," *What's Not to Love: The Adventures of a Mildly Perverted Young Writer* (2000), but it also affects the protagonists of both his novels.

Ames's first novel is a predictable product of a talented and intelligent student in an elite university's creative writing program. Notable primarily for its graphic scenes of the New York sexual underworld, it tells a familiar story of adolescent angst and coming of age. Although there are seeds of Ames's unique way of looking at the world here, they are not fully developed, and the novel is unformed and contrived.

Ames's distinctive voice became apparent first in the "City Slicker" columns he wrote for *The New York Press* from 1997 to 2000 (collected in *What's Not to Love*) and in his breakthrough second novel, *The Extra Man* (1999).

The Extra Man is the coming-of-age story of Louis Ives, a young man who loses his job at a New Jersey prep school when a co-worker catches him wearing a bra in an obvious state of arousal. He moves to New York City, where he becomes roommates with an older man, Henry Harrison, after responding to a newspaper ad.

A delightful curmudgeon, Henry is an impoverished part-time English professor at a New York community college and "the extra man" of the title. That is, he is the available gentleman who squires older society women around New York City and West Palm Beach. For that, he receives free meals and tickets to plays and operas.

Full of outrageous opinions, but curiously puritanical about sex, Henry functions as father figure and mentor to the orphaned Louis. Although Henry is the most fully developed character in the novel, a figure

of Dickensian proportion, Ames never lets the reader know much about his past, or even whether he is straight or gay.

While Henry is taking out his lady friends, Louis, who views himself as a "Young Gentleman" in a Fitzgerald novel, has a number of sexual adventures. In addition to visiting a lady "spankologist" and a make-over artist who specializes in dressing transvestites, he discovers the delights and fears of Sally's, a Times Square transsexual bar.

Louis is caught on the horns of a dilemma: does he want to be a transvestite or is he a tranny chaser? Miss Pepper, one of Sally's beautiful pre-op regulars, tells Louis that he is not really straight or gay. "Straightish" is the word she coins to describe him.

Guilt-ridden about his secret life on the edge, Louis idealizes what he perceives to be Henry's almost asexual persona. Indeed, the relationship that develops between the two men is the most fulfilling emotional bond in their lives. Nevertheless, Louis is mortified when Henry discovers him in bed with a transsexual and shocked when he thinks that Henry may have made a pass at him at their apartment one evening. He is really not sure about the pass, and the issue is never resolved.

Perhaps that is as it should be in this touching and funny novel. *The Extra Man* is particularly interesting for its wide-eyed innocence and its blurring of categories of all kinds. In this quintessentially queer book, labels simply do not do justice to the complexities of the emotional and sexual lives of its characters, who are never only what they may seem when seen at a particular moment. Perhaps that is why Ames chose to make Henry a "walker," an escort for older women. As he has commented, "I am always drawn to people on the edge. Walkers are on the outside, but appear to be on the inside."

Ames's reputation as a significant comic writer was cemented by the publication of *What's Not to Love*, the collection of his columns in *The New York Press*. Described by Ames as a "comic autobiography" and as "exaggerated nonfiction," the book is extraordinary for its frank honesty as well as its hilarity.

Ames has the ability to make comedy out of what in lesser writers would be merely embarrassing. His frankness about such topics as his masturbatory habits, his adventures with enemas, his breast fixation, his obsession with germs, and his self-consciousness about his receding hairline is disarming.

Some of his comic essays cross the bounds of what might be considered good taste, but they never cease to amuse or hit a truthful sort of poignancy, even if they leave the reader in slacked-jawed disbelief. Ames says, "I might be a little more disturbed than normal. But I'm not sure I qualify as a pervert. I do act on more things than the average person. That's my problem."

One of Ames's most telling essays is entitled "Breasts and Transhistories." In this piece, he segues from a confession of his obsession with breasts to a story about his being asked to write a blurb for a transsexual's memoir (Aleisha Brevard's *The Woman I Was Not Born to Be: A Transsexual Journey*). Ames's description of "transhistories," as he describes the genre of transsexual memoirs, is acutely observed and generous in spirit.

Ames's third novel, *Wake Up Sir!* (2004), is a gentle parody of P. G. Wodehouse's Wooster and Jeeves novels, interwoven with the obsessions that are Ames's signature as a writer. As in *The Extra Man*, the young protagonist's most fulfilling emotional relationship is with an older man.

Alan Blair, the narrator of *Wake Up Sir!*, is dependent on the calming emotional presence of his valet, Jeeves, whom he is able to hire after winning a sizable settlement when he slipped on the sidewalks of New York. Jeeves counsels him through his picaresque adventures in Montclair, New Jersey, a Hasidic enclave in Sharon Springs, New York, and, finally, at a writer's colony in Saratoga Springs.

The novel begins shortly before Blair's aunt and uncle evict him from their home in Montclair when they discover he has fallen off the wagon. A man beats him up in Sharon Springs after Blair calls the man's girlfriend when he sees her telephone number on a bathroom wall. He falls in love with a woman at the writer's colony after being smitten by the size of her nose, but ends up giving her scabies acquired from a hotel bed in Sharon Springs. He then has to shave his body to rid himself of body lice. The body shaving is, no doubt, an allusion to the psychological humiliation Ames felt because of the late onset of puberty.

During all of his misadventures, Blair, a writer, struggles to create the novel that will become *The Extra Man*, thus strengthening the similarities between Blair and Louis Ives (and Ames himself). As in *The Extra Man*, the narrator sees himself as a young gentleman. Moreover, he is obsessed with many of the same psychological issues that define Ives as queer.

In *The Extra Man*, these issues are seamlessly woven into the story. However, in *Wake Up Sir!*, the protagonist's queerness--including fantasies of being imprisoned and raped--are used primarily as comic asides in his dialogues with Jeeves, a character who may not even exist and who, in any case, lacks the curmudgeonly qualities that make Henry Harrison so engaging in *The Extra Man*. *Wake Up Sir!* is interesting as an exploration of the creative process, but it is not as fully satisfying as *The Extra Man*.

A performance artist and storyteller, Ames appears frequently at nightclubs and theaters. His one-man show *Oedipussy* played off-off-Broadway in 1999.

Ames has jokingly described himself as "bald and ribald, I'm like Rabelais and Danny Kaye, sometimes I'm straight and sometimes I'm gay." Only to add "Well, not really. I'm almost never gay, but it rhymed nicely with Kaye, and also I tend to be depressed rather than gay." He has also written that he strongly believes that the "need for labels is going to lessen." Until that happens, however, the best label to apply to him is not straight or gay, but queer.

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About the Author

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