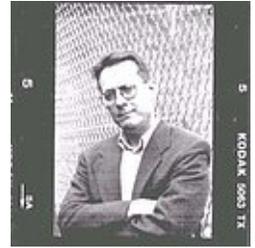




## Merlis, Mark (b. 1950)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Mark Merlis.  
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Mark Merlis is a novelist of unusual imaginative and linguistic power who examines contemporary gay concerns through the filter of historical parallels. His thought-filled, lyrical, yet wryly humorous narratives shift between the past and the present in order to illuminate the cause-and-effect relationship between homophobia and gay self-loathing, among other issues.

Ultimately, his explorations of gay memory and the gay past offer a vision of how the cycles of violence can be broken and individuals join hands across the divides that separate them.

In *American Studies* (1994), Reeve, the elderly victim of a brutal beating by a hustler he brought home late one night, spends his time while recuperating in the hospital recollecting how Tom Slater, his college mentor, was driven to commit suicide when outed during the McCarthy era.

In *An Arrow's Flight* (1998), Merlis sets the events of the Trojan War in a late twentieth-century Mediterranean or Caribbean milieu, adapting the ancient myth of Philoctetes--who was abandoned under miserable circumstances by his fellow Greeks en route to Troy when a leg wound festered so badly that no one could bear its rank odor--to illuminate American attitudes towards the gay body in general, and towards AIDS-sufferers in particular.

And in *Man about Town* (2003), Joel Lingeman, a middle-aged civil servant specializing in health care issues who has just been abandoned by his longtime partner, searches for a bathing suit model about whose image in a magazine Joel fantasized as a youth. Only by deconstructing the illusions of his past is he able to address and move beyond his present alcoholic inertia.

In all three novels, Merlis examines how the chains of power that render gay men second-class citizens can be broken. These chains include the power that the past has over the present; the power that straights have to intimidate gays; and the power of desire to make one vulnerable.

### Biography

Born in Framingham, Massachusetts, on March 9, 1950, Merlis was six years old when his father, a physician, moved the family to Baltimore. Here Merlis attended a Society of Friends (i.e., Quaker) school.

After completing a B.A. in English at Wesleyan University in 1971, and an M.A. in American Studies at Brown University in 1976, Merlis returned to Baltimore where he took an entry-level position at the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to support himself while writing.

His efficiency as a health policy analyst, however, earned him a series of promotions, allowing him to move in 1987 to the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress as a Specialist in Social Legislation. Here, in addition to being closely involved in most of the major health legislation that emerged from three successive Congresses, he devised the original grant allocation formulas for the Ryan White AIDS Care Act.

Merlis comments on his webpage that, unlike other gay writers who "are at their best when drawing upon their own experience, I find that my past is an empty well." While he has not yet produced (and does not seem likely to do so) the kind of autobiographical novels that Christopher Isherwood, Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and Felice Picano have made a staple of gay fiction, he does draw upon his knowledge of academe in *American Studies*, and upon his experience as a "senior health policy analyst in an agency that provides nonpartisan analysis and research for members and committees in Congress" for *Man about Town*.

Since 2001, Merlis has worked as an independent health policy consultant, while living with his partner in New Hope, Pennsylvania. He is currently at work on a fourth novel, tentatively titled *The Anarch*.

### **Hands across the Abyss**

Merlis notes that his novels "are about breaking the chain of power and violence that permeates both straight and gay culture." He explains, for example, that the mix of ancient and modern materials in *An Arrow's Flight* "is a way of easing the reader into the drama and of rephrasing, without fundamentally modifying, the questions Sophocles asked: what country are we really citizens of, and what do we owe to one another in that country?"

Merlis's approach to social issues is as intellectually engaged as it is emotionally powerful and often wryly humorous. His protagonists are, in their dissimilar ways, all concerned with building the *polis*--that is, with creating a community sensitive to the needs of all its members.

In *American Studies*, Tom Slater (whose career parallels that of influential Harvard scholar F. O. Matthiessen, who committed suicide in 1950) is the author of a ground-breaking book titled *The Invincible City*, which celebrates the "triumph of comradeship" in nineteenth-century American writers such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. Slater enthuses that through his book he hopes to foment "a revolution built on love and not bloodletting. A world where I can watch a Billy Budd walk away and not want to obliterate him because I can't get inside his skin."

Tragically, Slater's own efforts at "comradeship" fail: his advocacy of socialist ideals rings hollow while he continues to live off inherited family wealth, and he has difficulty acting upon his erotic attraction to men.

At first glance, conversely, Joel Lingeman of *Man about Town* is just another cog in the boring grind of government. When a newly elected, conservative senator draws upon Joel's expertise in drafting health care legislation in order to deny Medicare benefits to gay men who contracted HIV through "irresponsible" (i.e., unprotected) sex, however, Joel recognizes that "we're all in this together," and argues that government is a "covenant" guaranteeing that the fortunate will care for those who are less able to care for themselves.

Even *An Arrow's Flight's* Pyrrhus, the runaway prince *cum* gay stripper and hustler who seems so self-involved as to be incapable of thinking about the *polis*, comes to understand how a person can function as "a country of your own" (just as, Reeve notes, Tom Slater managed in his American studies seminars to "make a little country of his own").

For Merlis, what keeps "the invincible city" of comrades from being realized is the retributive anger that straight men direct at gay men for refusing to wear the impenetrable armor of masculinity, and the consequent shame that gay men feel regarding their sexual orientation.

Pyrrhus's inheritance and eventual rejection of the armor belonging to his father, Achilles, is a powerful metaphor that informs all three of Merlis's novels in which gay men are repeatedly despised by straight men

for having made love the center of their lives, rather than arming themselves in "the seemly reticence that makes men talk only of sports and cars and bosoms."

Taken together, Merlis's novels offer an extended meditation upon the ways by which homophobia creates feelings of inadequacy, and even self-loathing, in gay men. Each novel contains multiple scenes in which a gay man is made to feel small by a hearty.

Reeve, who was repeatedly "brownd" by male classmates as a boy, is both intimidated by Tom Slater's openly disdainful brother into relinquishing his claim upon Tom's estate and humiliated to be evicted from his apartment building for daring to disrupt the peaceful night's sleep of other residents with his screams on the night of his beating.

The conservative senator whose homophobic legislation Joel's non-partisan status requires him to support is as presumptuous of his privilege as Joel's low-ranking status as a government functionary and gay man renders him deferential and eager to serve. The United States Senate is one more group of privileged straight boys, like the ones that excluded Joel in high school.

And Odysseus understands only too well how to play upon Pyrrhus's sense of inadequacy after growing up in the shadow of his super-macho father, Achilles, in order to get Pyrrhus to manipulate the errant prince into doing the Greek general's bidding.

Merlis displays a profound psychological insight in his representation of the ways in which gay men render themselves all the more vulnerable by their attraction to the emotionally impenetrable straight men who are most likely to disdain them.

Pyrrhus, for example, acknowledges the erotic fascination that his father's body held for him--the same stupidly over-masculinized body that causes Pyrrhus to test the attractiveness of his own far more elegant form.

Tom Slater's afternoon sherry hours with his Harvard students "always looked like a casting call for an Arrow Shirt ad." Reeve describes the men to whom Tom was attracted as "Wheaties eaters." Reeve, his vision damaged by the beating that he suffered at the hands of a hustler, nevertheless casts sideways glances at the working-class heterosexual boy who is in the hospital bed next to his.

And Joel, obsessed with finding the model in a thirty-year-old swimming suit advertisement, must unexpectedly confront the effects that unsolicited gay desire has had on the boy, who proves to have been heterosexual.

But, while "the invincible city" of comrades may not be immediately available, and while gay men are most likely to feel that we are living in a "war zone where no covenants held," Merlis holds up for examination an alternate form of heroism: the reaching of two hands across a seemingly unbridgeable distance.

In breaking his bow, Philoctetes displays to Pyrrhus that gay men can simply refuse to give straight men power over us by turning away from straight warfare and joining hands to create "a country of your own."

At the end of *Man about Town*, Joel quells his suspicions concerning a new boyfriend's petty thefts and enters into a biracial relationship.

And whereas Tom Slater proved unable to cross "the abyss between the two beds" when he lay awake as a boy at boarding school with the object of his desire sleeping in a nearby bed, Reeve can "cross between the beds" in his hospital room. Falling while returning to his own bed after pulling up the covers on his sleeping roommate, he is startled to have a helping hand extended to him by the straight boy he initially feared was going to strike him.

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## About the Author

**Raymond-Jean Frontain** is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.