



## Fernandez, Dominique (b. 1929)

by Tina Gianoulis

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A respected member of the French literary establishment, Dominique Fernandez has not only won many prestigious literary awards, but in March 2007 he was elected to membership in the venerable Académie française, a significant honor. Inseparable from Fernandez's identities as an academic, historian, novelist, essayist, and travel writer is his identity as a gay man who came of age during the 1950s.

Fernandez did not come out publicly until the 1970s. In his remarkable autobiographical work *L'Étoile Rose* (The Pink Star, 1978) he has written of the belatedness of his coming out with some regret: "Je songeais . . . à tout ce qui aurait été différent dans ma vie, si, à dix-huit ans, j'avais pris conscience que j'étais gay, au lieu d'un paria." ("I dreamed . . . of everything that would have been different in my life if, when I was eighteen, I had understood that I was gay instead of a pariah.")

The author of dozens of novels, travel memoirs, essays, and works of criticism, Fernandez pioneered the "psychobiography," a literary form that he used to imagine the lives and inner struggles of gay artists in past centuries. He has also explored the experiential gulf between homosexuals who grew up under almost total societal disapproval and those who developed their gay identities after the gay liberation movement made public homosexuality a possibility.

One of Fernandez's recurring themes has been the complex question of the outlaw nature of homosexuality and whether gay men and lesbians lose something essential by becoming more integrated into mainstream culture.

Fernandez was born in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine on August 25, 1929, the son of a French mother and Franco-Mexican father. His father, Ramon Fernandez, was a prominent biographer and literary critic who ended his career in disgrace when he served on the executive committee of the fascist *Parti Populaire Français*, collaborating with France's Nazi occupiers. Ramon Fernandez died of alcoholism in 1944, before he could be punished by his outraged countrymen. Dominique was fifteen years old when his father died and was deeply affected by the scandal and shame of his father's last years.

However, he followed his father into the world of literary academia, passing his baccalauréat in 1946 and entering the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1950. In 1955 he earned his degree in Italian. In 1968 he was awarded his Ph. D, having written his thesis on gay Italian writer Cesare Parese.

In 1957 and 1958, Fernandez taught French at the French Institute in Naples, but his career there was brought to a sudden halt when he was fired for teaching the works of the libertine communist author Roger Vailland. He returned to France, and taught Italian in the northwestern city of Rennes, first at the lycée, then at the University of Haute-Bretagne, where he remained for twenty years.

Fernandez married Diane Jacquin de Margerie in 1961; the couple had two children before the marriage ended in 1971.

Fernandez began publishing academic works such as *Le Mythe de l'Amérique chez les intellectuels italiens de 1930 à 1950* (The Myth of America among Italian Intellectuals from 1930 to 1950), which was released in 1968. He also became a regular contributor to literary journals such as *La quinzaine littéraire* and *Nouvel observateur*.

In 1974, Fernandez publicly revealed his homosexuality and published a novel, *Porporino, ou les mystères de Naples* (translated into English in 1976 as *Porporino, or the Secrets of Naples*). The novel, about the life of a castrato in eighteenth-century Naples, depicts homosexuality openly. It won the 1975 *Prix Médicis*, a French award for newly discovered literary talent.

Dozens of books followed, including *L'Étoile Rose*, which explored the cross-generational relationship between a middle-aged provincial professor and a younger, post-liberation gay man, and *Dans la main de l'ange* (In the Angel's Hand, 1982), the bleak story of gay Italian writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was murdered by a male prostitute. *Dans la main de l'ange*, one of Fernandez's first psychobiographies, earned the prestigious *Prix Goncourt*.

Other of his psychobiographies include *L'Amour* (Love, 1986), about painter Friedrich Overbeck; *Le Dernier des Médicis* (The Last of the Medicis, 1994), about Gian Gastone; and *Tribunal d'honneur* (Court of Honor, 1996), about composer Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky.

In *Le loup et le chien* (The Wolf and the Dog, 1999), Fernandez delves into gay community politics and philosophy. The title refers to a classic French fable in which a dog and a wolf debate the comparative merits of security and freedom. Fernandez applies this dichotomy to the situation of contemporary homosexuals, arguing that civil rights advances, such as civil partnership contracts (*le PACS* in French), weaken the subversive nature of gayness.

In a 1995 interview, he elaborated on the tension he feels between his identity as a gay man and as an academic critic, remarking that as a gay man he rejoices in the civil rights advances achieved by the gay movement, but he added: "as a writer and a reader of novels I'm perplexed because I notice that permissiveness has trivialized homosexual culture. As soon as we can calmly reveal everything, we lose any specificity and often what you get are merely stories about sleeping around which are just as boring as heterosexual stories."

He continues this argument in his internationally popular art survey, *A Hidden Love: Art and Homosexuality* (2002). The book features a wealth of examples of both subtle and overt gay erotic themes in art through the ages. Fernandez advances the somewhat regressive and certainly debatable theory that the homophobic censorship of earlier times that forced queer artists to conceal their true meanings produced better art than the openly gay-themed art of the past few decades.

Throughout his life, Fernandez has been an avid world traveler. He has recorded his experiences in numerous travel memoirs, documenting his journeys to such diverse destinations as Italy, Portugal, Russia, Syria, Brazil, and Romania. Many of his travel journals are illustrated with photographs made by his longtime companion, architect Ferrante Ferranti.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.