



Mordden, Ethan (b. 1947)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Ethan Mordden is perhaps best known for his four volumes of short fiction comprising the series of interconnected "Buddies" stories set in New York City, which have, since their first publication over twenty years ago, gained classic status in gay literature. These "tales of gay Manhattan" are, as the critic Reed Woodhouse observed, principally "paean to friendship," that is, friendships between men, in the "post-Stonewall gay world."

Mordden is also the author of four additional novels and over twenty works of nonfiction on musicals, theater, opera, and film.

Ethan Mordden was born on January 27, 1947 in Pennsylvania and raised there, as well as in Venice, Italy and Long Island. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a B. A. in History. Shortly after graduation, he moved to New York City. His publishing career began in 1976 with the study of the Broadway musical, *Better Foot Forward: The History of American Musical Theatre*.

His fiction first began appearing in the early 1980s in the pioneering literary magazine *Christopher Street* as a regular column called "Is There a Book in This?" As Mordden has explained, he was originally hired by Chuck Ortleb and Tom Steele, the publishers of *Christopher Street*, to write a monthly arts review column. However, over drinks one evening, Mordden began telling the two publishers stories about his "eccentric and colorfully picturesque" family. Ortleb and Steel were so entertained by these stories they immediately decided to change the arts review column to an autobiographically-oriented one instead.

Mordden's first articles for *Christopher Street* were journalistic recollections of his family, but they gradually developed into semi-fictionalized accounts of his life as a young gay man in New York City. These stories are narrated by Bud, Mordden's apparent alter ego. Bud is a gay man in his thirties, living in Manhattan; he is well educated, culturally sophisticated, militantly gay, and surrounded by a group of gay male friends who form a kind of "family." For Mordden, creating such a family is essential for many gay men, as they can help to build "a stable environment . . . somewhere you get accepted for what you are without qualifications."

As Michael Schwartz has perceptively discerned in his bio-bibliographical essay on Mordden, these stories are also "taxonomic": they are concerned, both explicitly and implicitly, with what is, and is not, meant by the word "gay." Thus, Mordden's obsessive interest in what "gay" means is both the subject of his tales and an indirect statement about what gay "tales" ought to be.

Mordden's first *Christopher Street* pieces were collected and published as *I've a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore: Tales from Gay Manhattan* (1985), which was followed by *Buddies* (1986), and *Everybody Loves You: Further Adventures of Gay Manhattan* (1988).

Mordden set aside the series for some nine years before returning to it with *Some Men Are Lookers* (1997). These stories find Bud and his band of friends attempting to confront the challenges of long-term

relationships and the anxieties of aging.

Mordden's first novel, the semi-autobiographical *One Last Waltz* (1986), concerns a family of four Irish-American brothers, one of whom is gay.

Under the pseudonym "M. J. Verlaine," Mordden published *A Bad Man Is Easy to Find* (1991), a collection of eleven short stories, many of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, about heterosexual life in Manhattan. Mordden has explained that since at this point in his fiction writing career he had only amassed a gay audience, he believed that if he published the stories under his own name he would disappoint his current readers and not be able to attract new ones.

Mordden is also the author of the epic account of gay liberation and the development of gay culture, *How Long Has This Been Going On?* (1995). Populated by a diverse cast of characters--both male and female--the novel begins in Los Angeles in 1949 and concludes in New York City at the 1991 Gay Pride Parade.

His most recent work of fiction is *The Venice Adriana* (1998), a novel about gay identity, the love of opera, and the cult of the diva. Set in the early 1960s, the novel centers around Mark Trigger, a young American sent to Venice to ghostwrite the autobiography of the legendary Greek-American soprano Adriana Grafanas (whose character is modeled on the illustrious Maria Callas).

In 1994, Mordden edited *Waves: An Anthology of New Gay Fiction*, a selection of short stories from such noted writers as Michael Cunningham, Scott Heim, Jim Provenzano, and John Weir. In his introduction, Mordden designates the writers in this collection the "Third Wave" of gay male writers (the "First Wave" being the 1970s Violet Quill aesthetes and the "Second Wave" the 1980s AIDS realists).

Mordden has written nonfiction works on opera, including *Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot* (1978), *Demented: The World of the Opera Diva* (1984), and *Opera Anecdotes* (1985).

He has also written well-received studies of American film, such as *Hollywood Studios: House Style in the Golden Age of the Movies* (1988), *Movie Star: A Look at the Women Who Made Hollywood* (1983), and *Medium Cool: The Movies of the 1960s* (1990).

He has also written extensively on the American theater, particularly Broadway musicals, with *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (1983), *Rodgers & Hammerstein* (1992), and *The Happiest Corpse I've Ever Seen: The Last Twenty-five Years of the Broadway Musical* (2004).

Mordden currently lives in Manhattan.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.