



Picano, Felice (b. 1944)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Felice Picano is a highly prolific author in a number of different genres, including novels, stories, memoirs, poems, plays, essays, and reviews. He is perhaps best known for his commercially successful gay thriller *The Lure*, as well as *Like People in History*, his award-winning fictional account of gay life in postwar America, and his multi-volume memoirs, *Ambidextrous: The Secret Lives of Children*; *Men Who Loved Me*; *A House on the Ocean*, *a House on the Bay*; and *Art and Sex in Greenwich Village*.

Felice Picano.
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Picano is also a pioneer in gay publishing, having founded two publishing companies: the SeaHorse Press in 1977, one of the first gay publishing houses in the United States, and, in 1981, Gay Presses of New York.

Additionally, Picano was a founding member of the Violet Quill, the now legendary group of gay writers, which included Andrew Holleran and Edmund White, who met informally over the course of a year and a half beginning in 1980, and whose works collectively helped create the post-Stonewall renaissance of American gay male writing.

Biography and Early Career

Felice Picano was born on February 22, 1944, in New York City. He attended Queens College of the City University of New York, where he was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1964.

Upon graduating, Picano found employment as a social worker for the New York City Department of Welfare, a job he held until 1966. He then left the United States and moved to Europe for an extended stay. Upon his return to the U.S., Picano worked in various capacities for several New York City bookshops, first as an assistant manager for Doubleday Bookstore, from 1969 to 1970, and then, from 1972 to 1974, as an assistant manager and buyer for Rizzoli's Bookstore.

In 1977, Picano launched SeaHorse Press, New York's first gay publishing house (and, according to Picano, "the second gay publishing company in the world," after Gay Sunshine Press, in San Francisco). As he has explained, "quite clearly . . . there was a great big gay and lesbian community out there and it was not remotely being served by publishers."

Picano then joined forces in 1981 with two other gay publishers, Larry Mitchell and Terry Helbing, to form Gay Presses of New York.

Both publishing houses remained in operation until 1995, when Picano reluctantly closed them, due in part to the deteriorating health from AIDS of both Mitchell and Helbing.

Through his publishing ventures, including as editor of the groundbreaking *A True Likeness: Lesbian and Gay Writing Today* (1980), one of the first anthologies of its kind, Picano introduced to the public some of the most significant gay poetry, plays, and fiction of the post-Stonewall era, by such respected glbtq writers as

Alan Bowne, Jane Chambers, Dennis Cooper, Harvey Fierstein, Robert Glück, Brad Gooch, and Doric Wilson.

Additionally, from 1980 to 1983, Picano was Book Editor for the influential gay newspaper, *New York Native*.

Novels by Felice Picano

Picano's first three novels--*Smart as the Devil* (1975), a finalist for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, which recognizes distinguished first books of fiction, *Eyes* (1975), and *The Mesmerist* (1977)--were popular, best-selling psychological thrillers with no overt gay content.

Although he had earned a wide, mainstream readership, Picano next turned his attention to writing about explicitly gay subjects. This was a particularly precarious endeavor for Picano since his books had been marketed to a general audience and he risked losing the readership he had so carefully cultivated.

In 1979, he published his fourth novel, the gay mystery thriller *The Lure*. It was both critically commended and commercially successful. The story focuses on Noel Cummings, a young sociology professor, who is recruited by the New York police to join an undercover operation as a "juicy piece of bait" to help identify a serial killer who is targeting gay men.

Picano followed that work with the comic novella *An Asian Minor: The True Story of Ganymede* (1981) and the novel *Late in the Season* (1981), about an unexpected relationship that develops between a gay composer in his late thirties and an eighteen-year-old girl. Neither book was as successful as his earlier efforts.

The late 1980s found Picano returning to non-gay fiction with *House of Cards* (1984), and the thriller genre with *To the Seventh Power* (1989), another mainstream bestseller.

In 1995, Picano published *Like People in History*, which he called a "gay American epic." (The book's title was borrowed from an unpublished novel by Edmund White, written years earlier.) Picano's novel traces the story of two gay men, Roger Sansarc and his more flamboyant cousin Alistair Dodge, from their first meeting in 1954 until Alistair's death in 1991.

In an interview with Richard Canning, Picano revealed the impetus behind the book's creation: "Something I'd noticed, going around the country doing readings, is that we'd not only lost the bulk of my generation of American gay men; we'd also lost the history. I saw these bright, young people who'd grown up in what was essentially a gay world. They had no idea how they'd gotten there. There was interest. But not many people like to read history books. So I thought . . . I could make this a history book and also a story about the various lives gay men led in the past and how different these were--not only from now, but from each other."

The novel met with mixed, although mostly encouraging, reviews. A critic for *Publishers Weekly* cited for particular attention Picano's "memorable characters" and "wonderfully dishy dialogue." Charles Harmon, in his review for *Booklist*, felt that the novel was less an epic than a "beach book," although he also conceded that *Like People in History* "succeeds as a story that doesn't take itself too seriously."

Like People in History won several awards, including a Lambda Literary Award nomination, the Ferro-Grumley Award for Gay Male Fiction, *Le Figaro Littéraire* Citation for Best Foreign Book of the Year, and a *Gay Times of England* Award for Best Gay Novel of the Year.

Also in 1995, Picano published *Dryland's End*, a science fiction epic, which was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award for Best Science Fiction/Fantasy. Three years later saw the publication of *Looking Glass*

Lives (1998), a contemporary gothic thriller about reincarnation.

His next novel, *The Book of Lies* (1999), is a story of academic intrigue loosely based on the Violet Quill group (renamed the "Purple Circle" in Picano's novel). David Lipsky, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, observed that "Even readers who aren't familiar with the real writers evoked in this *roman à clef* will be aware that scores are being settled, family snapshots are being passed around and that a pointed, aching nostalgia is being expressed for the pre-AIDS world of clubs, glitzy vacations and the glories of the anonymous pickup."

Picano's most recent novel is *Onyx* (2001), set in 1992, which focuses on Ray as he ministers to his long-term lover rapidly succumbing to the ravages of AIDS, while embarking on a new physical relationship, endorsed by his lover, with a married man confused about his own sexual desires. *Publishers Weekly* found the novel "Striking in its bold depictions of both pleasure and pain . . . taking a fresh angle on familiar themes of love and death, and manifesting greater insight in its musings about living and loss during the traumatic years of the AIDS epidemic."

Memoirs by Felice Picano

Picano has authored several volumes of memoirs, beginning with *Ambidextrous: The Secret Lives of Children* (1985), about growing up in 1950s suburbia, and continuing with *Men Who Loved Me: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel* (1989), which covers the mid-1960s and Picano's early adulthood, including his friendship with the poet W.H. Auden.

In 1997, Picano published the third volume of his memoirs, *A House on the Ocean, a House on the Bay*, which recounts his literary successes and romantic struggles set against the heady pre-AIDS gay scene of Manhattan and Fire Island. Richard Violette, in his review for *Library Journal*, called Picano "a leading light in the gay literary world," and added, "his glints of flashing wit and subtle hints of dark decadence transcend clichés."

In 2005, Picano authored another, slighter memoir, *Fred in Love*, an affectionate portrait of his pet cat, Fred, whom Picano first encountered in the early 1970s.

His most recent memoir, *Art and Sex in Greenwich Village: Gay Literary Life after Stonewall* (2007), focuses primarily on Picano's role in the founding of SeaHorse Press and the Gay Presses of New York. Catherine Texier, in the *New York Times Book Review*, observed "Picano has assembled a tremendously entertaining collection of anecdotes and portraits that only a witness (and a good writer) could report in such vivid detail."

Other Works by Felice Picano

Picano has also written a great deal of short fiction, poetry, and plays, as well as a considerable amount of nonfiction.

His short fiction has been collected in *Slashed to Ribbons in Defense of Love and Other Stories* (1983), and *The New York Years: Stories* (2000).

His stories, erotica, and essays have also been widely anthologized, appearing in *Not Love Alone: A Modern Gay Anthology* (1985), edited by Martin Humphries; *Men on Men*, volumes 1, 3, and 4 (1986, 1990, and 1992), edited by George Stambolian, and *Men on Men 7* (1998), edited by David Bergman; *Scare Care* (1989), edited by Graham Masterton; *The Violet Quill Reader: The Emergence of Gay Writing after Stonewall* (1994), edited by David Bergman; *The Best of The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* (1997), edited

by Richard Schneider, Jr.; *Gay Widowers: Life after the Death of a Partner* (1997), edited by Michael Shernoff; *Gay Travels: A Literary Companion* (1998), edited by Lucy Jane Bledsoe; *The Mammoth Book of Gay Erotica* (1998), edited by Lawrence Schimel; *New York Sex: Stories* (1998), edited by Jane DeLynn; *Best Gay Erotica 1999* (1999), edited by Richard Labonte; *Hey Paesan: Writing by Lesbians and Gay Men of Italian Descent* (1999), edited by Denise Nico Leto, Giovanna Capone, and Tommi Avicolti Mecca; *The Man I Might Become: Gay Men Write about Their Fathers* (2002), edited by Bruce Shenitz; *M2M: New Literary Fiction* (2003), edited by Karl Woelz; *The Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name: Essays on Queer Desire and Sexuality* (2003), edited by Greg Wharton; *Filthy: Outrageous Gay Erotica* (2006), edited by M. Christian; and *Fool for Love: New Gay Fiction* (2009), edited by Timothy J. Lambert and R.D. Cochrane.

Picano's poetry has appeared in two collections, *The Deformity Lover and Other Poems* (1977) and *Window Elegies* (1986), which won a Poetry Society Chapbook Award.

His poetry has also appeared in a variety of anthologies, including *Getting from Here to There: Writing and Reading Poetry* (1982), edited by Florence Grossman; *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse* (1983), edited by Stephen Coote; *The Badboy Book of Erotic Poetry* (1995), edited by David Laurents; and *A Day for a Lay: A Century of Gay Poetry* (1999), edited by Gavin Geoffrey Dillard.

Picano has also written several plays, including *Immortal!*, a play with music, co-written with Jerry Campbell, and based on Picano's novella *An Asian Minor*, which was produced in 1986. The one-act play, *One O'Clock Jump*, was also produced in 1986 and won a Jane Chambers Playwriting Award. *The Bombay Trunk*, a full-length murder mystery, was produced in 2002.

In 1992, Picano co-wrote, with Dr. Charles Silverstein, *The New Joy of Gay Sex*, an updated version of the book Silverstein had originally created in 1977 with Edmund White. The new version included safe-sex practices and information reflecting the AIDS crisis.

A fully revised and expanded third edition of *The Joy of Gay Sex*, again with Silverstein and Picano as co-authors, was published in 2003.

He has also contributed articles, poems, stories, and reviews to periodicals, including *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *Advocate*, *Washington Blade*, *Genre*, *Harrington Gay Men's Fiction Quarterly*, *Lambda Book Report*, *Out*, and *Soho Weekly News*.

Picano currently lives in Los Angeles.

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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.