



## Preston, John (1945-1994)

by Matthew D. Johnson

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One of the most prolific gay writers of recent decades, John Preston published his first story only at age thirty-two. That story, which evolved into the pornographic novel *Mr. Benson*, ended up becoming his most enduring work. Possibly his most important legacy is helping to elevate pornographic fiction into a genre viewed as having literary merit.

John Preston was born in Medfield, Massachusetts, on December 11, 1945. By age fourteen, he had become devoted to the civil rights cause, volunteering as a Freedom Rider in Alabama and tutoring students in Chicago's slums.

In 1969 Preston moved to Minneapolis where, like many other former civil rights activists across the country, he became involved in gay liberation activities. He was founder and director of Minneapolis's Gay House, one of the first gay and lesbian community centers in the United States. By the mid-1970s, he had moved to Los Angeles, where he was briefly editor of *The Advocate*.

Around 1978, Preston moved to New York. Living in a basement apartment in Manhattan's East Village, he penned his first work of fiction, a short pornographic story about an itinerant young man who becomes the sexual property of an exacting, nigh omnipotent Master named Aristotle Benson. Preston offered the story to *Drummer*, the premier gay leather- and S/M-themed publication of the time.

*Drummer's* editors were so impressed with the story that they encouraged him to continue Jamie's adventures with Mr. Benson so that episodes could be published in the magazine serially, as is a convention with pornographic fiction. Preston agreed, mapping in the course of each installment the universe of institutions that comprised gay Manhattan's S/M culture.

Formerly an underground world known only to its initiates, leather life became more visible and accessible in the free-wheeling sexual culture of the 1970s. Like the magazine in which it appeared, *Mr. Benson* played no small part in popularizing that world when its monthly chapters began to be published in May 1979.

Yet *Mr. Benson* occasioned a response unprecedented by any fiction *Drummer* had published or, indeed, by any gay print pornography published up to that point. The overnight sensation it created is perhaps most readily comparable to the "porn chic" phenomenon that had been prompted by the release of such innovative heterosexual feature films as Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* (1972) and the Mitchell brothers' *Behind the Green Door* (1972) earlier in the decade. For the first time, porn stars became celebrities, as did pornographers.

Readers--male and female--eagerly crowded newsstands in anticipation of the next installment of Preston's story. Preston began receiving a tremendous volume of fan mail, and fan clubs sprung up around the country. T-shirts reading "Looking for Mr. Benson" (with or without the addition of a final question mark) began appearing in gay bars in various cities. The demand was such that *Mr. Benson* was published in book

form in 1983. *Penthouse* later dubbed it one of the ten best S/M novels ever written.

Perhaps inevitably, the sensation around *Mr. Benson* had many New Yorkers searching for his presumed real-life model on the streets of their city. Many fans believed that Preston himself was that model, a supposition that Preston deflated in his later autobiographical writings.

Patrick Califia, a self-confessed fan of Preston's story, nonetheless took issue with its influence on the S/M community's perceptions of both "Top" and "bottom" roles. The stylized, archetypal images presented in *Mr. Benson* meshed so well with the sexual fantasies of so many, yet those archetypes have only limited foundation in the lived, day-to-day experience of S/M practitioners. Preston himself called the work an impossible sexual comedy, claiming that he often laughed aloud while he was writing it.

Remarkably, Preston was able to parlay his early success in a marginal medium into a prolific (if abbreviated) career as a "legitimate" writer. By 1984, he had published two non-pornographic novels: *Franny, the Queen of Provincetown* (1983), a fictionalized account of one queen's spectacular life in the gay Massachusetts resort; and *Golden Years* (1984), the first in a series of several novels featuring the undercover political missions of gay ex-Marine Alex Kane.

Preston also edited volumes of gay male autobiography and wrote a memoir, publications issued by prominent literary houses and university presses. His diagnosis as HIV-positive in 1987 inhibited his ability to write for some time, yet this sad news led to the eventual publication of *Personal Dispatches: Writers Confront AIDS* (1989), an important early anthology of writing about the epidemic which included contributions from important gay writers. With Joan Nestle, he co-edited *Sister and Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men Write about Their Lives* (1995). Preston is also warmly remembered as a regular participant in the annual OutWrite conferences of glbtq writers and publishers.

Despite the success he achieved as a mainstream writer, Preston felt that *Mr. Benson* cast a long shadow over his career, though he believed that the shadow was largely beneficial. One of his mentors, publisher Michael Denny, encouraged him to return regularly to writing and publishing pornography. "It'll keep you honest," he reportedly told Preston.

Preston did continue to write tales of sexual Mastery and slavery, including *Entertainment for a Master* (1986), *The Love of a Master* (1987), and *In Search of a Master* (1989), along with other modes of genre fiction; and he edited the successful *Flesh and the Word* (1992, 1993, 1995) series of gay erotic fiction anthologies. He also wrote non-fiction guides to scanning personal ads (*Classified Affairs: A Gay Man's Guide to the Personals*, 1984), procuring the services of male prostitutes (*Hustling: A Gentleman's Guide to the Fine Art of Homosexual Prostitution*, 1994), and practicing safer sex (*Safe Sex: The Ultimate Erotic Guide*, with Glenn Swann, 1986).

A personal triumph for Preston was making the acquaintance and cultivating the friendship of Samuel Steward (aka Phil Andros), whose gay pulp fiction had captivated Preston as a younger man.

Having published more than twenty-five books as author or editor in a span of little more than ten years, Preston succumbed to an AIDS-related illness at his home in Portland, Maine, on April 28, 1994.

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### **About the Author**

**Matthew D. Johnson** holds a Masters Degree in Anthropology and History from the University of Michigan. He is currently Cataloging Assistant in the Brooklyn Museum library.