

## One's Hot, The Other's Not



Focus

Lauren Sanders

*THE LEATHER DADDY AND THE FEMME*

Carol Queen

Cleis Press

P.O. Box 19684, San Francisco, CA 94114

140 pages; paper, \$14.00

*WHITE STAINS*

Anaïs Nin

Masquerade Books

801 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017

200 pages; paper, \$6.95

In his polemic on the merits of dirty books, *Obscenity and Pornography*, D.H. Lawrence sets forth a very modern definition of his two subjects: "What they are depends, as usual, entirely on the individual. What is pornography to one man is the laughter of genius to another." I would venture the same holds true for the erotic and its eponymous literary genre, *Erotica*. Too often, however, what is erotica to one man or woman is the agony of boredom to another. I for one tend to avoid books with the word erotica in the title, having been too often frustrated by the recycled soft-core clichés and embarrassing sex scenes that color so much of the genre. It's as if the mission to arouse is at odds with the desire to write good prose.

Happily, this is not the case for writer, sex educator, and activist Carol Queen, who in her novel *The Leather Daddy and the Femme* manages to spin a smart, outspoken, and sexy tale out of the current cultural obsessions with gender identity and sadomasochism. These are also Queen's obsessions, her mission, so to speak, and her familiarity with both subcultures has fueled numerous essays and heavily-anthologized short stories over the past decade. More a continuation than culmination of this work, *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*

solidifies Queen's place in the contemporary erotic cannon. Like her leather-clad compatriots Pat Califia and John Preston, both of whom earn a nod on Queen's dedication page, Queen is a sex writer who can craft an interesting sentence. Beyond that—and again in the tradition of her contemporaries as well as hearkening back to the original literary perverts Sade and Sacher Masoch—Queen in her writing dares to tread the margins of human sexuality and report back from the terrain of the underrepresented.

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*The Leather Daddy and the Femme* is itself an amalgam of underrepresented desire, featuring San Francisco's microcosm of leather daddies, topwomen, dungeon masters, raven-haired dykes, girls who want to be boys, boys who want to be girls, etcetera, etcetera. From the opening scene wherein our lively protagonist Randy (a.k.a. Miranda), all full of queer-boy energy, cruises leather daddy Jack out on his Harley, and manages to get his cock in her mouth before he discovers she's no ordinary boy, gender is the operative force. When Jack, unlike most daddies she's cruised, is unfazed by Randy's disclosure, Randy escalates their scene, disappearing into the bathroom and transforming herself into the high-femme Miranda. Why would she risk femming out now that she's finally nabbed the leather daddy of her dreams? "I love being a boy, but I don't like having to be two separate people to get what I want. I really want the men I fuck to turn me over and see the whole me: the woman in the boy, the boy in the woman. This daddy, this leatherman whose name I didn't even know, was the first one with whom that seemed possible—and I wanted to make sure. I wanted to know if

he would really play with me.” Of course Jack is willing to play, and thus begins a narrative that reads less like a novel and more like an off-beat adult movie as Jack and Randy pursue a series of interconnected, gender-bent sexual fantasies.

The cast of characters widens to include Randy’s ex-lover and roommate, the transvestite prostitute Ariel, Jack’s lover Demetrius, the dominatrix Georgia Strong, Sir Sebastian, the obligatory superdaddy with his fully stocked dungeon, and other sundry individuals. At times these characters seem flat, defined solely by their particular sexual proclivi-

ties, physical traits, or clothing. Of course, characterization is not the primary goal of most erotica; in fact, there is probably nothing less arousing than a sex scene bogged down with psychological introspection, overwrought dialogue, or personality quirks. And Queen is a master at choreographing a good sex scene. Whether Randy is at home with a Magic Wand in hand and her daddies Jack and Demetrius commanding the scene from a speaker phone, or strung up in a cage as she’s “ganged” by a band of leather daddies, we stay close to her sensations and thoughts as she narrates. To Queen’s credit, whatever feelings such sex scenes might conjure for the reader, there is a very low “Yuck” factor—an obstacle to a lot of erotica. Not only could you never imagine yourself in the scene, but also it makes you think, “Yuck!” and hurl the book at the wall. At no point was I ready to hurl *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*; I even went back to a few of the sex scenes more than once.

Queen’s narrative loses steam, however, when we leave the sexual arena and her political stance becomes all too obvious. Like Sade, who peppered his scenes of sexualized torture with what George Bataille referred to as his libertine “disquisitions upon violence,” Queen’s characters are prone to disquisitions on gender. For example, Demetrius on his transformation from loving her husband to S/M queer: “There’s also something very powerful about true androgyny, about mixing the characteristics so they’re not sublimated in each other but still both present, with all their erotic charge.” Or here’s Ariel on men who like chicks with dicks: “No one knows the first thing about these guys—except, in a way, us queens. No one pays any attention—not gay men, not their wives, not the sociologists.” Granted, these lines are taken out of context, but they seem even more didactic within the narrative. I would have rather heard less from these characters and seen more of



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their sexual dynamic played out in less overtly sexual situations—a bit more teasing, if you will.

There is something refreshing in the ironic eye Randy turns on scenes as she participates in them. (For example, coming out of the bathroom after femming up for Jack, she registers feeling like a *Vogue* model who'd stumbled into a Tom of Finland painting.) This style is very post-modern, a giant step from the erotica of the 40s represented in a book of short stories called *White Stains* by Anaïs Nin and friends. We're told on the back cover that these stories were churned out for a dollar a page. We're also told these friends of Anaïs are Virginia Admiral, Caresse Crosby, and others. I'll give anyone a dollar if they can tell me who these people are and why their flaccid prose is worthy of its resurrection. Apart from being gathered under perhaps the worst title ever, and rehashing sexual stereotypes such as the deflowered virgin, the domineering nurse, and the shy seductress, stereotypes the Victorians introduced with more panache one hundred years earlier in *The Pearl* and other journals, the stories in *White Stains* seem constructed merely to utter the words "cunt" and "prick" as many times as possible. Let's look at the opening to the story "Cunts," for example. "Pretty young girls have nice tickly little

cunts between their legs for ardent young men to put stiff pricks into. Let any young man see a young girl's pretty hairy cunt, and watch how his prick will come up standing!" Or this trenchant description from "Love's Encyclopedia," an ersatz *Joy of Sex* for the sexually unenlightened: "Fucking is the introduction of the manly prick into the female cunt, and the action of the couple in moving in and out until the spunk of the male is spurted into the woman's vagina." Pretty hot stuff, ay?

Perhaps back in 1940 this tone was sophisticated, even ironic, but today it seems merely juvenile, as if it might show up in an episode of *South Park*—hey, relax, it's only cable. Even for Masquerade Books, a press that has made a name for itself publishing dirty books of all sexual genres, *White Stains* scrapes the bottom of the barrel. Personally, I can't imagine how anyone enjoys reading the kind of erotica gathered in its pages, let alone gets off on it. For me the greatest pleasure was hearing the crack of its spine against my wall.

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