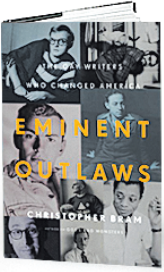


# 'Outlaws' shines welcome light on gay writers' lives and work



## NONFICTION

### Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America

By Christopher Bram  
Twelve Books  
384 pages, \$27.99

By COLIN DABKOWSKI

NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

In 2010, when the art exhibition "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" opened in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, its curators made a remarkable claim. The show, they said, was the first major museum exhibition in America to explicitly include sexual difference as its central theme.

To the casual museumgoer in 2010, this came as a surprise. Surely, some major museum, somewhere in the United States, had dared to address the practical omnipresence of coded or explicit gay and lesbian subject matter in American art and its manifold influences on the whole of American society.

Yet no. The long-overdue show, curated by the Portrait Gallery's David Ward and University at Buffalo professor Jonathan Katz, managed to bring into the spotlight what had been "hidden in plain sight" for at least the last century. That "Hide/Seek" set off a heated and ongoing controversy came as no surprise (though the precise catalyst for that controversy did).

Two years later, it might surprise some readers to know that when it comes to a major consideration of that same hidden-in-plain-sight subject matter in American literature and its widespread influence on the broader culture, the pickings are similarly slim to nonexistent.

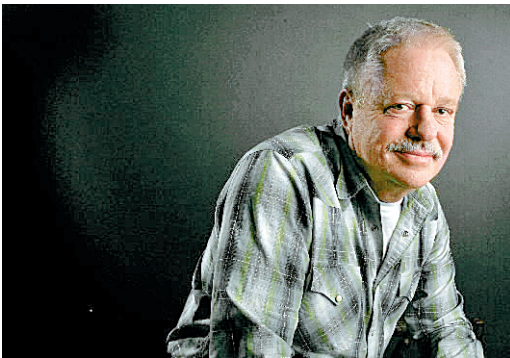
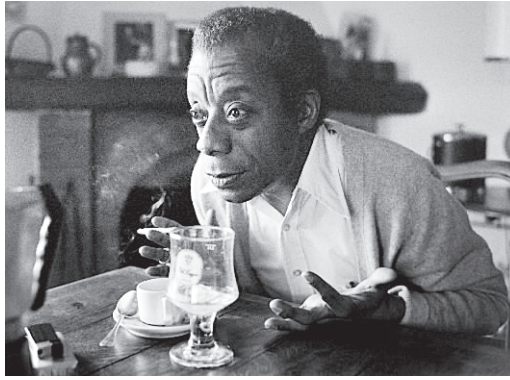
Aside from the odd academic journal article or monograph, most of which have tended to focus on narrow time frames (before or after the 1969 Stonewall riots, for instance), authors have either avoided writing on the rise of a gay literature for a general audience or publishers have avoided the subject. One suspects the latter, and probably for the same reasons that museums avoided an exhibition like "Hide/Seek" for so long: In the second decade of the 21st century, homophobia still lingers in our major institutions, where the depiction of certain approved brands of homosexuality is fine, but the discussion of its larger meaning remains taboo.

In other words: Be as gay as you like, but for God's sake don't make us think too much about it.

Here to drag a long-overdue discussion of post-war gay literature into the light is the novelist Christopher Bram ("Exiles in America," "Lives of the Circus Animals," "The Father of Frankenstein," adapted into the film "Gods and Monsters"). His excellent book "Eminent Outlaws," out this week, is a personal chronicle of the author's wide reading of gay authors that doubles as a bravura exploration of gay literature's ascendancy and cultural influence.

Bram did not set out to be exhaustive — an impossible task, given the vast and variegated genre of gay literature. Instead, he produced a deeply informed, clear-eyed and happily peripatetic book, which moves effortlessly between personally inflected critiques of individual works of fiction and nonfiction and the lives and careers of the gay authors who wrote them.

Along the way, Bram argues convincingly that the idea of a named gay literature and gay writers have been consistently and systematically down-



Christopher Bram's "Eminent Outlaws" illuminates the work of, clockwise from top left, James Baldwin, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote and Armistead Maupin, among others.

played in popular and intellectual discussions of the larger American literary scene. What's more, he also makes the case — though perhaps not convincingly enough for some — that gay literature had a more direct and powerful effect on galvanizing the gay movement than, for instance, black literature or feminist literature had on the formation of those movements.

Bram begins with Gore Vidal, the enigmatic and prolific figure whose 1948 book "The City and the Pillar" is perhaps the first sign of a new literary consideration of homosexuality — a literature that dared to include gay characters as something other than symbols of moral weakness.

From there, Bram launches off on his decade-by-decade chronicle, giving us breezy, highly engaging sketches of the careers of Tennessee Williams, Allen Ginsberg, James Baldwin, Christopher Isherwood, James Merrill, Edmund White, Armistead Maupin and Tony Kushner, among many others. Along the way, he weaves in illuminating observations by straight writers like the critic and University at Buffalo professor Leslie Fiedler (whose important 1948 essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey" remains required reading), Norman Mailer and Frank Rich, even flagrant homophobes like William F. Buckley and John Simon.

Except for one cringe-worthy sentence, Bram shines particularly brightly on Baldwin, a writer of great personal significance to him, as well as with Isherwood, Maupin and White — each of whom receives a loving treatment that is nonetheless unsparingly critical when it needs to be.

Perhaps the most important role Bram plays, more than informed chronicler of a multifarious literary movement, is as a heroic rescuer of reputations. The book serves as a badly needed corrective to the corrosive, virulently homophobic criticism of the past 70 years. (Criticism, it has to be said, that continues in some quarters to this day.)

He writes, convincingly, that Baldwin's own monumentally important sexuality was unfairly edited away during his life, and especially after his death, by those who wish to claim him solely as a black literary hero. As if his sexuality did anything but make his vital contributions to the ongoing racial debate in this country even more important and broadly applicable.

Writing about Baldwin's death in 1987, Bram writes that Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and

Amiri Baraka spoke at his memorial service in New York City, each one celebrating him "solely as a black writer, not a gay one." His gay novels were largely ignored. "The degayification of James Baldwin had begun," he writes.

It was a fate that befell many other writers who appear in the book, from Isherwood to Ginsberg, as well as many other artists (Robert Rauschenberg chief among them) and many other thinkers and dancers and actors throughout history.

Bram's prose is clear and unadorned, the better to describe such riveting historical events as a televised debate between Gore Vidal and arch-conservative Buckley in which Buckley calls Vidal a "queer" and Vidal calls Buckley a "pro or crypto Nazi."

Bram's skill in taking apart the arguments of reactionary critics like Buckley, and by extension the critics themselves, is never done in a mean-spirited or polemical manner. He gives credit where credit is due to those who have redeemed themselves in his eyes — Frank Rich, for one — and uses the same compassion and sensitivity to discuss the personal artistic failings of Baldwin, Williams, Vidal, Truman Capote and, especially, Larry Kramer, the irritable, outspoken but indispensable author of "Faggots" and "The Normal Heart," a 1985 play about the terrifying onset of the AIDS crisis.

On the AIDS crisis and its effect on literature, Bram offers this insight: "The AIDS epidemic was not a sudden cataclysm but a slow-motion disaster, a creeping fire that left people with time to brood and worry. Writers used this time to write, fighting off their fears with prose and poetry. AIDS gave a new urgency to the work, and it gave gay writing a new importance in the culture at large."

Through it all, "Eminent Outlaw" never bores. Bram's passion for the novels, essays and critical debates that moved him personally — many of which also happened to move American society "a few inches forward," as he writes — is infectious. For the curious reader, the book is like a treasure map with the potential to send us scurrying off to the nearest library to indulge ourselves in the same pleasures Bram so expertly describes.

For that reason, "Eminent Outlaws," remarkably the first book of its type, must now rank as an invaluable addition to the very body of literature it set out to chronicle.

Colin Dabkowski is *The News' Arts Critic*.