
REVIEWS

Philip Gambone. *Something Inside: Conversations with Gay Fiction Writers*. Photographs by Robert Giard. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999. 341p.

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Philip Gambone's ambitious collection of interviews contains the uncensored and spontaneous perspectives of twenty-one male writers who self-identify as gay. The interviews were conducted over the course of eleven years, and the book is clearly divided into three separate sections, containing six to eight authors in each: "The Early *Bay Windows* Interviews (1987-1990)," which previously appeared in the gay-themed newspaper of the same name; "The WOMR Interviews," conducted in 1993 as part of the author's contributions to a community radio station in Provincetown, Massachusetts; and "Later Interviews," spanning from 1994 to 1998.

Each of the interviews is highly unpretentious and, while Gambone refers to specific novels published by each of his subjects, he engages them in conversations which transcend the need for rigid or statistical questionnaires. In a natural flow from one question to another, including the "ums" and other elliptical punctuation associated with normal pauses during dialogue, the interviews prove far more effective than the standard, more formulaic practice of addressing the same questions with each of the authors in order to arrive at points of comparison. Instead, Gambone, whose experience as professor of creative writing significantly enhances the quality of the interviews, has devised a set of questions for each specific author, based on his own readings of their works. The interlocutor, therefore, actively participates in the content and the direction of the interviews he conducts. While this method sacrifices some degree of objectivity as a result of conceiving a separate set of questions for each interviewee, it is interesting to note that many of the same themes emerge in the majority of these conversations.

The title of the book is significant for historical, psychological, and even sentimental reasons. In his introduction, Gambone comments that each of the broadcasts for the WOMR radio station alluded to above began with an excerpt from "Something Inside So Strong," a popular song recorded by the Flirtations, a gay a cappella group, many of whose members have since died of AIDS. Indeed, the

title seems to define the purpose of compiling the dialogues. What Gambone seeks to accomplish in each of his interviews is to explore the need, the impetus to write, and even the notion of writing as survival mechanism, a process which holds true for nearly all the men whose voices emerge naturally, if not always eloquently, in these pages.

Gambone is concerned with the evolution of the gay male novel from 1978 to 1998, highlighting themes such as meditations on AIDS; “coming out”; identity-formation, including proliferation of multiple identities, particularly being Jewish, black, or Asian as well as homosexual; and aging issues in the gay community. The dialogues also consider generic aspects within the “gay male novel,” such as viewing urbanity as the most common backdrop for expression of gay motifs, debating the controversial fine line between homoeroticism and gay male pornography. Such discussion complicates much of the writings of feminist and postmodern literary critics, which primarily address constructions of gender roles based on cultural notions of masculinity and femininity.

The concept of the “gay male novel” is itself highly problematized throughout the interviews. In fact, if there is one topic which predominates the direction of the interviews, it is precisely the enduring debate over whether or not a “gay sensibility” exists and, if so, how to define it. By extension, Gambone provokes much discussion on the elusive category of the “gay writer,” attempting — perhaps in vain — to strip the layers of gayness from writerliness to determine whether the outlooks explored in the book’s pages are a culmination of a uniquely gay consciousness or merely the universal preoccupations, insecurities, thrills, and struggles of the individual who has chosen the vocation of creative writing. In fact, David Leavitt recalls a former professor’s theory that “as gay content becomes more and more explicit, and the need for concealment disappears, the gay style will disappear . . . [t]hat gay style and gay sensibility are entirely responses to having to conceal the fact of homosexuality” (50-1). In any case, one perspective — albeit expressed in various ways — is repeated throughout the interviews: writing is not a choice or even a desire as much as it is a basic and often compulsive “need” for expression. Various novelists try to analyze what constitutes the need for written expression, and many theories are espoused, ranging from the sublimation of the paternal or maternal instinct to create, the quest for immortality, the younger generation’s need to subordinate “coming out” issues to secondary status and defeat apologetic or confessional modes of writing in order to portray gay characters in the wholeness of their humanity, and many others.

While treated with far less attention than the themes involving gay identity mentioned above, there is also some conversation on the business aspect of the

production, marketing, and packaging of novels. Decisions of titles, where the work is presented, and how it is marketed contribute significantly to whether a novel is classified and even reviewed in the light of erotica or pornography, as John Preston points out, as well as whether the work will attract a predominantly gay, straight, or mixed readership.

One of the strengths of the collection is the inclusion of photographs of many (although regrettably not all) of the writers interviewed. This feature is certainly worth the space it occupies, since it helps to attach a human face to the black and white pages that so many contemporary readers have found enlightening, pleasurable, and disturbing.

Unfortunately, there are abundant typographical errors, mostly orthographic in nature. At last count, I found eleven separate imprecisions. A more thorough editing process should have occurred before the book was published. In addition, while perhaps Gambone is not at fault for the tendency to focus on Eurocentric perspectives and experiences, there is an extreme privileging of writers who have looked to Europe to construct their identities or that of their characters and a virtual abandonment of those who have explored Asian and African cultures for similar inspiration. Finally, while the author admits, in three separate cases, that some of the taped conversations with novelists have been lost over the years and that he is reconstructing much of the content of the dialogues, he does not acknowledge how dangerously inaccurate this process can be. Although the study of creative writing is his passion and Gambone has met many authors whose words of wisdom and confessions of insecurities are far too poignant to forget, he perhaps trusts the unreliable human memory a bit too much (e.g., 63 and 76). In addition, the following problem is also a serious one, especially in light of Gambone's intention to achieve the spontaneity of "extended conversations" (4). He acknowledges that, of the twenty-one interviewees, he has never met one of them in particular, Bernard Cooper. The interview was conducted not in person, but via the Internet. Gambone then proceeded to do the following: "A few days afterwards, I sent Cooper a transcription so that he could look it over for any changes he wanted to make" (311). The transcript of Cooper's interview, therefore, does not fit well with the other twenty subjects, for he is the only writer who had the opportunity to emend or correct a spontaneous interview. This is problematic because none of the other writers were invited to change or censor their own thoughts.

Overall, though, Gambone's collection of interviews is a valuable addition to the ever-growing corpus in gay studies / queer theory. It poses far more questions than it does answers and relishes in the contradictions that emerge in intellectual conversations with writers and their craft. One of the most notable moments is

when Bernard Cooper makes a statement and then revises it without judgment or interference of any kind on the part of the interlocutor. Ironically, his comment pertains to the process of revision itself: “Revise till you feel you need a straight-jacket; then you are done. You are never done” (323). ✱