



# American Studies

*Mark Merlis*

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Reeve thinks his life is over: his career is at a dead end, his face is a mess, and his landlord is evicting him from his apartment because he made too much noise when a hustler beat him up. As he lies in his hospital bed, trying to figure out what to do next, he finds himself brooding about the parallel ruin of his comrade and mentor Tom Slater, a famous American literary scholar who dabbled in communism and was driven to suicide during the McCarthy era. And there is the further distraction of the patient in the next bed, a silent youth who arouses feelings Reeve has vowed not to have any more, the dangerous longing for the sweetness and menace of straight men. Never at a loss for the telling detail or bitchy aside, Reeve offers a sweeping view of gay life in this century as he reconstructs the troubled world of Tom Slater (a figure inspired by the critic F. O. Matthiessen) and recalls his own insouciant youth and horny old age. Dark humor and decadent prose infuse this story of desire, betrayal, and healing.

## American Studies Details

Date : Published January 1st 1996 by Penguin Books (first published January 1st 1994)

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Author : Mark Merlis

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# From Reader Review American Studies for online ebook

**Michael says**

"Of course nothing came of it. We were two tunnels with no train."

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**Lena♥Ribka says**

**4.5 stars**

JD: A Novel was my first Mark Merlis. I read it in 2016.

**JD: A Novel is beyond ingenuity.**

I remember that I wanted immediately AFTER to read EVERYTHING Mark Merlis wrote. Don't we all think the same after something so powerful, beautiful and emotional? Why didn't I do it?!

How could I miss THIS?!

Mark Merlis, who debuted as a novelist in his 40s, penning four works of fiction that explored the joys, tensions and agonies of gay life in America in the 20th century, died Aug. 15 2017 at a hospital in Philadelphia. He was 67.

In one of his interviews Mark Marlis said:

*“I am, of course, a gay man whose ... novels are swarming with gay characters, and I have allowed myself to be marketed as a practitioner of a genre called gay fiction. But this is a commercial category, not an artistic one. I write, like anybody else, about how it is to be human.”*

It is actually all you have to know if you decide to read Mark Merlis.

**His novels are beautifully heart-wrenching and simply HUMAN.**

What an enormous loss for us all :(

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**Tom Slater says**

An existential nightmare....

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## **William Freeman says**

Definitely one of the better books I've read this year. A very true and sometimes moving account of gay life through the 1940's and on in the USA. Well written thoughtful, sad, bittersweet just a little too verbose on occasions

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## **Dan Kagan says**

I sort of loved it.

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## **Sergei says**

Quite extraordinary. A touching reminder of what the generation of gay men before ours went through. Their sad, limited views of love and sexuality, the veils and shame and secrecy and violence. In a way, the author reflects this generation without fully understanding the limits of his worldview, which makes it all the more poignant.

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## **Adam says**

Mr. Reeve, 62, is hospitalized for an eye injury after a mugging from a trick. His straight roommate, only referred to as "the boy," is convalescing after damaging his thumb on the job. This story spans only a few days, but Reeve has time to reminisce over the past 40 years, coming back to the events revolving around the suicide of his mentor, Tom Slater, in 1952 and how this shaped Reeve's life.

Many beautiful parts of this writing that can only be felt through gay experience, and I look forward to reading more from Mark Merlis.

"I have always been partial to backs. I don't mean backsides, whose virtues are more generally appreciated, but backs, whose owners never see them and whose baroque, superabundant complexity is squandered, given away freely to those who will look. Here I have gone and excited myself.

After dinner, we go back to watching television, "Wheel of Fortune." I rather enjoy trying to guess the mystery phrases from the scattered letters. It's like hangman, but without the awful urgency as your body assumes its parts, one by one, on the gallows, ready to swing.

The boy is evidently more interested in the floozy who turns the letters. He has been touching himself absentmindedly through much of the show. I reach for a drink of water. He remembers me, glances over, and withdraws his hand from under the covers. For a while we both look only at the screen. I find myself feeling that it connects us, the lines of our vision meet at the vortex of the screen and we are comrades. But soon enough my shame takes over and I conjure instead a beam of disdain angling at me. It is his TV, I am an intruder, reading over his shoulder. He changes the channel as if to sever the unwanted intimacy. I turn my back on the boy. But I am aware of him as the dark side of the moon must feel the pull of the unseen earth."

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## **Todd says**

This book bridges the lives, perceptions, cultures, experiences of gay men across three generations in a way that I found moving and beautiful. Not a happy read, as it encompasses anti-gay violence and self-loathing among gay men. But a raw look at the psychological costs of past gay-maleness. I want to teach this to my LGBT students just as a way for them to try to imagine how different the world used to be for gay men.

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## **Mel Bossa says**

Edit added on August 25th 2017. Just found out that Merlis passed away at age 67 on August 15th. He was one of the first gay authors I read and his book American Studies is one I will never forget and will continue to reread every few years. An enormous talent and wit to spare. R.I.P.

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A profoundly moving story about the Lavender scare during the McCarthy days. But more than this, it's a very funny, touching, and human tale of Reeves, a bitchy, witty, and lonely, aging gay man, victim of an assault he suffered at the hands of a "trick." As he lies in a hospital bed recovering, he thinks of his past, and fantasizes about the straight guy in the next bed.

This book is so full of grace and intelligence, and every time I read the inevitable and tragic end, I feel a bruise on my heart.

This is very atypical sort of narrator for a gay book. Meaning, Reeves isn't this muscular gym addicted, Will and Grace type of gay man. He's a queen, from a time where it was dangerous to be one--come to think of it, it still is a little dangerous these days, right? A lot, depending on the country.

What I love about this book, is the details and vivid emotions Merlis awakens in my mind when I read his carefully chosen words. It's all there: the pre-WW2 years, the post-war years, the sexual liberation, the artificial eighties, the fear, the love, the sex, everything. Nothing is left behind.

And it always has me dreaming of Tom Slater's Invisible City...

Someone said that this book is about the Civil war between straight men and gay men in America, and it is.

The talent of Merlis is in the way he managed to show us that war raging in the tiny trench between two hospital beds.

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## **Jim says**

Utterly captivating for its longing and aching disappointment, Merlis novel nevertheless displays hope amid dangerous times for a gay man dealing with his own hustler-abused closeted life.

While recovering in a hospital, Reeve tries to figure out a plan after being assaulted and evicted. His school professor's mysterious past is revealed and he ruminates on the man's life. It's a curious tale within a tale, but also profound in its traces of hope amid the misery; a life wasted on regret, his teacher's story reflected in Reeve's own doubts.

Some wry and subtle sensuous moments are notable; Reeve's subtle flirtation with a hunky hospital roommate, his imagined sexual revenge exploits of others, including the young man who betrayed his professor. This is contrasted with his insecurity about his body, aging, and facing an open life as it could be.

But more clearly, Merlis makes the case for a then-impassable chasm between the straight and gay male. His comparison of body language include subtle nudges and winks as the dividing line between us and them, the doable versus the felonious. These are the insights to human frailties rarely depicted so well in any genre.

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### **Paul says**

I did not hear about this author until I read his obituary, so I decided to see if I could find his work. This was his first - sad, poignant, such an interesting point of view of the narrator. Off to read his three other novels.

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### **Mitch says**

I stumbled upon Mark Merlis by Googling "Best Gay Novelists." His name kept coming up on best lists, but I'd never really heard of him. I'm often disappointed by gay literature novels. Too often the focus veers into sex, even when it's not apropos to the story. And while Merlis explores sexuality in American Studies, the focus of sex is handled in a way that reflects the main characters experiences in post WW2 America. Sex for gay men at that time was often furtive and fleeting. It was something one did and then compartmentalized, never to be discussed at length.

Merlis describes a time when everyone who was "outside" the norm was suspect. This is a very well written book that pulled me back to a time when everyone was looking over their shoulder, and those that didn't often paid a very big price.

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### **Mark says**

This is undeniably well written but the subject matter--the vicious cycle of self-loathing--doesn't make it an easy read especially when none of the characters are particularly likeable. It is, however, a timely history lesson in what it was like to be gay pre-"sexual revolution" and of the tragic consequences of conformity. Some of the author's phrases and ideas stuck to me like splinters and I liked turning chunks of the book around in my head after I'd finished it. Given the fluid structure between the past and the present and the expansive tone of the narrative, I did better with this when i read large passages of it at a time. There was one event in the present-day story line near the end that just did not buy, but I did like how this story line resolved. All in all, well done but hard cheese.

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**Virgowriter (Brad Windhauser) says**

Effective paralleling of two separate storylines--one of a college professor who kept his gay identity hidden during a time when being gay was illegal, the other of a sixty two year old man--former mentee of the professor--who's recovering from an assault. In his hospital bed, reflects on his former professor's life. Both show that being gay has never been safe. Interesting how the narrative present has little action but still feels like things happen (and not just with young roommate).

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**Charles Stephen says**

I finished this book in 48 hours and pondered it for another 24. The narrative is heavy with the self-loathing that most gays experience their entire lives (Does it really get better?) Reeve is in hospital recovering from an assault. He's been bringing tricks (men who are gay for pay) home to his apartment building for twenty years, but this latest one beat him up and almost blinded him. He looks terrible, feels ashamed and terrible, and is being evicted by his landlords over the incident. His sickbed reveries are about the man, Slater, who was his teacher and, briefly, his lover at boarding school after World War II. His fantasies are about the young man with the mostly-severed thumb who shares the hospital room with him. A master at pacing, Merlis moves the reader from past to distant past to present, progressing story lines along several layers of narrative. There is resolution of the self-loathing for readers who hold out for his conclusion. I think Merlis is a treasure, one of the most under-appreciated gay writers in America.

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