



Fellow Travelers

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From the highly acclaimed author of *Bandbox* and *Dewey Defeats Truman*—a searing new historical novel about the competing claims of faith, love, and politics during the McCarthy era.

Washington, D.C., in the early 1950s: a world of bare-knuckled ideology, hard drinking, and secret dossiers, dominated by such outsized characters as Richard Nixon, Drew Pearson, Perle Mesta, and Joe McCarthy. Into this fevered city steps Timothy Laughlin, a recent Fordham graduate and devout Catholic eager to join the crusade against Communism. A chance encounter with a handsome, profligate State Department official, Hawkins Fuller, leads to Tim's first job in D.C. and—after Fuller's advances—his first love affair. Now, as McCarthy mounts an increasingly desperate bid for power and internal investigations focus on “sexual subversives” in the government, Tim and Fuller find it ever more dangerous to navigate their double lives. Drawn into a maelstrom of deceit and intrigue, and clinging to the friendship of a beautiful young woman named Mary Johnson, Tim struggles to reconcile his political convictions, his love for God, and his love for Fuller—an entanglement that will end in a stunning act of betrayal.

Moving between the Senate Office Building and the Washington *Evening Star*, the diplomatic world of Foggy Bottom and NATO's front line in Europe, *Fellow Travelers* is energized by high political drama, unexpected humor, and genuine heartbreak. It is Thomas Mallon's most accomplished and daring novel to date.

Fellow Travelers Details

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From Reader Review Fellow Travelers for online ebook

James says

I just finished reading this book, and it's ending was a culmination of the many little instances in which it tore at my heart these past couple weeks. As I finished the last sentence I felt one last jab to my heart, and a tightness in my throat. I guess I felt like crying. But it was worth the pain.

Beautifully written, every chapter felt like poetry. Yet like a lot of beautiful art, it was steeped in sadness and melancholy. Every so often the story took a turn in which it teased me with the prospect of lasting happiness for the core characters, but just as soon the hope was gone.

Essentially, it's a love story. A love story that dare not speak its name, at least in 1950s McCarthy-era Washington. As such, it's a story of a love that persisted for decades, though never had a chance to truly break through the dirt in which it was sowed, never having a chance to live in the light.

As painful as this was to read at times - maybe because the story of the ill-fated lovers of Fellow Travelers could have been that of any gay and bisexual men of that era, who lived in the shadows and suppressed their true nature in order to survive, personally and professionally- most of the time I didn't want this story to end. I really felt as though I had stepped into the lives of these people, maybe reading a memoir written over the course of five decades.

I'll treasure this book, for the way it brought me to another time and place, and in the way it ensures that we will remember all those who had to be silent, who may have thought they'd be forgotten.

Eric Smith says

I really enjoyed this book, couldn't put it down and would give it five stars except for one problem: history. If you don't know much about American history in the 1950's and the important people of that time, then this book will be a constant trip to Wikipedia and a bore. That said, the plot is fascinating: two closeted gay men in the State Department, one fresh out of college and the other a mature adult (32), and the tortured experience they have during the McCarthy era. If you know some about that time, I highly recommend the book. The writing is graceful, the pacing is quick but not rushed, and the characters are vivid.

Skip says

I finished this novel last night. I was up early this morning to take it back to the library.

For some reason, I found this story so unnerving. So sad...Was any character truly happy? (Not that stories have to be full of happy people.)

In short, the McCarthy hearing chapters could have been better edited. It went on too long. And the whole time I was wondering if what I was reading was the true version or the fiction.

But the near-last line is the one that really tingles.

"Tell him I was happy enough. Make it easy on him."

Is it really enough to only love, and not be loved?

Richard Jespers says

Fellow Travelers is set in Washington, DC in the early 1950s but 1991 provides a certain frame. A young (twenty-two) Tim Laughlin is seduced by a thirty-year-old Hawkins Fuller (Hawk), a handsome state representative official. They conduct a short riotous affair—flying under the radar of a homophobic Washington. When Tim realizes he can never have Hawk, he joins the Army for two and a half years. Of course, he never gets over Hawk—and he is destined to come in contact with him again, even as Hawk Fuller is now married. Yet they pick up their affair where they left off—by co-opting the third floor of a condemned building (not an accidental symbol). For weeks or months they meet until Tim, in the throes of making love, says, “I love you.” Mallon deftly pivots the POV to Hawk, who, realizing what a relationship with Tim will mean for his career, says, “I love you, too.”

Hawk, to save his career, and to save Tim from himself, sabotages Tim’s future in Washington by seeing that his security clearance is nixed. Hawk Fuller leaves it to a mutual female friend to tell Tim. Fuller tells her to make it hard on him. Tim, we discover in the epilogue, had lived his life in the Boston area doing largely altruistic work, also as a clerk in a bookstore. He is brought to Hawk’s attention (now in his late 60s) by dying at fifty-nine of bone cancer (not AIDS as Hawk first assumes).

Earlier in the novel, Tim had given Hawk a paperweight of clear glass with a sprig of a cherry blossom floating at its center. He still possesses this object at the end of the novel. “It had traveled with him for many years, from one country to another, throughout a world grown unexpectedly, and increasingly, free” (354). There may be no novelistic sentence that expresses more regret. Hawk realizes he could have at least some of the time lived . . . free . . . and not as he had chosen.

Also see my review for

Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and
Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*

Chris says

This book was a tough read for me. I thought it was well researched, but that's the problem. The author provided so much arcane political information that I could not really focus on the plot or create much passion for the characters. The story held a great premise but in the end, it was too dry and too dense for me to recommend it to friends.

Debbie says

Broadly speaking, love and obsession (or obsessional love) in the McCarthy era. As alleged Communists and homosexuals are hunted out of the government, an innocent young man becomes the lover of a somewhat older, but decidedly more worldly fellow. I had the same problem with this novel as I have with others of Mallon's. Most of his characters seem pretty cool and remote and their relationships largely transactional. The political detail of the early to mid fifties was just that, detailed, and I spent a lot of time looking up names or refreshing my memory on events. Lately half of what I read or watch seems to be reflecting our own Current Situation. Although not the point of the book, a point in the book is that there will always be a

certain group of people willing to follow a bullying stooge.

Scott says

Way too much American political history, which is of marginal interest to me. Almost too well researched I.E. More historical detail than I wanted. It seems to me that Mallon could have replaced most of it with a standard historical reference and just kept the love story.

As for the love story, neither character is really sympathetic.

Hawk not all -- he has a bad case of internalized homophobia, which might have been interesting if presented as a product of time and place, but that connection is not really made at all. He's just a bastard from the get go.

Tim, the arch-catholic cold warrior is more sympathetic but so hard to relate to and ends up a pathetic and lonely old man in Rhode Island. He has little self-awareness.

Did anyone notice that hardly anything bad happened because of McCarthy? Sure, Tim lost a job but only because Hawk outed him. One or two off-stage actors got fired. I don't think this is historically accurate.

It's a sad story but in the end I just wanted to scream Get Out of Town and Get a Life, Boys. Go to San Francisco. There is more to life than Foggy Bottom.

Mal Warwick says

Only American history majors are likely to be aware that America's first Red Scare was sparked in 1886 by the Haymarket affair in Chicago — a demonstration by workers calling for an eight-hour day which led to widespread persecution of men, usually foreign-born, who were perceived as anarchists. Thirty-three years later a wave of anarchist bombings in the wake of World War I induced Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer to recruit a 23-year-old named J. Edgar Hoover to locate and deport hundreds of anarchists, Communists, and other assorted leftists. Dial the clock forward nearly another thirty years to the anti-Communist frenzy following World War II that rose to a crescendo in the 1950s with the histrionic hearings presided over by Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy. Thomas Mallon's novel, *Fellow Travelers*, skillfully recreates the mood prevailing in Washington, DC, during McCarthy's witch-hunt, placing fictional characters in solidly researched historic circumstances.

America's third Red Scare

To appreciate Mallon's tour de force to the fullest, you might need to be in my age cohort (yes, north of 70). Reading *Fellow Travelers* was a lot like old home week for me: the book is filled with references to the federal officials, celebrities, and signature events of the 1950s. Since Thomas Mallon was born only in 1951 and would have been just nine years old when the decade ended, it's safe to assume that he had to do a great deal of reading and research to recreate the flavor of those times.

It's well known that McCarthy and his collaborators — as well as those who knuckled under to their strong-arm tactics — targeted not just Communists but anyone left of center, including outspoken liberals, progressive, and unaffiliated socialists. Anyone who resisted the Red Scare was placed in McCarthy's cross-hairs and frequently lost their jobs as a result. Among them were not only officials in the State Department and the Army and Hollywood personalities, all of whom have received a great deal of attention, but also teachers and administrators on campuses throughout the country and employees in private companies as

well. It's less well known that gay men, too, were driven out of their jobs as "security risks," presumably because they were vulnerable to blackmail. (Whether lesbians were also targeted is unclear in the context of this gay love story, and I have no personal knowledge to answer the question). The McCarthy years were one of the darkest periods in American history.

A gay love story set against the background of the Red Scare

Fallon deftly weaves together two themes in *Fellow Travelers*: the rise and fall of Joseph McCarthy and the love between two men, one of them a senior government official. There's irony — perhaps what might be called a double entendre — in the title as a result, as the two central characters were "fellow" travelers on the unconventional path they'd chosen.

About the author

Thomas Mallon is the author of seven nonfiction books and eight novels as well as numerous magazine articles, critical essays, and reviews. I've previously reviewed his two most recent novels, *Watergate* and *Finale* (about the final years of Ronald Reagan's administration). Both were outstanding works of political fiction.

Rhonda says

Ew, the 50s: cigarette smoke everywhere, Brylcreem, wet wool, B.O., rooms full of pasty white men in bad suits running the country, the world, our lives--my earliest memories. This deeply humane story is about how it couldn't have been told when it happened, and why, and what all that cost how many people--without ever being even slightly pedantic or giving off that stink art gets on it when it has a political agenda. The politics it depicts get a little murky occasionally because almost too thoroughly researched--but that lends credibility to the intelligence that explains it can't find a brush dark enough to tar McCarthy & Co. Timely in so many ways! Somebody pay attention!

Russ says

Conservative, religious and closeted, Timothy Laughlin is totally obsessed with Hawkins Fuller and Hawk knows it. At times Fuller appears to toy with the younger man's affections, using him and controlling him in a kind of game that ultimately leads to Fuller's own sadness. I found this story both heartbreaking and uplifting, surely the most difficult combination for an author to pull off.

Set in the early fifties, the tale is full of the subterfuge and lying that gay life required in those bigoted times. Mallon draws us in and shows us the convoluted lives of gay men who worked in the federal government during the McCarthy era. Ultimately the twisted love story rises above the history lesson and *Fellow Travelers* shows us what it was like to be a gay man when the threat of blackmail and prejudice made all gay men targets. Is this a true portrait of the times? Who cares? It feels true and that is all one can hope for in a piece of historical fiction.

Elaine says

A Beautiful Story

A beautiful story. The story of two people, who can't love, who they want. In the 50's. I love the character Tim. So sweet, and kind. His life always and in second.

Scott says

A good book about an interesting time period for US history. The novel takes place during the McCarthy era and involves the coming of age of a young man who works on Capitol Hill.

This young man becomes involve with high power worker in Congress, Hawkins Fuller. They have to be careful of their affair due to the witch hunt on capitol hill for both gays and communists.

The history is a great addition to the plot, because there are times that you want to slep Tim, the main character. Ah, but youthful innocence is nice to reflect upon.

Al says

I once had a friend, a high school social studies teacher, who confided that he got all his history from historical fiction. I thought it a waste of time, having to suffer through enormous epic sagas when history in the hands of a great historian can be as dynamic as any fiction. However, Thomas Mallon's "Fellow Travelers" has made me rethink my position as maybe being too hastily dismissive. "Fellow Travelers" is historical fiction at its best, weaving the political events of Washington's "pink and lavender" witch hunt of the 1950's with a believable love story between a young Congressional aide and a older State Department career diplomat. You don't have to be an old-time Washingtonian to appreciate the brilliant period details, and you don't have to be gay to understand the looming tragedy in the relationship between Timothy Laughlin and Hawkins Fuller. To his credit, Mallon makes both men emotionally complex, especially Tim: "Timothy's blazing political belief matched, of course, the religious zeal, but to Fuller's mind neither had ever seemed to go with the simple freckled rest of him. He was like that Iowa schoolgirl Preminger had just picked to play Joan of Arc: no matter how hard she tried, once they released the picture you'd still be seeing a cornstalk instead of a burning stake." Highly recommended, especially if you are a political junkie.

Alistair says

This is an absorbing book about one of the most interesting periods in twentieth century America - the McCarthy era. You don't need to know a lot about the period to get the most out of this book, the author wears his research lightly. Into a cast of real historical figures, McCarthy himself, Roy Cohn, Nixon, Marron inserts two fictional ones; Hawkins Fuller, a state department official on the rise, suave, handsome and

teflon-coated; and Timothy Laughlin, a recent college graduate determined to lend his weight in the fight against Communism. Young Timothy falls for the charms of Fuller, and, in an era when being gay was almost as bad as being red, a convoluted relationship develops between the two. A fascinating look at the mores of fifties America, with an ending that left me with goosebumps.

Ray says

So ostensibly this is a novel about being gay in the 50's in McCarthy-era Washington, D.C. But really, I liked this book so much because it is about the sacrifice of self, and the willingness (or unwillingness) to be vulnerable required by love.

I won't go into a ton of detail on the plot, but at the surface-level it's your standard tale about two gay boys who are unable to realize their love and their relationship due to homophobia and social norms. It's also a part of another gay standard in which two gay boys are unable to realize their love because of inter-class struggles.

If you read enough gay fiction, you come across these troupes a lot, but what sets *Fellow Travelers* apart is a somewhat distanced and ironic perspective on these plot happenings, that allows the reader to assign other motives and gain more complex understandings of the characters' behaviors.

Which basically boils down to, yeah it was hard to be gay in politics in the 50's, but at the end of the day if your real issue is that you refuse to be vulnerable, and share your feelings, and be honest that you need affection and love, homophobia ends up just being window dressing to those more core issues (and I certainly understand that sustained homophobia can cause emotional withdraw, but just trust me, there was more than that in this book and that made it cool).

I like the character of Mary a lot, although I felt uneasy re: her believability at times. Many characters felt like they could have walked into this novel straight from one written by Gore Vidal, but Mary in particular.

One other note, it's always interesting/pathetic to read about gays in any era (and it certainly happens today, like with Larry Craig) who align them selves with radical anti-gay politics and basically live in a constant state of self-hate. In this case, it was the two main characters' involvement with Sen. McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and the Cold War in general.
