

David Bergman assembles the living VQ members

# The Violet Quill Club, 40 Years On

ANDREW HOLLERAN, FELICE PICANO, & EDMUND WHITE

**F**ORTY YEARS AGO, we did not have the Lambda Literary Foundation. We did not have The Gay & Lesbian Review. There were local newspapers and magazines, and The Advocate aspired to nationwide coverage, but the number of gay presses was minuscule (Alyson Publications started up in 1980). The major commercial publishers—Random House, Morrow, St. Martin’s, Viking—were reluctant to publish anything with gay content. In the past, publishers had been sued for selling pornography when the only sexual act might have been a chaste kiss between men. Perhaps more important was the problem of marketing. Big publishers didn’t know how to sell books to lesbians or gay men, and they doubted there was a big enough population of readers to make such books profitable.

To make up for this lack of support, gay and lesbian authors came quietly together to back each other up, to read or hear each others’ works, and to discuss specifically gay literary problems. The Violet Quill was one of these clubs, a mixture of gay male friends and lovers and enemies who came briefly together forty years ago—meeting from 1980 to ’81—to enjoy literary camaraderie. Among the issues the members discussed were how close should their fiction come to autobiography, how to indicate to a reader that the campy “she” is really a male, and how do you keep from confusing the reader when a love scene contains two “he” characters.

The Violet Quill would have been forgotten if it hadn’t brought together several of the most important gay literary figures of the period at the birth of a definable gay literature. In 1978, Andrew Holleran published *Dancer from the Dance* with William Morrow Publishers; Edmund White published *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* with St. Martin’s Press, and the following year Felice Picano published *The Lure* with Delacorte. All of these books made money (the Holleran and Picano books were bestsellers). At the same time, Larry Kramer, who was not invited to join the VQ, published *Faggots* with Random House, which sold a large number of copies. These success stories showed publishers that by bringing out gay-themed works they would not be dragged into court for obscenity and, of greater importance, they could make money.

The Violet Quill had seven members. Robert Ferro, whose novels are being republished now, is perhaps the most important of those I have yet to mention. His lover was Michael Grumley, who struggled to find his voice. George Whitmore was one of the first AIDS journalists and wrote a series of profiles for The New York Times, which were collected in *Someone Was Here*

(Penguin, 1988). Christopher Cox became an editor. By the middle of the 1990s, all but three of these writers had died of AIDS: Edmund White, Felice Picano, and Andrew Holleran.

I presented the surviving VQ members with a set of questions to get their thoughts on the VQ forty years later and its importance to subsequent gay literature. — D.B.

**David Bergman:** When you met as the Violet Quill, you were all at the beginnings of your careers. How did you see your future then as “gay writers”? How has it turned out?

**Edmund White:** I thought there would be more of a cross-over readership, as the Black novel or the Jewish novel achieved.

**Andrew Holleran:** I can only speak for myself about that. It was all so new, and happening in the moment, that I did not really know what was going on. I was actually a bit wary about joining a gay writers’ group: competitive, paranoid. But I remember going to a party where an older man who worked in publishing came up and told me that my book could never have been published in his day. The young are narcissistic, however, and I only had a mild appreciation of that fact. I was concerned about my own career, not my place in “history.” I think writers are like cats: solitary critters.

As for how it’s turned out, I think what Robert Ferro used to call “gay litter” has gone through several stages: the gay flowering, the opening up, followed by gay bookstores, gay sections in mainstream bookstores, and big advances for gay books—and then the publishers’ realization that this was not the big market they thought it might be (those huge advances given to writers on gay subjects that did not pan out)—and then the David Leavitt Period, the new generation who blended gay and straight characters (what Felice called “dickless lit”) and who did not want to be reduced to being “gay” writers, and then AIDS, which required gay writing to be about AIDS and nothing else, and then the closing of gay bookstores and the decline of gay men reading books because of all the new media, and then the consequent return of gay writers to publishing with small presses, small gay presses. So it has come full circle. I mean, it’s all ironic, and it’s all circular, don’t you think, over a long enough period of time? Eternal recurrence!

**Felice Picano:** I believe that Edmund rightfully had high literary ambitions and that fueled his very long and very difficult march toward his rightful place as an author. I suspect that Andrew was astonished by his easy early success, and it took him a while to get back on his feet, but he’s carved out a secure spot too. As for myself, I was trained as a visual artist, and for years after college I was unsuccessful in finding artistic or even commercial art jobs to support myself. I was always shunted into editorial or writing work. So, it was a surprise to me that people

David Bergman, poetry editor of this magazine, is the author of *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture* (2004).

liked my writing. I was untrained and had done little beyond school requirements. At first, I sold commercial books—some bestsellers—but my editors told me that they barely edited me. So, on the one hand I'm pleased, on the other I feel like someone who has been conspired against "for my own good." A 1960s TV show, *Laugh-In*, had a "Fickle Finger of Fate": it has been steadily pointed at me.

I keep telling myself that when I retire [from writing] I'll take up painting again, but I've learned to enjoy writing. To this day, no one else is writing the stories I want to read, so I'll keep doing them. I taught literature courses at Antioch University. When I was asked to teach writing, I had real reservations, but my workshops were popular and are missed now. However, I was horrified to discover that my "postmodern work" (like *The Book of Lies*) was an essay question in a final exam at an American Studies course at a British college.

**Bergman:** We now have a better idea of how many gay books had been published before the 1970s. But it is still unclear to me what sort of impact earlier gay writing had on the Violet Quill personally or collectively. Did Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Ronald Firbank, André Gide, Jean Genet, or Thomas Mann provide any guidance to you as writers or for your careers?

**Holleran:** Vidal, Capote, and Williams were certainly role models. I mean, they were obviously homosexual and had big careers and, in the case of Williams, seemed to have really gone to the core of the homosexual soul, if there is such a thing. But I never explicitly imitated them. But Thomas Mann, Williams, and Proust were probably the biggest influences, if that's the word.

**White:** The gay writer who inspired me the most was Christopher Isherwood, especially *A Single Man*. Of the others, Gore Vidal not at all, but Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* I read as a young teen, Gide I read in high school, Firbank in my twenties, and I devoted seven years of my life to Genet. Proust would be at the top of any list.

**Picano:** I did read most of those writers' work, and I attended Williams' plays—including the original *Night of the Iguana* on Broadway with Bette Davis! (I was twelve or thirteen.) But I never considered them "gay forebears." There were key books I found impressive. Thomas Mann was and remains a lodestone for me for other reasons. But 1963 saw John Rechy's *City of Night* and *A Single Man*, two books set twelve miles apart, which read as though they are from two different planets, neither one that familiar to me. I think what propelled me into the VQ was the crying need for stories about the "everyday" gay world that existed all around us, and in so many U.S. cities of the time.

**Bergman:** You three are the survivors of the group. How do you see the works of Robert Ferro, Michael Grumley, George Whitmore, and Chris Cox, both as part of your generation and as individual artists?

**White:** Robert Ferro was a serious, ambitious writer. Michael Grumley was the Cheever to Ferro's Roth. George Whitmore and Chris Cox were younger and died before they could make their mark.

**Holleran:** I just wrote an introduction to a reissue of Robert Ferro's *The Blue Star*, and Felice introduced *The Family of Max Desir*, and we're all glad to see interest in Robert continue. I

have not read much Michael Grumley or Chris Cox or even George Whitmore, to be honest. My fault.

**Picano:** I'm so glad that Robert's books are finally being republished via ReQueered Tales. Besides being almost a brother to me, Robert was a writer who really took seriously this whole writing thing and being a writer. I think Andrew will join me in this, that in comparison we've been playing at it, and it showed in the lasting quality of the work. But some of Michael's books deserve reprinting, even if they weren't particularly gay: *After Midnight* most prominently. Similarly, Chris Cox' stories are unique, and now that we have more Southern publishers, his work ought to be picked up and aired out. I'm wondering if George Whitmore's writings need that kind of champion. He was personally the most complex of the VQ members, as are his books, and he wrote memoir, nonfiction, poetry, plays, essays, and novels. None of it is currently available.

**Bergman:** After the VQ had helped to launch gay literature, there emerged writers like David Leavitt, Christopher Bram, Scott Heim, et al. How did you feel about this new generation? Were there any challenges they faced that you didn't?

**Holleran:** I suppose I resented them to some degree, their aversion to being placed in the gay literary ghetto, though I can't tar them all with that brush, and you could argue that they were right to resist being marginalized. It seemed to me that all that mattered was whether the books were any good—though in truth, some part of me was bothered by the assumption that if you had a few straight women in your *New Yorker* story standing with the homos around the pool in the Hamptons, that made it a mainstream story.

**White:** I respect all three. Beautiful writers. I met Leavitt in Paris and I was amazed by his sudden fame, especially in Italy and Holland, and felt eclipsed by him.

**Picano:** Although I like individual books by those writers (*Mysterious Skin* is getting attention again, and *Martin Bauman* was the Leavitt book I was waiting for), I've never specifically thought of them as "successors" to the Violet Quill. In 1977, I founded a gay publishing company, the SeaHorse Press. In 1981 I merged it with two other small publishers to form the Gay Presses of New York, which, despite the name, would eventually put out almost a hundred books by men and women from across the country and from the U.K. and France. SeaHorse published younger writers that I felt were important then: Dennis Cooper, Brad Gooch, Robert Glück, Kevin Killian, et al., what many people refer to as the San Francisco Writers or the Language Writers. They all did well.



Felice Picano, Edmund White, and Andrew Holleran in 2011.

**Bergman:** You have lived through the changes of “homosexual” to “gay” to “queer” to “nonbinary,” as well as the emergence of the concept of “heteronormativity.” What do you make of these changes? Have they affected your work?

**Holleran:** We are all limited by our belonging to a certain generation, to have grown up at a certain time. Maybe that’s why I find the nonbinary so hard to grasp. But, of course, one cannot argue with a younger generation to whom those issues are central. It’s their world, their subject.

**White:** Maybe the move to “queer” was liberating for me and permitted me to write more about heterosexuals from my own perspective.

**Picano:** In the past I’ve made a distinction between the “homosexual” writers up through the 1960s, and we seven in the VQ and others, too, who began in the 1970s. I felt we were different—“gay,” i.e. openly accepting of our sexual lives and proud of it. Last year I appeared at many 50th Stonewall celebration events and I was always described as a “gay activist and writer.” If others want to use other terminology for themselves, that’s fine with me.

**Bergman:** A figure like André Aciman, a straight man writing about gay men and boys, would have been impossible forty years ago. What do you make of this opening up of gay subject matter? What does it mean to be “a gay writer” today?

**Holleran:** Aciman is a very interesting case—the married straight man who makes his subject matter the bisexual, the closeted or out gay person. I don’t know the answer. It’s like the book Alice Hoffman published [*At Risk*] about a young girl with HIV during the AIDS years, which was resented in some quarters because she seemed to be trying—though we hadn’t the term then—to “appropriate” gay experience. Of course, any writer can write about anything he or she wants to. But yes, to be honest, at the time one felt to some degree that they were poachers.

**Picano:** Several years back, straight women were writing gay novels and being praised for it and selling well. At a panel I complained about it and a furious Dorothy Allison said: “Women can write whatever they damn well please!” So, I guess, can men. To me they don’t feel authentic, and when the film of *Call Me By Your Name*—a puerile concept—came out, I wrote “I would watch Armie Hammer read the telephone book on screen all day. But this film about an over-privileged white adolescent’s crush made me gag.” But a lot of gay men loved it. That’s popular writing for you!

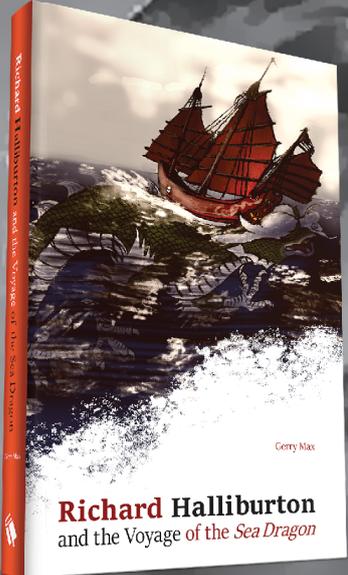
**White:** The more the merrier, I say. After all, Iris Murdoch often wrote wonderfully of gay characters.

**Bergman:** Finally, you all have kept writing, and that usually means that you feel you haven’t said all that you want to say. What do you want to do next?

**Holleran:** Another book, though the problem does come down to: what *is* it that one wants to say?

**White:** I’m working on a novel about polyamorous love, which seems to me the coming thing.

**Picano:** Over the past decade while publishing nonfiction, I’ve worked on novels with characters in our shared past who are “differently sexual.” *Pursuit: A Victorian Entertainment* is set in England and Europe of the 1880s and will be published in Spring 2021.



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