

# STYLE



Randall Slavin

By *Antonia Richmond*  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

**W**e can thank Mary Ann Singleton and Michael Tolliver, Carrie Bradshaw and Stanford Blatch, and Grace Adler and Will Truman for paving the way to the recognition of straight woman/gay man relationships, but as far as these literary and television characters have come, it's still difficult to avoid certain clichés: gay man as fashion adviser, sex educator and brunch buddy. Straight woman as nurturing caretaker, neurotic urbanite and insecure improvement project. And of course, the inevitable falling out when someone gets a boyfriend.

Though these stereotypes have a basis in reality, what's been missing from popular culture thus far is a deeper look into the complexity and varieties of straight woman/gay

## Un-fatal attractions

A new book of essays explores the unique bond between gay guys and the straight women who absolutely adore them

man relationships in the real world. For Melissa de la Cruz and Tom Dolby, editors of the just-published anthology "Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys: True Tales of Love, Lust, and Friendship Between Straight Women and Gay Men" (Dutton, 2007), both their friendship and a desire to break through some of the clichés inspired them to solicit 28 personal essays on the topic.

"'Will and Grace' and 'Sex and the City' very much paved the way for this book in terms of recognition ... but these relationships go so much further than that," says Dolby, a New York writer whose second novel, "The Sixth Form," will be published in January. "We haven't had any really strong cultural representations of gay parenting, for example. There are so many different varieties of this dynamic ... we have a few stories that

**Melissa de la Cruz and Tom Dolby** were inspired by their own friendship to put together the anthology.

## Collection of 28 essays moves beyond clichés

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are about shopping and fun and cocktails, but the really good material was deeper and richer than that. We wanted to show the darker side of it, too. There are breakups that are sometimes just as devastating as a romantic relationship breakup.”

De la Cruz agrees. “We wanted to show the messier side of things,” says the writer. “I remember seeing [the film] ‘Object of My Affection’ and feeling a little cheated because it was such a superficial treatment of something really deep.”

As is often the case, art also imitated life. After returning from a trip to Lake Tahoe with Dolby, de la Cruz, who also grew up in Northern California, albeit from a less privileged background than Dolby -- her family ran the employee cafeteria at Sears in San Bruno -- found herself reflecting on their friendship. “I had just gone through a miscarriage, and it was so wonderful to have this friend who was so supportive of me,” says the author of the best-selling young adult novel series “Au Pairs,” who now lives in Los Angeles with her husband and daughter.

“I couldn’t have gone through it without him. When we got back from the trip, I was in a bookstore and saw the anthology ‘The Friend Who Got Away,’ and I started thinking about our friendship. And then, ‘Why don’t we do a book about straight women and gay men?’”

The anthology explores the many different ways in which the straight woman/gay man dynamic is unique. From Barney’s creative director Simon Doonan’s ode to fashion-loving ladies, to “Starter Wife” author Gigi Levangie Grazer’s elegy to her favorite waiter, to theater director Philip Humberg’s moving story of his high school girlfriend, who is now the mother of his child, both genders are given equal space to examine the significance of their relationships.

The duo made cold calls and solicited friends and friends of friends to get stories. The response was overwhelming: “bestselling writers who get asked [to contribute to anthologies] all the time and say no got really excited about it,” says Dolby, whose father, Ray, is the founder and chairman of Dolby Laboratories and whose mother,



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**At a book party,** Tom Dolby signs a copy of his book, above, as his mother, Dagmar Dolby, and K.M. Soehnlein look on. At left, Ray Dolby (left) chats with Nancy Bechtle, while Christopher Turner (center left) listens to his partner, Armistead Maupin.

Dagmar, is prominent on the San Francisco social and political scene, particularly as an advocate for the National Abortion Rights Action League.

The enthusiasm of the contributors is evident; Doonan’s hilarious essay, “Fag Hags: The Laughter, The Tears, The Marabou,” helps set the tone.

“Maxine, Eve, Pamela, Jeanine, Hattie!” he writes. “Where are you now? Where are the great fag hags of yore? And why did they disappear? Like 8-track cassettes and princess phones and Idi Amin, the fag hag, as I knew her, is a thing of the past. She’s an obsolete concept. An extinct species. She’s very last century, dahling. Haggus fagulous, ceased roaming the earth about a quarter of a century ago. The 1970s was, in fact, the golden age of the fag hag. I know I was fag to many a hag.”

Local writer K.M. Soehnlein, author of the Lambda Award-winning “The World of

Normal Boys,” also loved the idea and was eager to contribute. “It was great to get beyond the clichés and to make a collective portrait of these relationships. It was an opportunity to think about my friendships with women and what makes them dear and special to me.” Soehnlein’s piece, “The Collectors,” is an exploration of the women he has collected in his life and how they, in turn, have collected gay men.

“Love and Other Impossible Pursuits” author Ayelet Waldman got involved “because I love Tom,” and also to respond to the flap that arose in 2005 after she published a piece (“You’re Supposed to Marry the Person You Love, Mom”) on Salon.com, in which she wished her son would grow up to be gay.

“A lot of people were horrified that I wished this life on a child,” Waldman said with an air of disbelief. “It’s one thing for ignorant heterosexuals to say that, but for homosexuals to say it was sad. In a truly progressive

society we would make fun of stereotypes and not be so wedded to them.”

So does her new essay, “Darling I Like You That Way,” in which she defends her wish for a gay son, offer a less controversial take on the subject? “I never expect controversy.” Waldman laughs. “If I did, I’d probably be better at avoiding it.”

In addition to editing, both de la Cruz and Dolby (who grew up in San Francisco, on the “straight side” of the gay/straight cultural divide) contributed their own stories. “A Manhattan Love Story” is de la Cruz’s paean to the intensely intimate relationship she had during and post-college with her gay friend, Morgan; “Future Perfect,” is a

droll recounting of Dolby’s adventures with a Boca Raton psychic whom he thought would help him with his troubled love life. (Spoiler alert: Dolby eventually did find his perfect match, but not when the psychic said he would.)

“Girls Who Like Boys Who Like Boys” is ultimately a “counterpoint to the cliches that popular culture has already codified about gay men and the women in their lives. [It reminds] us once again that neither gender nor sexuality can ever fully dictate the tenants of our hearts,” writes Armistead Maupin, whose “Tales of the City,” launched in *The Chronicle* in 1976, made him the literary pioneer of the straight woman/gay man relationship. It affirms what gay men and

the women who love them have known for decades: that they have a bond unlike any other.

“Straight women and gay men seek each other out because they are natural allies ... they have both been marginalized,” says de la Cruz. “They understand each other, without the sexual tension. Now that I’m older I appreciate my female friendships, too ... but when I was younger, those relationships were really competitive.” Dolby puts it this way: “You know how men are from Mars and women are from Venus? Maybe gay men are from Venus some of the time, too.”

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