

# Leather *Dolce Vita*, Pop Culture, & the Prime of Mr. Larry Townsend

Written by Jack Fritscher during October 1996 and published as the “Introduction” to *The Leatherman’s Handbook Silver Anniversary Edition* written by Larry Townsend, 1997; first edition of *The Leatherman’s Handbook*, 1972.

- I. Author’s Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written December 12, 1999
- II. The introductory essay as published in Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman’s Handbook 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, Los Angeles: LT Publications, 1997
- III. Eyewitness Illustrations

## I. Author’s Eyewitness Historical-Context Introduction written December 12, 1999

If *Drummer* had not been dysfunctional all during 1997 and 1998 as it fell to its collapse this year with its last issue in April 1999, this historical essay about Larry Townsend, which was offered to the editors, might have been printed in *Drummer* in whole or in part.

Larry Townsend deserved this kind of full attention from *Drummer*. In 1972-1975, he had been a part of the group founding the LA newsletter, *H.E.L.P./Drummer*, which evolved into *Drummer* itself. (H.E.L.P. is the acronym for “Homophile Effort for Legal Protection.”)

Author Townsend and publisher Embry, however, had certain disagreements, and Townsend kept his work out of *Drummer* for the first five years because, Townsend told me, he knew he’d “never be paid.” There was little love lost between Townsend and Embry. They were both the same LA vintage; and they were both autocrat tycoons of mail order. Because they had similar post office-box addresses, Townsend told me that some customers thought they were the same mail-order company, and he grew tired of explaining to some of the disgruntled that they should complain to Embry because their business was with Embry.

And there was an eat-shit-and-die in LA moment.

Excerpt source: © [Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008

In the first and only book review in the first issue of *Drummer* (June 1975), Embry—not loathe to use columnists as hand puppets—trashed Townsend’s book, *Chains*. Reviewer “Cam Phillips” wrote: “the author [was] obviously confused”; “dull sex scenes”; “Townsend is not a ‘good’ writer in the sense that Christopher Isherwood and John Rechy are ‘good’ writers”; “he is weakest when dealing with his characters outside of the bedroom, or when he makes them open their mouths for anything other than sexual purposes”; and the cover which Townsend designed “promises an extremely heavy sexual book, but this is definitely not the case.” (*Drummer* 1, page 13).

It was only in 1980 when mutual need caused the two strange bedfellows to kiss and make up. Embry, having alienated nearly all the talent base from the 1970s, needed his pages filled every thirty days, and Townsend needed a national platform to keep his name bill-boarded monthly to sell his novels mail order. Thus his advice column titled “Leather Notebook,” written in trade for free advertising, became a regular *Drummer* feature from 1980 to 1992. This was a suitable fit because Townsend’s 1972 *Leatherman’s Handbook* had early on helped invent and form the “how-to” aspects of early 1970s leather behavior which he then popularized in mid-1980s *Drummer*. He was a leatherman whose vaunted top role in S&M propped up his credentials as writer. Larry has reminiscenced to me about his photo-studio dungeon where many a bound-and-gagged slave experienced S&M sessions feeling Larry’s greatest “hits” while his stereo speakers boomed out tapes of the ominous, fervent hammer blows of Mahler’s *Sixth* as well as his dark, terminal *Ninth*.

During my tenure as editor in chief of *Drummer* in the 1970s, I had concentrated on 1) gay literary quality in feature essays and fiction and drama, 2) the reflexive *verite* of gay pop culture as lived by the actual readers, and 3) themes of homomascularity and wild sex.

I was all about 1970s sex vets: “Do It!”

Not about 1980s tyros: “How do I do it?”

In the 1970s, everyone seemed to know how.

Townsend is a clever man; he knew how to change with the times.

With the end of the Titanic 70s, and the rise of the HIV 80s, *Drummer* moved with the times to transpositions of 1970s sexuality into 1980s sociality: 1) practical columns, such as “Leather Notebook,” on how to run a safe-sex and a consensual S&M scene; 2) in-house promotion photo spreads and centerfolds that focused on *Drummer* contest winners; and 3) an excessive interest in commercial videos as the dumbed-down mentality of television—via the Trojan Horse of the VCR—began to saturate written gay magazine culture—including *Drummer* itself—which video and the Internet eventually destroyed.

(Historically, with the rise of video, both mail-order moguls, Townsend and Embry, were busy selling the hundred *Drummer*-style video features I directed and filmed for my own company, Palm Drive Video, which was showcased on *Drummer* covers and in centerfolds and monthly advertising. In a scalene triangle, we three seemed inextricably bound together by the gay mail order central to keeping *Drummer* alive.)

All generations of *Drummer* were valid. All issues of *Drummer* were valid. All the talent writing and creating *Drummer* was valid. That doesn't mean they were all equal as art, literature, erotica, and entertainment.

As much as the early *avant-garde Drummer* shaped the golden-age times of leatherfolk; the HIV-VCR times shaped *retro-garde Drummer*.

Riding these vicissitudes like the leatherman he is, my longtime friend, Larry Townsend, has done the most amazing act of gay survival: in a GLBT publishing culture famous for its flakiness, thievery, and out-right human cruelty, he has remained functional, and his more than fifty productive years of non-stop writing are testament to his dedication to leather homosexuality and its popular vernacular literature.

Is there an award for that?

I'll create one here and now.

If anyone should be an "Honorary Mr. *Drummer*," it's "the Larry"; it's "the Townsend."

After Embry sold *Drummer* in 1986, author Townsend and publisher Embry parted ways.

Townsend's column continued on in *Drummer* under AIDS-era publisher Tony DeBlase until 1992 when Townsend switched his monthly column to Embry's longtime *bete noire*, *Honcho* magazine.

---

On March 4, 2006, the legendary Larry Townsend gave me permission to be the first journalist to print the following personal biographical information including the year of his birth: 1930. Of Swiss-German extraction, he served in the U. S. Air Force (1950-1954) as Staff Sergeant in charge of NCOIC Operations of Air Intelligence Squadrons in Germany. In 1957, he graduated UCLA with a B. A. in psychology, and has a PhD thesis pending at California State University, Los Angeles. He began his pioneering work in the politics of gay liberation in the early 1960s.

**II. The "Introduction" essay written by Jack Fritscher as published in Larry Townsend, *The Leatherman's Handbook 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*, Los Angeles: LT Publications, 1997**

**Introduction: *The Leatherman's Handbook*****The Controversial Best Seller****Leather *Dolce Vita*, Pop Culture,  
& the Prime of Mr. Larry Townsend**

When principles collide with issues, principles win. *The Declaration of Independence* survives because it is a document of principle, not a document of issues current in 1776. Principle clarifies issues. Civil rights is a principle. Gay rights is an issue. Pursuit of issues *per se* causes political myopia. Abortion, suicide, and same-sex marriage are hot-button issues solved by the cool-button principle of free choice.

Give a person an issue and he will eat fire for a day; give a man a principle and he may think clearly for a lifetime. It takes common sense to raise a village. Common sense is precisely what professionally trained psychologist Larry Townsend offered the emerging world of leathermen in his original *Leatherman's Handbook*, 1972.

**CONCEPT, CONQUERORS, & CAPTIVES**

*New Leather*, as ancient as Eden when Lucifer pulled on a snake skin, presented the young Larry Townsend the same self-defining task Adam had in the Garden: naming nameless things. Leather is twice the love that had dare not speak its name, and an out-of-the-closet vocabulary had to be invented. *Leather* itself is a code word for domination and submission in the human condition. The Greeks and Romans often made names *pars pro toto* where part of something identified the whole—as in calling a man a “dick.” So the word *leather* has come to symbolize more than its literal meaning which is skin, *toughened* skin.

*Leather*, as a concept, raises from the mists of pre-history, archetypes of conquerors and captives, masters and slaves, in literal and existential tableaux of sublime power and of human bondage. With the fall of barbarism and feudalism, and with the rise of enlightenment and democracy, humans evolved toward self-consciousness. Ask Freud. Ask Jung. Yet the psyche of many, even in this millennial new age of equality where no one is unworthy, remembers and requires the ancient rituals of the human past.

What scenes there be in ancient Greek theater—Ask Euripides—or in modern leather bars and postmodern leather play rooms, date back—whether or not the players acknowledge it—to the moment Eden

**Excerpt source: ©Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness*  
Drummer, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008**

fell and the knowledge of top and bottom entered the world: reciprocal concepts of power and no-power. That's why "Original Recipe Leather," the post WWII biker gangs, had power-structure names like "Hell's Angels" or "Satan's Slaves."

The universal human condition is masochism.

Ask Aquinas, Boccaccio, Dante, and Milton. Ask Annie Lennox. Everybody's a misbehaving bottom looking for a top: sexual, political, theological, whatever. To paraphrase Monty Python's virtually Shakespearean take on what exactly is the distinguishing power of Topness in *The Holy Grail*: "You can tell the kings from the common people, because the kings are the ones not covered in shit." Even in the world of recreational sex, bottoms search for tops with their vernacular shit together so the top can, in all the coded roles of Master/Coach/Cop/Dad/DI/Trainer, work/beat the shit out of the bottom: get the bottom's shit/act together; and basically save/transfigure the bottom (who loves his passive-aggressive addiction to bottomness because he gets to be "bad" and exert his will on the top) from the graceless impotence of his unworthy self.

*Leather* as a playground perches on the cusp of human psychology. Ask De Sade. Ask Masoch. Ask Larry. By the time of the rip-roaring counter-culture of the 1960s, the specific word *leather*, transcending literal meaning as clothing, surfaced from the underground subculture redefined to mean a specific psycho-drama sex-style.

*Leather*, along with 60s peace, love, sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, arrived linguistically to name a way of being and becoming, of ritualizing and actualizing, of creation and recreation, of politicizing and marketing. Participant gonzo journalist, Larry Townsend, as both a psychologist and a leatherman, reported the debut as *Leather* stamped out of the closet.

## WARHOL, FOUCAULT, FETISH, & THE WORD MADE FLESH

Leather exploded into pop culture with the dark glamour of Hollywood, the Hell's Angels, and Andy Warhol's *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* featuring the Velvet Underground with Lou Reed singing, "Shiny Boots of Leather." At the same time, June 26, 1964, *Life* magazine, always breathlessly "Roman Catholic" about sadomasochism, featured a two-page worldwide alert on the Tool Box, not the first, but the first famous leather bar.

Compared to the Bimbeau Limbo of vanilla gay bars, the Leather Bar promised masculinity, the kind of masculine identification that has always lured homosexual men: straight, or straight-acting. Note that this Leather Declaration of Independence in *Life* was a full five years, almost to the day, before Stonewall: June 26, 1964, to June 29, 1969. Ask Abbott.

Ask Costello. Leather—barbaric, medieval, industrial—is from cow to linguistics, in truth, “the flesh become word.”

Leather is the conjure amulet, the lo-tech talisman, the fetish to which a certain erotic drive attaches itself and through which a certain erotic desire commands its visible incarnation.

The word becomes flesh, and leather moves to a photographer’s studio in New York, a doctor’s office in San Francisco, or a bodybuilder’s gym in Venice Beach. Literal leather skin, by the time leather moved to the typewriter of Larry Townsend, had become a psychologist’s dream of a symbol for an outlaw lifestyle few wanted to acknowledge. Ask John Rechy.

In the mid-1960s, Larry Townsend was politically active in Los Angeles, the pop culture capital of the world where he was well aware of the leather culture popping up across the nation. By 1969, he was circulating his famous samizdat mimeographed sadomasochistic questionnaire through the circuit of leathermen. I dubbed it “The Leather List.”

Townsend’s was the job of the good reporter scouting the latest news of the newest liberation front during an astounding period in American culture. Remember, with the civil rights movement marrying the peace movement, the five years of war from the Summer of Love in 1967 to 1972 (when *The Leatherman’s Handbook* was published), were the most rebellious civic episode in the U.S. twentieth century.

In November 1970, the world’s premiere leather/uniform writer, Yukio Mishima, author of the must-read disciplinary *Sun and Steel*, accomplished the ultimate homomasculine S&M suicide-execution that rocked the literary world and freaked the gay leather culture.

Larry became absolutely necessary to arbitrate how leather was to behave this side of death. Twenty years later, in the 1980s, it fell to that freaky visitor to Folsom Street, the irrepressible French philosopher Foucault, “The S&M Poster Boy,” to probe the human psyche far deeper. Foucault twisted S&M leather recreational sex into existential endgame about power.

But it was Larry Townsend who, “beating Foucault,” introduced *Leather Vocabulary 101*. As a journalist he used his ear as a novelist to hear the voice of emerging leather and suggest certain standards of courtesy and behavior. He didn’t invent codes of leather behavior; he searched at the grass roots level and introduced the leather underground to itself. Ask leather author William Carney.

Like everything else in life, leather takes time to come to conclusions about itself.

*The Leatherman’s Handbook* was one of the first analytical mirrors held up to the masculine homosexual face.

Leather liberated masculine love from the depressive drag stereotype.

Townsend helped define masculine-identified homosexuality in terms of the pop psychology that is the guywire of our media consciousness of self. Leather is a sock-to-the-jaw statement that, contrary to the straight stereotype, gay men are not *faux* females driven to dresses. Just as female drag had once been the town queer's way of signaling blowjobs to sailors, suddenly drag divided and alternated; and leather became the new semaphore advertising a new, open man-to-man sex encounter.

Leather was a welcome way out of the closet for masculine men who in larger numbers than anyone ever suspected thanked the gods that the New Leather Culture allowed them to do their Father's Act rather than their Mother's Act, and in doing their Father's Act to excel beyond the father.

The sign on the ceiling of the Tool Box said, "No Tennis Shoes," which nixed limp wrists, fluffy sweaters, and the passe code slang of the "Friends of Dorothy."

#### SAME WAVE-LENGTH, SAME TURF: 6 DEGREES OF LEATHER

Nothing happens in a vacuum. So parallel is the leather universe, that, in 1971, the year before the publication of *The Leatherman's Handbook*, I had no idea that "The Leather List" was anything but just another samizdat folk document circulated as jerk-off material, but informational enough that I quoted the anonymous questionnaire as a grass-roots source in my own nonfiction book, *Popular Witchcraft: Straight From the Witch's Mouth*, published at the same time as Larry's *Leatherman's Handbook* (1972).

This *Popular Witchcraft* was the first modern uncloseting, analysis, and mix of homosexuality, leather, and satanism.

In my own participatory research, I connected samples of 1960s leather-heritage DNA: Satanic S&M Black Masses in Greenwich Village, gay conjure-magic at Fe-Be's bar in San Francisco, and the rituals of the gay S&M coven called "The Order of the Sixth Martyr" in LA. I included quotes from William Carney's book, *The Real Thing* (1968), because Carney codified how-to-do and how-to-live the leather lifestyle. I've often thought that pioneer Carney in 1968 inspired pioneer Larry Townsend to begin his S&M survey published four years later. All of us participated in the same *zeitgeist*. Leather was "happening." [Author's note: Without knowing one another, several *Drummer* types were pursuing the same analysis of leather on a tight timeline: Carney's *The Real*

*Thing* (1968); my novel, *I Am Curious (Leather)* (1968) with my nonfiction book of interviews, *Popular Witchcraft* (1972); Sam Steward's *When in Rome Do* (1971); Townsend's *The Leatherman's Handbook* (1972); and Anne Rice, who in those years was sitting in the Castro writing *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) while I was sitting in the Castro writing *Popular Witchcraft* (1972).]

Larry was a fellow working-journalist in the midst of an extraordinary tribe of leatherfolk featuring a convergence of hands-on and heads-up “mediums” through whom leather homomascularity articulated its modern self—to the continuing scorn, prejudice, and hatred from brain-washed homosexuals self-hating their own masculinity. That said, the seeming spontaneous outbreaks of gay culture in the 1960s were of major significance to academic models within the newly founded American Popular Culture Association where, generally, feminism is accepted and masculinism rejected.

#### IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE THE VILLAGE PEOPLE

Twenty-first-century leathermen might start highlighting their ancestral roots here. For instance, contemporary with Larry's research, underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger had been opening up cinema with his Cocteau-rooted leather classic, *Scorpio Rising* (1964) and its sequel *Lucifer Rising*, the print of which disappeared in the 1970s and, while reported to have been kept by Bobby Beausoleil of the Manson Family, was actually hidden for a time at the Berkeley home of *Drummer* author Sam Steward (friend of Gertrude and Alice), who wrote 1960s leather novels and stories under the pseudonym “Phil Andros.” (Steward swore to me he had the film print at one time. Beausoleil, who remains in prison, denies ever taking *Lucifer Rising*.)

Auteur William Carney's daring 1968 epistolary novel, *The Real Thing*, brought the leather novel into serious hard cover and out of the leathery sweatshops of Evergreen Press to which Larry had sold *Run, Little Leather Boy*, and to which I would not sell for \$100 my 1968 Chicago and Inferno leather novel, *I Am Curious (Leather)* aka *Leather Blues*.

In the nonverbal context of the Emergent Leather times, Chuck Arnett was painting Rorschach inkblot images of leathermen on the Lascaux walls of the Tool Box in San Francisco as Dom/Etienne had painted leather murals on the wall of the Gold Coast leather bar. In Chicago, Chuck Renslow, entrepreneur of the Gold Coast, had since the early 1950s run the manly and leathery Kris Photo Studio which featured seductively ominous photographs of muscular Polish-Catholic working-men culled from the streets and the Triumph gym Renslow managed. In this way,

**Excerpt source: ©Jack Fritscher, [Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness Drummer, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008](#)**

Renslow's ACLU-defended photography conditioned emerging gay men with a laser-straight masculinity that became archetypal totem and fetish for leathermen.

At the rear of the Gold Coast, leather pioneers, Bob Maddox and his lover Target Model Frank Goley, created Chicago's first leather shop, Male Hide Leathers. Few neo-leather historians remember that Illinois, where I grew up, was the first state to legalize homosexuality in 1961. Two years earlier, the Gold Coast leather bar had opened its doors. Thus freed up, Chicago leather society, inspired by photographer Renslow's Kris standard of masculinity, led the charge of the Leather Liberation Brigade.

Renslow's Chicago crew was as pivotal to the creation of the American leather archetype as was the early cartooning of the fine artist Tom of Finland, who was introduced to the United States by Bob Mizer via his LA-based *Physique Pictorial* magazine in 1957.

Bob Mizer with his Athletic Model Guild (AMG Studios 1945-1989) presented a rough-trade hustler version of straight tough young men that predated Renslow, matched the police-harassed Bruce of LA (without whom there'd be no Bruce Weber/Calvin Klein images), and inspired in 1970, out of the Guild Press, the genius photographer David "Old Reliable" Hurler with his S&M-tweaked delinquents. Associated with Chicago leather, centered at that time at Renslow's "Black Castle" house was the macho ballet star Dom Orejudos who was the leather S&M artist aka Etienne/Stephen, as well as the cop-lover, writer Sam Steward aka Phil Andros aka Phil Sparrow who had taught Chicago's ink-maven Cliff Raven how to tattoo leathermen. The "Leather List" questionnaire, circulating through the players in Chicago leather, was filled out and mailed to Los Angeles—that is, to Larry Townsend who collected them up, collated, tabulated, and made hay out of them.

In New York, photographer Jim French aka the artist Luger aka Rip Colt, co-founder of Colt Studio's Leather-Lite Look, in the late 60s split to the muscle beaches of California. His Colt partner, Lou Thomas, stayed with the New York Leather-Serious Look in developing his classic Target Studio and the Anvil Leather Bar with leathermen Frank Olson and super-top, the legendary Don Morrison, my longtime pal (1969-1975), who tutored and tortured only the *creme de leather*. Early on, I had the good fortune to model for Target and spent five years associating with Lou Thomas and his "take" on leather, before becoming bicoastal lover of Robert Mapplethorpe who in the early 1970s was collaging photographs of leathermen into high concept art that bloomed up and out of the gay ghetto and brought leather into the art world's mainstream. Manhattan "straight" magazine artist-illustrator, Steve Masters, imagining

muscular leathermen in painterly drawings killed himself when his wife found out about his second career. Masculine image input came from everywhere, and Larry's "Leather List" was read, re-typed, and mailed from Manhattan to Los Angeles.

In San Francisco, Harvey Milk opened a vanilla photo shop to compete with photographer Walt Jebe's leather-identified camera store on 19th Street in the Castro. In 1970, my lover of ten years, David Sparrow, and I posed duo for Jebe's leather photo magazine, *Whipcrack*, which predated *Drummer* by five years and provided a few more early gay images for the emerging leather analysts like Townsend and artists like Domino and Bill Ward. So it was that the leather cadre in Chicago and Manhattan gene-spliced the commercial leather genesis that was simultaneously combusting like wildfire in San Francisco and Los Angeles where Larry Townsend was busy working the leather pop-culture scene on the leather-bar and bike-run circuit at venues like the Black Pipe, Griff's, and Larry's (no relation to Townsend), with leather superstars like the respected British movie actor Peter Bromilow (*Camelot*, *The Railway Children*). Even in San Francisco and LA, curious leathermen filled out Larry's leather questionnaire and mailed it to Los Angeles.

#### LUST IN THE LEATHERAMA

Did the Roman Empire have gladiator bars? Ask Aaron Travis. Ask Steven Saylor. The original gay leather bar was an Italian-American invention inspired by the leather world's nicely capitalistic drive to make money. Ask the Mafia. Gay liberation, originally and in fact, was successfully and openly driven by gay capitalism much to the later chagrin of a successive generation of lesbian gay Marxists with a taste for tuna casserole "fund-raisers" because they quit their day jobs. Sex, a recession-proof industry, always drives money. And vice versa. The Leather Bar had to be invented or all of us *etwas neues* leathermen — always seeking "something new" — would have been like Marlon Brando in the Ur-Leather movie, *The Wild One*, a biker *sans* biker bar. Sexmeister Tony Tavarossi (d. July 12, 1981) designed the basic leather bar as the 1950s became the 1960s: first in New York and then at the Why Not in San Francisco. The original decor has never needed improvement: black paint + red bulb = leather bar.

In Manhattan, leather begot Keller's and the Anvil where Jerry Torres, the star of the Maysles film documentary, *Grey Gardens*, took Jackie Kennedy Onassis.

Following faster than a speed trip was the very leather-identified club the Mineshaft, managed tongue-in-cheek by stand-up impresario Wally Wallace who in the 90s runs the Lure, another leather S&M venue

connected to the premiere leather artist, Rex, who is Tom of Finland's Evil Twin.

Larry Townsend's *Leatherman's Handbook* was combination etiquette book and *Boy Scout Handbook* for the Mineshaft's epic nights of beautiful people where early motorcycle-inspired leather recombined its functional concept as riding gear to include the farthest reaches of drug-driven S&M. To time-trip back to the sexual decor at the time of publication of *The Leatherman's Handbook*, throw onto a video monitor a copy of the William Friedkin film, *Cruising* (1980) which features actual leathermen of the 1970s period playing "atmosphere people." *Cruising* has always been controversial, because it's like the *X-Files* of being gay.

LEATHER, SEX, & GENDER:  
DON'T LET THIS HAPPEN TO YOU

Everything rising out of the closets converged. Larry Townsend, a networked part of all he met, was well focused. He examined exactly how leather was kicking out from all the heretofore closeted places (military, prison, industry) where men enjoyed covert masculine contact that was very physical, very rough, and often very erotic, but not always sexual, and not ever female.

One can most assuredly agree with my pal Camille Paglia who says even homosexual men must observe women; but one can also agree with Katharine Hepburn who advised no more than, "Men and women should live next door and visit each other once in a while."

In 1964, Kenneth Marlowe had written a shocking non-fiction best seller titled *Mr. Madam*. Mr. Marlowe's virtual *Queen's Handbook* rather demanded the balance Mr. Townsend introduced in *The Leatherman's Handbook*.

Reference to gender of all kinds is suggested only to inform those "seeking offense" where no slight is meant, that at the start, in his initial field research, and laser-true even on its 25th anniversary, Townsend targeted a man's leather *Handbook* to a demographic of masculine-identified men before leather women and female bodybuilders were invented in American pop culture. While diverse others have read, enjoyed, and learned the basic leather tropes from the *Handbook*, the author's specific subject is homomascularity and his operative audience is gay males.

Over the years, many women as well as many other-than-gay men, have quoted Townsend's man's *Handbook* as a leather primer, a clarificatory introduction into their own legitimate versions of leather culture. Hopefully, the diversity of all others who are not gay males—and who doesn't believe in women and female-identified homosexuals writing

about and for women and female-identified homosexuals—will not hold a grudge ever in print or in their hearts against one of the earliest historic, agenda-free documents written by a man about men and for men.

### THE CAUTIONER'S TALE

*The Leatherman's Handbook*, chock full of sexual entertainment and literary license to illustrate the wide psychology of leather, merits, by entertainment value, at least, status with Chaucer's travelers' handbook, *The Canterbury Tales*. Like New Journalist Hunter Thompson, author of *The Hell's Angels*, journalist-player Larry Townsend, the right reporter in the right place at the right time, did not invent leather culture, but he definitely caught the wave of a movement co-created by quite a few players, writers, photographers, and entrepreneurs who themselves were and are active and deeply established S&M leather masters and slaves whose influential names may not be known to a fresh new leatherboy who just fell off the turnip truck crossing the rough rails of the Millennium.

Masculine-identified leather artists of the visual, articulated by all the masculine-identified leather voices writing—including Townsend in 1972, helped motivate, and received validation in prompting, the American Psychiatric Association's removing homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders in 1974. This victory is a red-letter day in the black-and-blue History of Homosexuality.

The groundbreaking 1972 publication of Larry Townsend's *Leatherman's Handbook* is as remarkable a construct as Stonewall itself, because it was a declaration of independence for "anatomically correct" homosexuality. Ask Martin Duberman. By June, 1976, Larry, with Robert Opel, reported the first leatherman's wedding and gay marriage between Tom Bertman and Fred Schultz at Griff's leather bar in LA. Townsend has always been a liberal voice advising common sense and progressive caution.

### CREATING THE LEATHER GENRE

Larry, while writing his *Handbook*, which is more "etiquette book" and "encyclopedia" than "manifesto," was a celebrated political activist in Los Angeles with the Homophile Effort for Legal Protection, Inc., or H.E.L.P. This organization, lightly inspired by Henry David Thoreau, originated the newsprint paper, *H.E.L.P./Drummer*, in 1972. Larry Townsend was president of H.E.L.P. and his name appeared on the masthead of this "pre"-*Drummer* tabloid. At this early date, a major news article in

*H.E.L.P./Drummer*, “We Weren’t Born Yesterday,” featured a 1971 Symposium on the importance of “preserving our considerable gay history.”

Book reviews showcased Larry Townsend’s *Run, Little Leather Boy*, its sequel *Run No More*, and *The Leatherman’s Handbook*. Townsend was a gay pop culture phenomenon who held himself independent from the 1975 birth of the glossy magazine, *Drummer*, which I dubbed in 1978 “Leather’s Publication of Record” and “The American Review of Gay Popular Culture” in *Drummer* 23. He didn’t come aboard *Drummer* until 1980.

*Cherchez le femme!* A woman helped deliver *Drummer*. Ms. Jeanne Barney, according to Leather Patriarch Harold Cox, publisher of *Checkmate/Dungeonmaster*, was one of the two best editors *Drummer* ever had. Trouble—police-driven by then LA police chief Ed Davis—complicated the infighting causing *Drummer*’s founding partners split. Entrepreneur John Embry got custody of the infant *Drummer*, named himself publisher, and after the April 10, 1976, bust of his “Slave Auction,” fled Los Angeles for San Francisco leaving behind such leather stars as filmmaker Fred Halsted, photographer and performance artist Robert Opel, and photographer/hustler JimEd (Master Tau) Thompson who in 1974 created *Gay Bondage* magazine and *Action Male* bondage magazine, the tutorials for Mikal Bales’s Zeus bondage studio.

*Drummer*, once arrived in Mecca, quickly became leather’s official voice to the world during the Golden Age of Liberation. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Because Embry seemed peeved with and by Townsend, he also seemed rather pleased at Townsend’s absence which might have imprinted *Drummer*. And miffed that he himself had not written *The Leatherman’s Handbook*, claimjumper Embry—who was also trying to clone *The Advocate* by creating *The Alternate*—commissioned a clone of Larry’s *Leatherman’s Handbook* written by Bruce Werner and called *The New Leatherman’s Guide* (*Drummer* 18, 1977). Embry followed this with *The Care and Training of the Male Slave* written by Embry himself aka Robert Payne. This kind of instant commercial imitation signaled the enthusiastic beginning of a pop culture genre: *how-to* and *self-improvement* books for leather players.

Larry Townsend, by talent really a novelist, achieved legendary status by founding this new leather genre of self-improvement through S&M. “Larry Townsend” became an instant Brand Name in leather popular culture. Embry himself, finally, could not resist publishing even more writing by Townsend in 1980s issues of *Drummer* where ultimately Townsend’s monthly column, “Leather Notebook,” appeared for twelve years.

Townsend’s second regular column, “Ask Larry,” on this Silver Anniversary of the *Handbook* is currently a regular feature in the international leather magazine *Honcho* edited by Doug McClemon. Larry’s writing

also appears in *Bound and Gagged* magazine and in the lists of Richard Kasak's Bad Boy Books as well as of Alyson Publications. *Ask Larry: The Collected Notebook*, the hard-core back-beat to *The Leatherman's Handbook*, was published by Masquerade Books in 1995.

#### TOWNSEND: PUBLISHER TO THE LEATHER AUTEURS

Larry Townsend, the person, and "Larry Townsend," the Brand Name, are a very viable pair. Larry remains, twenty-five years on, an active and very declarative public voice driving leather evolution in manners, mores, playing, and plague. He laughs, when he's not steaming mad, about resisting the lesbian trend of political correctness that has nothing to do with masculine leathermen who prefer men masculine. Ask Stephen H. Miller. Larry is pro-men without being anti-women. So, he remains a favorite with both male and female leather audiences. Larry speaks often at seminars and reads with sense and sensibility at literary gatherings accompanied by his 90-pound Doberman Pinscher, "Mueller," who manages crowd control. He has written more than 26 books of fiction plus three nonfiction books. His 1997 novel, *Czar*, is an historical epic of literary S&M, and is a crowning achievement of his much-published life. Townsend is a contemporary writer, photographer, leather player, media personality, and businessman. As L. T. Publications he has himself produced more than 60 books and has published more than 55 gay writers of S&M leather literature.

#### OLD GUARD, NEW GUARD!

#### THE ONLY TRUE GUARD IS *AVANT GARDE*

However, no good deed goes unpunished. That's a basic tenet of S&M. So, naturally, on the progressive occasion of the 25th anniversary of *The Leatherman's Handbook*, it is necessary to weed out a certain hatefulness of rhetoric hurtful to the progress of leather and of homosexual activism itself. In a direct attack on Townsend, some "leatherish novice" recently coined the label "Old Guard" to discard the wisdom of deeply established writers, mentors, and teachers, and classic books such as *The Leatherman's Handbook*.

Shades of the Cultural Revolution in China where intellectuals and artists were murdered or exiled to remote work camps. That self-centered novice devised such exclusionist coinage as a separatist way of showboating his/her own generation as "New Guard." Shame on such "politically incorrect" ageists who should be slapped across the face (with a leather glove) the way hysterical twits in movies are always slapped to get a grip!

**Excerpt source: ©Jack Fritscher, *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness*  
Drummer, San Francisco: Palm Drive Publishing, 2008**

Actually, *The Leatherman's Handbook*, which has sold thousands of copies, thrives on this new brush-fire of controversy!

Youth needs the wisdom of the established, and the established need the energy of the young. The present usually takes a dim view of the past. This attitude is attractive to the naive who often think that the whole wide world began the day they first noticed it. Sometimes, too, people with some mileage wrongly dismiss the younger because the young weren't present at the past.

If people—for instance, artists, writers, leather players—are alive, working, and creating at the same time on the same clock and the same calendar, no matter what their individual ages, they are all contemporary, because they work in the “Culture of Here and Now.”

Larry Townsend is as pertinent as the boy he beats, and the boy he beats is as pertinent as Larry Townsend.

If this principle attacks some dogmatist dragmatist's Inner Bette Davis, I make no apology for myself or for Larry, or for the very leathery Golden Age of the Titanic 70s whose celebratory sex-style has taken an unfair beating, as if “those ignorant leathersmen at that decade's party” and not a virus caused the plague.

Once the plague is conquered, or at least controlled, the gay press will be driven to invent new material, and gay men will want their publishing jobs back. Before AIDS, the gay press featured news of tricycle races and show biz. Once the plague is controlled, will Tony Kushner be permitted to write the third act of *Angels in America*, or will he be dismissed as Old Guard, the way ACT UP discarded Larry Kramer, and OutWrite actually booted Edward Albee.

#### LEATHER *DESIDERATA*: PISSING ON TERRITORY

So, in the parallax view of 20/20 hindsight, what appears in *The Leatherman's Handbook* to be familiar, well, uh, “old guard” may in fact be very “new guard.” What appears to be new may in fact, in this folk document, be familiar. So question what you know. Be your own best critic. Do penance and self-flagellation if you wish, but let no one unworthy teach you or top you.

Be skeptical of historical revisionists of any gender—especially the co-optations by post-AIDS non-males who, with unmitigated gall, fancy themselves saviorettes who will write the history of gay male culture and gay male leather culture as if Larry Townsend and fifty other living authors—and about 100 recently dead ones—haven't been writing this material, which is actually our group autobiography, for the last fifty years in fiction and nonfiction.

Ask Patricia Morrisroe. Be wary of wannabe artistes and stenographic historiennes who sacrilegiously and pompously invoke our dead whose history they claim to be “saving” from oblivion.

They actually think they’re arriving in our life as if our life were abandoned and as if major talents have not kept full record of our life.

*Sacre bleu!*

I mean it’s nice that foreign graduate students and tenure-hungry academics want to formulate leather on the head of a Pruffrockian pin. True scholarship is, of course, welcome, even needed; but true scholars never make the actual “source people” and “source material” disappear so the scholar can appear to be the source.

That’s theft of intellectual property.

This is not *ad hoc* or *ad hominem*. It’s not even an issue. It’s a principle

It’s peculiar that every group has roots except white male faggot leathermen.

Ask Maya Angelou.

Why shouldn’t this particular leather pop culture history be best told by the actual “author”-ities, the men who created it for males, lived it as males, and recorded it, not as separatists but as humanists. The sexual liberation fronts included everybody; gay men were just more immediately intense about succeeding.

All the male witness-authors, witness-photographers, and witness-artists who have been vastly creative and widely published for this last half a century have long done quite well mapping our leatherman’s history. And, frankly, these deeply established writers don’t appreciate the lesbigay *bandito* scholarship that literally steals facts, dates, names, vocabulary, and concepts from intellectual property that certain wannabe scholars then fail to acknowledge by so much as a footnote. (I am naming them in my will.)

Ask those semi-plagiarists who know who they are. You can always spot the usual suspects. They arrived post-1980 on the leather scene; they became first noticeably active at exactly the same time as AIDS; they write the trendspeak of political correctness; and they endlessly use the cliched rhetoric of queer studies—a language invented by academics who must publish or perish.

Despite such *faux* prophets in our midst, do seek your spirituality, mystical experiences, and transcendence, but not in gay magazines and leather literature—much of it written under the fundamentalist thumb of cultish egos and media money—published by straight males and edited by women for gay men. (Read the mastheads on magazines.)

Be somewhat sophisticated when seeking advice, because while homosexuality has been declared not a mental disorder, homosexuals themselves can still be mentally ill.

Even Larry would ask, should you really “Ask Larry”?

Don't let the horizon of your life be the skyline of Castro, SoMa, WeHo, SoHo, or Chelsea. For instance, when some certain—but certainly not all—leather “facilitators” get together to jerk each other off in public so they can spout S&M advice on anything, run away, little leather boy, as fast as you can—until you actually check out what might be their measurable credentials and actual biases.

Do you really want to sit at the feet of the Leather Bourgeoisie? Ask Brando: “The horror!” Check out the “facilitators” as carefully as you would a strange bondage Top.

If the talkers prove to be objectively credible, still remain your own best critic about anybody telling you anything. S&M leather is art. Unlike those bed-fellows, fundamentalist religious morality and fundamentalist lesbigay politics, it has no right or wrong way. Art transcends morality. You can “Ask Larry” as readers have for years, but...can you trust him? Uh! Trust, and the doubt about trust, razor-sharpen the double edge that makes leather fetish gear and S&M ritual play delicious.

Remember: there actually exist real live men who will tie you up and torture you until they cum!

I first applied the words *sensuality* and *mutuality* to S&M in print in 1972, but...can you trust the context of this Introduction? What if homosexuality exists for entertainment purposes only? Hey, that's the definition of recreational sex, which is a synonym for plain old *Lust*. Ask Larry. The playful sense of *The Leatherman's Handbook* keeps its principle of sexual titillation ahead of any humanoid issue.

You have to love a *Handbook* that is a guide to gay cannibalism! The author is the camp counselor telling scary, wonderful tales, mixed with just enough cautionary advice to encourage credibility, suspend disbelief, and give the audience goosebumps while imparting common sense for playing dangerous games.

## LEATHER: TABOO AS STRONG AS TOTEM

As in the classic film *Casablanca*, sooner or later everyone comes to Rick's. Sooner or later everyone reads some classic Larry Townsend. The revolutionary discussion Larry opened up a quarter of a century ago about S&M continues, because Leather's taboo is as strong as Leather's totem. This kind of erotic narcotic gets readers' attention and keeps the players'

interest. (The oldest living S&M leatherman still playing at the time of this writing is 92 years old, and, no, it's not Larry.)

Twenty-five years from now, *The Leatherman's Handbook* will be celebrated on its Fiftieth Anniversary in a collection published from the *oeuvre* of Larry Townsend. The future politics buzzing around Larry's *Handbook* will be even newer, shinier versions of jealousy, envy, calumny, and slander. The on-going never-ending tales of leather will have new chapters and new thrills and new cautions. But the crack of a whip will sound the same as it has since whip first touched flesh. In outer space, you cannot hear a scream. In the inner space of leather, the voices of innocence and the voices of experience will continue to whisper from the page...

### III. Eyewitness Illustrations

"Larry Townsend and Jack Fritscher," Fritscher-Hemry House, June 16, 1995. Photograph by Mark Hemry. ©Mark Hemry

Excerpt source: ©[Jack Fritscher](#), *Gay San Francisco: Eyewitness*  
*Drummer*, San Francisco: [Palm Drive Publishing](#), 2008