

4

**FIRST GAY WRITERS SUMMIT,
SAN FRANCISCO 1970
SONG OF THE LOON AND GAY LUNATICS
GAY MAIL-ORDER WEBS GAYS TOGETHER**

Famous in the Swinging 1960s, years before the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, the political, prolific, and best-selling Larry was so respected by his peer-group authors that Richard Amory, who conceived the meeting, invited him to join the first gay-pulp-fiction writers summit in San Francisco on June 15, 1970. This authors' self-defense meeting was called at the same moment that the gay albino founder of Guild Press, the dysfunctional Lynn Womack, went to jail for printing photos of underage models after ten years of publishing dozens of gay 1960s novels for his Black Knight Classics line distributed by his Guild Book Service mail-order. This was at the expense of authors he held hostage like Sam Steward whose 1965 novel *\$tud* Womack scandalously withheld from publication out of meanness while he hid out in a hospital to dodge his exploited authors. In gay history, this was ten years before the seven Violet Quill writers in Manhattan separated their literary selves from the pop genre of "gay pornography" and met for the first time to power up their own East Coast writers literary co-op in New York.

Larry drove from Los Angeles to meet the current San Francisco local authors for a panel discussion at the SIR Center, hosted by the Society for Individual Rights. This was the first time he met his host Amory who cloned his *Song of the Loon* trilogy out of Rousseau's mythic homomascularity of the Noble Savage in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* in which frontiersman Nattie Bumpo—clad in leathers and traveling with his Mohican

brother/lover, garbed like half the Village People—scouted new American frontiers just as these writers were doing.

Amory introduced Larry to his fellow pre-Stonewall authors such as Sam Steward whom I had just met in 1969, Richard Fullmer, Peter Tuesday Hughes, and Douglas Dean who all admired his aggressive entrepreneurship, his sturdy marketing, and his best-sellers in a growing market where a total short stack of some thirty gay pulp paperbacks published in 1965 tripled to a hundred in 1966 and exploded to more than five hundred before Stonewall in the transformative year 1969 when gay director John Schlesinger's movie of the 1965 gay novel by James Leo Herlihy, *Midnight Cowboy*, despite its homophobic X-Rating, won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Larry listed Herlihy and John Rechy as required reading in *The Leatherman's Handbook*.

Fullmer told Drewey Wayne Gunn at *Lambda Literary* on August 10, 2011, that he considered 1960s underground gay "dirty books" to be the "fertilizer" that nurtured the mainstream gay literature that followed. (Insert your own joke here.) In truth, these were men on the verge of a hybrid gay literature that was often both prurient and literary in their books that were illegal. These authors, all constantly threatened with arrest for writing their outlawed novels, looked to political activist Larry for ideas to resist arrest by police, exploitation by publishers, and persecution by puritans.

Dissatisfied with publishers' corporate greed around royalties and copyrights, the writers convened to discuss founding a gay publishing collective to be named the Renaissance Group. God knows, it was needed. As a young author in 1969, I sent my first S&M novel, with its first line a literary homage to the first line in *Studs Lonigan*, to Greenleaf publishing, but refused its offer of \$300 for the manuscript and all rights everywhere forever. When Frances Green, the editor of the Other Traveller gay series for Olympia Press, read of Larry's San Francisco meeting, she invited the attending writers to send their manuscripts to her. Between 1970 and 1972, she and a second woman, Ginger Sisson, published many book titles with Greenleaf Classics in San Diego, including thirteen by Larry who was paid a flat thousand dollars

per title, with no royalties, before Olympia went out of business letting his *Handbook* go out of print.

In the Townsend storyline, Larry lived as he died, stating his truth. Twenty-eight years after he began fighting for justice like a superhero around his literary rights in 1970, he died mad as hell in a raging firestorm of his own making in his lawsuit against gay bookstores and a publisher that tarnished his legacy in 2008.

Because in 1970 there was no gay publishing entity worth suing, and no court gay-friendly enough to hear such a case anyway, he channeled his frustration into action by starting his own boutique mail-order publishing house, LT Publications, in 1972, the same year the straight world was shocked open by the erotic art of *Last Tango in Paris*, and John Waters—whose first short film was 1964's *Hag in a Black Leather Jacket*—broke free of Hollywood studios and released his independent film *Pink Flamingos*. Larry wrote more with purpose than passion. His writing was his activism. In October 1971, he explained in *Vector*, the monthly magazine of the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) in San Francisco:

Literary contracts in the porno market are virtually meaningless. There's no way to force payment, because attorney costs and court fees will exceed anything you could hope to recover....I have found it necessary to make one cardinal rule: *Don't give anything away* [his italics]. Like any professional, the writer's most (only) valuable asset is his time. Except for the writing I do for H.E.L.P. [Homophile Effort for Legal Protection], which happens to be a cause [bailing out gay men entrapped by the police] in which I strongly believe, I do not write anything unless I get paid for it. I have a couple of pen names I use for straight, nonfiction articles and stories. I have several *noms de plume*...[Always marketing his small business like self-publisher Walt Whitman, he, like Walt, wrote many of his own reviews. Calling himself "Peter Lovejoy," he reviewed his own *Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* "as a spoof, a burlesque," in proto-*Drummer* 1, issue 2, December 1971.] I keep a constant flow of

short pieces going out all the time. This supplements the income and also allows me a break from the novels, which are my principal love. If I didn't do this, there would be periods of starvation between those of affluence.

Defying the astrologer's 1930 warning about those many 1960s pen names, he also changed his birth name from "Irvin Townsend Bernhard, Junior" to "Michael Lawrence Townsend," reprinted his *Handbook*, and took control of his art and business life. With that name-change decree issued by his attorney Vance Gary Prutsman on July 19, 1972, when Irvin—who as a teen called himself "Bud"—became Larry, he established his identity and brand, and broke free from corporate book publishers.

As an independent writer-photographer working from home, he created his LT Publications, and earned his worldwide reputation as a reliably consistent publisher of Leatherotica literature that made bookstore cash registers ring. He trusted in the sexual infinity of leather to give him both content and readers. He disrupted the vertical monopoly of incestuous corporate publishers crushing down from the top decreeing to subordinate imprints what authors may be published as was allegedly acted out later in corporate synergy when the media group, Liberation Publications, which owned *The Advocate*, bought Alyson Press whose books *The Advocate* reviewed. Even the benevolent Lambda Rising Bookstore in D.C. ran both the *Lambda Literary Review* and the *Annual Lambda Literary Awards*.

Journalist Liz Highleyman wrote in her syndicated "Past Out" column in the *Seattle Gay News* that "critics [were] warning about an impending LGBT media monopoly." Against such vertical corporate synergy, Larry offered instead a rebellious and practical alternative showing how the horizontal power of independent publishing liberates and levels the playing field where the free originality and full diversity of all voices can be published.