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FICTION

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“A love affair between foreigners,” writes Edmund White in his new novel, *The Married Man*, “is always as much the mutual seduction of two cultures as a meeting between two people.” As Mr. White reminded us previously in one of the various fictions of his autobiography, the French refer to a love affair as a “story” (*une histoire*), and in this particular story—in essence an elegy for his late companion, Hubert Sorin, who died in 1994—White delves into the subterfuge, evasions, and exaggerations we erect to beguile lovers and shield ourselves from harsh truths. Need we offer up our emotional and sexual history every time we embark on romance? Do we demur, forgive such lapses of candor in those we hope to woo? Allegorizing these questions as a romance between White’s surrogate, an HIV-positive (albeit healthy) American furniture scholar and writer living in Paris, and a French architect allows White to examine the façades of the self—or its “mythic lacquer,” as well as indulge in his signature thematic obsessions in lapidary prose: the nuance of etiquette, the intersection of the personal and political, the solace of friendship, the nature of memory.

In a sense, *The Married Man* grew out of the first chapter of his previous novel, *The Farewell Symphony*, and to a greater degree the memoir *Our Paris: Sketches From Memory*, his remarkable collaboration with Sorin, whose illustrations (*dessinées*) are the perfect accompaniment to

The Emotion in Motion

Review by William Sterling Walker

The Married Man

Edmund White

Knopf

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White’s narrative. Significant elements of his life with Sorin as told in *Our Paris* are reprised in the plot of *The Married Man* and are hardly altered except for the *curriculum vitae* of the characters and the contrasting tone of each—“*faux naïf*” (as White describes it in the memoir’s introduction) and autumnal in *The Married Man*. Indeed, this counterpoise in tone could be read as a poignant measure of how painful it must have been for White to express his loss formally in the midst of Sorin’s decline, and the necessity to remember everything about their life together.

The novel opens on Austin, Smith alone after a previous fling has soured. Ensnared on the Île Saint-Louis, Austin

spends time with his clique of younger Parisians and sophisticated expatriates, procrastinating work on a gargantuan encyclopedia of 18th-century French furniture, authenticating provenances for the occasional baroness, and working out at a gym frequented by few Americans. There, Austin encounters Julien, a married man two decades his junior. Perhaps Austin’s “heightened sense of the swath his life was cutting,” or his impending 50th birthday, allows him to see that this aristocratic Frenchman “could be courted but not groped.” They began to see each other, and their involvement deepens. Austin wrestles with disclosing his seropositive status even as he fears scaring away Julien. But suddenly Julien becomes

seriously ill and discovers he, too, is HIV-positive, though with a drastically depleted T-cell count. Hopping from Paris to Venice, Providence to Key West, the remainder of the book chronicles their five-year “marriage” until Julien succumbs during a transfusion in a Marrakesh hospital.

Last September in New York, the ever-affable White read the Venice chapter of his book to a packed crowd at KGB, the smoky, cerise room of an East Village bar decorated with Bolshevik kitsch. Discovering a page missing from his manuscript, White apologized but continued *ad lib*-ing the missing text without missing a beat. White said, apropos of a question about how this novel fit in relation to his great trilogy of postwar gay life (*A Boy’s Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, *The Farewell Symphony*), that writing *The Married Man* in the third-person had “freed” him to tell the story objectively, in the same way as living in Paris and communicating in French day-to-day had necessitated a succinct conversational style with no time for an emphasis on irony. Indeed, *The Married Man* will become a touchstone in the evolution of his style, not just for its sharp delineation from the first-person narratives of his trilogy. In *The Married Man*, White has reined in his florid stylistic impulses, and he employs irony sparingly.

When White riffs on the emotional

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vertigo of Austin's return to the States after his long Paris sojourn, it is the author's command of detail that gives Austin's ruminative observations on his ironic predicament more heft. On vacation with his former lover, Peter, whose abiding friendship forms an integral part of the novel, Austin finds himself in the ersatz "Paris" of Disney's Epcot Center:

And part of "Paris" was "the Île Saint-Louis," and Austin had a snobbish reaction to this silly simulacrum—the ridiculous berets and baguettes and the Edith Piaf soundtrack, the beveled windows and lacquered walls containing half a café...ten feet away from a baby Eiffel Tower. Austin was also frightened by it, as if it meant to suggest he'd never gotten out of America, never lived on the real Île Saint-Louis for eight years in its cold rains and on its deserted, windswept *quais*, never stood at the stone railing and looked down into the klieg lights of a passing *bâteau-mouche*....

During the course of the novel, White's prose becomes progressively leaner, stripped of embellishment, as sparse as the

Moroccan desert, though with a seasoned traveler's wonderment over minute detail.

The effect is to create a novel with a strong narrative arc and urgent pacing which calls to mind his superb short stories "Palace Days" and "Oracle." One cannot resist White's graceful storytelling or fail to marvel at the shimmer of his words, though at times *The Married Man* can be an excruciatingly painful read. The last two chapters are surely as unstintingly honest and austere as anything White has written. But White adroitly sidesteps closing on the harrowing chord of Julien's inevitable death, and confers, instead, a kind of benediction for the novel's survivors. What this work admits about White's life is how angry he had been about Sorin's desertion in death, and White has said as much in a recent interview in *The Observer* attending the novel's publication in England. This penumbra of anger, breathtaking in its intensity, essential to the elegiac tone, shadows the text, yet it throws into stark relief—to paraphrase the poet, James Merrill—the life lived and the love spent.

William Sterling Walker's fiction has appeared in Harrington Gay Men's Fiction Quarterly, The James White Review, Best American Gay Fiction Volume 2 and modern words. A memoir of his coming out appeared in the award-winning anthology, Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories, edited by Patrick Merla. □