

EDMUND VALENTINE WHITE III



Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1940, Edmund V. White, professor of creative writing in the Lewis Center for the Arts, Emeritus, has had many lives—far too many and many of them far too X-rated to do full justice to in these pristine pages!

Ed grew up in Evanston, Illinois, and attended the exclusive Cranbrook School in Michigan as a boy. He continued on at the University of Michigan, where he studied Chinese. For a short time, he intended to continue in this vein, but he ultimately decided to decline an offer from Harvard's doctoral program in Chinese to move to New York, where he began a career as an editor and writer, working at Time-Life Books, *Newsweek*, *The Saturday Review*, and *Horizon*. He became known as a lively conversationalist of encyclopedic knowledge and endless curiosity about all things human. From 1981–84, he served as director of New York University's New York Institute for the Humanities.

The best known Edmund White is, of course, the author of a dozen or so works of fiction. In 1973, he published his first novel, *Forgetting Elena*, which Vladimir Nabokov praised as “a marvelous book.” Ed undoubtedly cherishes this accolade above most others as the great Russian-American writer's *Lolita* was a book that changed Ed's life. What Ed identifies as the virtues of that controversial novel may bring a smile of familiarity to the reader of Ed's own work: “I instantly loved this book because it was outrageously funny, sexy, and passionate and, finally, gorgeously written. This triple threat of humor, sexiness, and linguistic brilliance set a standard for me that I've wanted to emulate ever since as a writer (with small success) and that I've cherished in other writers.” Most, though by no means all, of Ed's work could be similarly characterized—funny, sexy, passionate, and gorgeously written. This is certainly true of the celebrated trilogy of autobiographical novels that have earned him his place as the godfather of gay American literature: *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* (1988), and *The Farewell Symphony* (1997). These are the works critics are inclined to say are destined to endure, if only because they record with such memorable panache what it

was like to live as a gay American man in the second half of the 20th century. They are as humorous, as shocking, and as unsettling as the times they document. As the British novelist Alan Hollinghurst once observed, “He knows that his ‘painful honesty’ is the source of his humour. And we feel strongly . . . that it is more than that: it is the source of everything, however artful and luscious, that he has ever written.” Ed has also ventured successfully into the realms of historical fiction (*Fanny, A Fiction*, 2003, and *Hotel de Dream*, 2007) and drama (*Terre Haute*, 2006, about a fictional encounter between author Gore Vidal and Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh).

Then there’s Edmund White, the world historical figure in late 20th-century gay history. As a member of The Violet Quill, a gay writers’ group of the mid-70s and early 80s, Ed not only had the opportunity to develop his own voice, he also played a role in freeing others to realize their literary ambitions. Ed freed some other aspects of human potential as well—for an even broader audience. Few remember that he was the co-author of the first edition of *The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasure of a Gay Lifestyle* (1977) and many other works of nonfiction devoted to thinking through the gay sexual revolution (*States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, 1980) and the AIDS pandemic (*The Burning Library*, 1994). Once AIDS hit, Ed didn’t just write with “painful honesty” about what was going on in his life and the lives of others. He joined others in taking action. In 1982, he cofounded the Gay Men’s Health Crisis as part of the first organized attempt to respond to AIDS; in 1984, he was involved in the founding of the parallel French group, AIDES. From the mid-80s on, Ed lived and wrote as a self-identified HIV-positive man—a witness to the devastation all around him and an advocate for political engagement over the issues that devastation raised.

Next we come to one of the most easily neglected of Edmund White’s selves: He could easily have earned a tenured position in the French department of just about any university in the country! From 1983 until 1990, he lived in France, in part to escape the death count. (Four members of The Violet Quill died in the ’80s, as well as two of Ed’s closest friends, the critic David Kalstone and his editor Bill Whitehead, a 1965 alumnus.) As Ed has written, “For me, these losses were definitive. The witnesses of my life, the people who shared the same references and sense of humor, were gone.” His sojourn in

France gave him the opportunity to write his magisterial biography of Jean Genet (1993), a deeply researched and gorgeously articulate account of the life and work of this marginal yet canonical playwright and novelist. No French critic had dared to “correct” Jean-Paul Sartre’s earlier book-length portrait of Genet, but Ed never hesitates to storm in where angels fear to tread. His study won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1994 and will remain the definitive biography for decades to come.

With the French architect and illustrator Hubert Sorin, Ed also published *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory* (1994); Sorin died that same year of an AIDS-related illness. (Ed’s novel *The Married Man*, 2000, is a fictionalized account of their relationship.) Ed has also written short studies about two other sexual rebels of French literature: Marcel Proust (1998) and Arthur Rimbaud (2008). Although it’s hard to credit, Ed has observed that his bestselling book is also French-related: *The Flâneur: A Stroll Through the Paradoxes of Paris* (2000); it is certainly one of his most delightful efforts. These works of thoughtful and generous Francophilia help to explain why Ed was named an *Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government.

More recently, Edmund White has sometimes dropped the fictional persona to allow his memoirist self to come to the fore with three critically well-received volumes: *My Lives: An Autobiography* (2005), *City Boy* (2009), and *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris* (2014). When he approached his editor about the first of these books, the editor expressed surprise that there was anything about Ed that his readership did not yet know. There was, and even this jaded man of letters suggested that one chapter might well be deleted as “TMI”—“too much information.” It stayed. A new memoir, *The Unpunished Vice: A Life in Reading*, will appear in June.

Then there’s the Edmund White of the classroom—with a twinkle in his eye, a laugh in his voice, and a fire in his belly. Ed was appointed a full professor in Princeton’s Program in Creative Writing (Lewis Center for the Arts) in 1998, following brief stints at Johns Hopkins University (1977–79), Columbia University (1980–82), and Brown University (1990–92). He directed the Program in Creative Writing from 2002 until 2006. His sense of collegiality is legendary, if sometimes mischievous. His devotion to his students is straightforwardly exemplary. Hundreds of Princetonians have been the

beneficiaries of his thoughtful attention to their short stories, novels, and life writing. Many of them were present to see him receive no less than three standing ovations during his keynote address at the “Every Voice” conference on campus in 2013—Princeton’s first-ever LGBTQA alumni conference. Our illustrious colleague is the living embodiment of a moment and a movement.

Consequently, the accolades begin to pile up. In 1996, Ed was appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1996, and in 1999 to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2016, he was named state author of New York. In February 2018, he received the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction given “to a living American author whose scale of achievement in fiction, over a sustained career, places him or her in the highest rank of American literature.” The citation commended him for his “honest, beautifully wrought, and fiercely defiant books.”

Ed has been the partner of fellow writer Michael Carroll since 1995. They married in 2013. At the “Every Voice” alumni conference, Ed expressed an amused amazement that this marriage came about at Princeton’s insistence. With gay marriage now legal in New York, it was the only way Michael could remain covered by the University’s health benefits. We wish them both Ed and Michael well as they begin the next chapter of their lives in progress.