

Introduction

MICHAEL BRONSKI

For gay men who came of age from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s – the period immediately before and after the 1969 Stonewall Riots, considered the birth of the Gay Liberation movement – *Song of the Loon*, written by Richard Amory (a pseudonym for Richard Love), was perhaps the preeminent cultural literary icon. Even today, nearly forty years after it first appeared, the book (as well as the film that was based upon it) has a name-recognition that few items of gay male culture ever achieve. As opposed to many works that are now considered “classics,” *Song of the Loon* started out as one, and even though it has been essentially out of print for three decades, it retains its resonance and power today.

Song of the Loon is the bucolic tale of men discovering their sexuality and their ability to love other men (as well as themselves), set in a mythical world of trappers and Native Americans in the frontier forests of Oregon in the second half of the nineteenth century. Amory tells the story of Ephraim MacIver, a man fleeing through the dense forests of the Northwest to escape a violent, self-loathing former lover. Through Singing Heron and Bear-who-dreams – Native Americans and members of their Society of the Loon – MacIver matures into a self-loving and self-accepting gay man capable of loving relationships, and able to live within the idealized, outside-of-civilization Loon society. Written in a mock heroic style – consciously miming the great sixteenth-century Spanish pastoral novels such as Jorge de

Montemayor's *Los Siete Libros de la Diana* or Gaspar Gil Polo's *Diana Enamorada* (which was a continuation of Montemayor's earlier book), Amory was precise in naming the inspirations for his work – the original subtitle notes that it is “a gay pastoral in five books and an interlude” and an author's note explicitly states that, especially in the instance of his imagined Native Americans, he has “taken very European characters ... [and] painted them a gay aesthetic red and transplanted them into the American wilderness.” *Song of the Loon* was a first: a paperback original soft-core porn novel – more accurately labeled, by today's standards, erotica rather than porn – that didn't merely have literary aspirations; it had actual literary merit.

Even Greenleaf Classics, a publisher not known for its literary impulses, emphasized the novel's high-tone qualities in the jacket copy and described the book as “a mystical blend of elements from Hudson's *Green Mansions*, J. F. Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, and the works of Jean Genet.” Forgetting the fact that there is only a vague kernel of truth in this description (there is little of Hudson's late-Victorian sentimentality here, and almost none of Genet's harsh vision of anguished salvation), the reality is that Richard Amory wrote a completely original and dazzling novel that marked a turning point in the evolution of gay literature. But *Song of the Loon* was more than simply literature; it was a cultural milestone as well.

The book was released in 1966, and almost immediately took on a mythic stature in gay male circles. Its publisher, Greenleaf Classics, was based in San Diego, and specialized in paperback original, soft-core heterosexual and homosexual porn. *Song of the Loon* found a willing and receptive audience the moment it was published; it was so popular that in 1967 Richard Amory wrote a sequel, *Song of Aaron*, also published by Greenleaf. It is clear that the author and publisher planned to create a *Loon* trilogy at the time, since the title page of *Song of Aaron* labels it “book two” of “the Loon Songs trilogy.” In publishing, popularity breeds productivity, and Greenleaf understood

both the ever-expanding reputation as well as sales potential of *Song of the Loon*. The cover of *Song of Aaron* touts it as “[t]his generation’s most eagerly awaited book ... the spectacular sequel to the best selling underground sensation ... *Song of the Loon*.” The following year, *Listen, the Loon Sings...* appeared, described on its cover as the “final volume of the sensational Loon Songs trilogy.”

Later editions of *Song* make the claim on their cover of “over 100,000 copies sold”; while one should always be wary of sales figures from publishers, it is possible – given Greenleaf’s print runs and distribution networks – that sales of the trilogy itself may have reached these proportions. While the exact figures for Greenleaf’s print runs and sales are unavailable, we do know that the *Loon* books were so popular that in 1968 Greenleaf published *Fruit of the Loon*, a silly, occasionally amusing parody of the *Loon* books. “Ricardo Armory” is listed as the author of *Fruit of the Loon*, but that is simply part of the parody; Richard Amory had no connection to either its conceptualization or authorship. If the burlesque of *Fruit of the Loon* is a clear nod to the commercial and cultural success of the original books, even more so is the 1970 film version of *Song of the Loon*. Directed by Andrew Herbert, it was the first independently produced, non-pornographic gay male feature to be granted mainstream theatrical release. While it never played top-rung venues, the film – which featured soft-core nudity and displays of affection between its male characters – was booked into theaters in many large American cities and found audiences eager to see how the beloved novel played on the screen.

In the current age of *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and the casual appearance of homosexuality in major Hollywood films, it may be difficult to understand the impact and the importance of *Song of the Loon* not only on gay male culture but on mainstream American culture as well. Richard Amory wrote the book at a vital, and fascinating, moment in twentieth-century American gay history. Not only did this culture affect the writing and the reception

of *Song of the Loon*, the book itself signaled an important shift in a new emerging sense of identity for gay men and their communities in the U.S.

The publication of *Song of the Loon* in 1966 places it firmly at the end of the time period that might be thought of as the first wave of the U.S. gay rights movement. This era began in 1950 when Harry Hay, along with a small group of other men, founded the Mattachine Society, the first major U.S. organization that had as its goal the promotion of justice and equality for homosexuals. During this time, other groups sprang up across the U.S. – Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), Society for Individual Rights (SIR), the Janus Society, among others – which are generally referred to under the umbrella term “homophile.” These homophile years essentially ended with the Stonewall Riots in New York’s Greenwich Village in June of 1969, giving birth to the modern Gay Liberation movement. With the formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) – a radical political group that took its cues from the new left and other political movements such as the Woman’s Liberation Front, the Black Power movement, and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front – the assimilationist politics of the homophile groups were seen by many new gay activists as “old-fashioned” and even self-loathing. The universal cry of the Gay Liberation movement, “Gay is Good,” was used as a baseline for how to judge activist politics, personal politics, and all forms of culture.

Historians often make a sharp distinction between the homophile organizations and the Gay Liberation activists, and to a degree, a decisive political break did occur in that summer of 1969. But such historical moments never occur unheralded, without some specters of oncoming change. Indeed, the maxim “Gay is Good” was coined and first used by Mattachine Society activist Frank Kammeny in 1968, an update of “Homosexuality is Good,” a phrase he used in a noted 1964 speech. While the Stonewall Riots were a clear result of many late 1960s influences – the direct-action tactics of radical political

groups; the active, rambunctious summer street culture in New York City; the prevalent cultural mind-set of “drugs, sex, and rock and roll”— there is little doubt that its beginnings were also present in some manifestations of homophile politics. I’ve dwelt on this historical moment at some length here because it completely, and deftly, illustrates the political and social importance of *Song of the Loon*.

Literary critic David Bergman, in his excellent essay “The Cultural Work of Sixties Gay Pulp Fiction,”¹ makes the case that the sexual politics of *Song of the Loon* fall outside of the accepted demarcation line between pre- and post-Stonewall gay sensibility. The overt message of Amory’s novel is that only by loving oneself – essentially accepting the fact that “gay is good”— can one ever love other people and be at peace with the world. This was, indeed, the salient message of Gay Liberation. And Richard Amory’s genius in the *Loon* novels is that he brought that message (albeit, already articulated by Frank Kammeny to a very small group of politicized homosexuals) to the gay masses – a message they wanted and needed. That he did this years before the Gay Liberation movement began is remarkable and a tribute to the power of art and the imagination.

But *Song of the Loon* did not spring fully formed out of Richard Amory’s head, and while the social and political context in which it was written is important, so is the cultural context. Just as there is a perception – a myth, really – that politics before Stonewall was only concerned with adhering to heterosexual social norms, and that post-Stonewall life was all about liberation, there is also a widespread and deeply held-to myth that all gay fiction written before Stonewall was embroiled with self-hatred and ended in suicide, and that post-Stonewall literature is a constant affirmation of the radiance of gay life and gay love.

¹ From *The Queer Sixties*. Patricia Juliana Smith, ed. New York: Routledge, 1999.

As with all cultural myths, this is not completely accurate. There is a rich body of American gay male literature that emerged in the post war years. As I illustrate in my anthology *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps*,² there were probably close to 300 hardcover novels with central gay male characters and themes published between 1945 and 1969. (The appendix to *Pulp Friction* lists 260 titles, and I am still discovering more.) Many of these cloth-bound titles – on the whole, serious literary works – found a second life in paperback, often with the flamboyantly garish covers that we associate with gay pulp fiction. And along with these books there was a rapidly growing book industry for paperback originals – usually marketed with exploitative or heavily suggestive titles or cover art – that were being published by a host of small, but quickly expanding companies such as Greenleaf, Publisher's Export Co., and Guild Press. While these publishers were not interested in quality literary fiction – indeed, they were almost entirely concerned with acquiring, printing, and then publishing as many titles as the market could bear – they often did attract talented writers who, for various reasons – including overly sexually explicit content or lack of knowledge or contacts in the mainstream publishing world – would not be able to find other publishing venues. So from where did *Song of the Loon* spring? How does it fit into this nexus of gay-themed publishing at the time?

There is no doubt that there was a popular mainstream literary culture in the 1950s and 1960s that allowed for, and even at times promoted, decisively gay-themed novels. There are novels in the 1940s and 1950s that took on daring, provocative gay themes and found a readership: Richard Brooks's *The Brick Foxhole* (1945) gave a startling critique of how American masculinity led to violent homophobia (and racism); Thomas Hal Phillips' *The Bitterweed Path* (1949) looked

² Bronski, Michael. *Pulp Friction: Uncovering the Golden Age of Gay Male Pulps*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003.

at a complicated erotic relationship between a father and son and a third man; Paul Goodman's *Parents Day* (1951) examined the relationship of a married man with a student at a private school; Gerald Tesch's *Never the Same Again* (1956) was a sympathetic account of an affair between a thirteen-year-old boy and a thirty-year-old man; and Lonnie Coleman's *Sam* (1959) observed the problem of a middle-aged gay professional man looking for love in New York. Even in the 1950s, Americans could read more sexually explicit gay-themed material. Allen Ginsberg's groundbreaking poem *Howl* was published (along with other works) in 1956; *Chicago Review* published portions of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in 1959; John Rechy's *City of Night* was a bestseller in 1963, the year that the English translation of Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* became a cult novel for the intelligentsia; and in 1964, Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* became a literary *cause célèbre*.

At the same time as mainstream publishing was promoting – and in some cases, such as Selby's *Last Exit*, possibly even exploiting – gay male themes, the smaller, paperback original companies were promoting something of a revolution. While many of these companies had been releasing heterosexual-themed books since 1963 or 1964, titles with gay content were relatively few until 1966. Guild Press, based in Washington, D.C., published two books by Alexander Goodman – *The Soft Spot* in 1964, and *A Sliver of Flesh* in 1965 – but for the most part, it wasn't until two years later that gay male-themed books flooded the market, including *Song of the Loon*.

The co-existence of these two very different publishing markets raises an interesting question: could Richard Amory have published *Song of the Loon* with a more mainstream publisher? Amory's novel is so much a part of the fabric and history of gay pulp publishing that it is difficult to think of it as anything other than what it is. On the face of it – given the overt sexual content of the novel – a chance at mainstream publishing seems unlikely. Yet, when examined more

closely, it is not out of the question. Certainly Rechy's *City of Night* and Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* are far more explicit in their depiction of sexual activity. And while it might be argued that these two novels give a distinctly downbeat, if not completely negative, view of gay male culture – as opposed to the sunny optimism of *Song of the Loon* – it is also true that novels such as Coleman's *Sam* and even Richard Meeker's *Better Angel* (1933) showed that mainstream publishing was capable of promoting (albeit, infrequently) gay novels with happy endings. Even the fact that Amory's ambitious literary aspirations – the rewriting of classic sixteenth-century Spanish pastorals – may not have been held against it. *The Evergreen Review* and its publisher Grove Press, as well as Olympia Press, were always interested in quirky literary experiments and were in the forefront of publishing exciting new writing. While the bulk of this writing was concerned with heterosexual relationships and activities, there were important exceptions: *The Evergreen Review* first published Rechy's and Selby's writing; and Olympia Press' Travelers Companion series published Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and *The Ticket that Exploded*, William Talsman's *The Gaudy Image*, and Parker Tyler and Charles Henri Ford's notorious underground classic *The Young and the Evil*, as well as Jean Cocteau's *The White Paper*, Oscar Wilde's *Teleny*, and the highly sexual, long suppressed *Black Diaries* of Irish revolutionary Roger Casement. They were also not adverse to publishing quirky items such as Akbar del Piombo's collage graphic novel *Fuzz Against Junk*.

It is not impossible to think that Richard Amory's quirky, well-written and original *Song of the Loon* might have found a home at *The Evergreen Review*, Grove Press, or the Traveler's Companion series in 1965 when he had completed it. In fact, in 1971, Amory did publish *Frost with the Other Traveler* series, an imprint of Traveler's Companion. So why did he decide to publish *Song of the Loon* with Greenleaf Classics?

We have no answers, but there are some clues. Because of the popularity of *Song of the Loon* Amory was interviewed in gay publications including *The Advocate* and *Vector* (the publishing arm of SIR [Society for Individual Rights]), and frequently wrote essays on literature, gay publishing, and politics for these publications as well. With a few exceptions, Amory seems to dislike much of what has been published in the mainstream on gay themes. In an interview in *Vector*, he posits that the gay novel is “already an identifiable genre ... with roots going back to the nineteenth century if not further. (I don’t think that the *Satyricon* counts).” But his major complaints were with more recent books published by mainstream publishers:

I’m no expert on the gay novel (there is room here for a serious study), but it seems to be that up until now, we’ve had two main types of books, neither of which is much to my liking. First there is what I call the “Closet Queen Novel,” a dishonest put-on wherein the essentially gay characters are disguised as heterosexuals. These things are much older than *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and probably much more common than the straight world would like to believe.

After naming a varied assortment of works and authors who fit into the category – the thirteenth-century *Le Queste del Saint Graal*; the works of Tennessee Williams; Mason Hoffenberg and Terry Southern’s *Candy* (for its “perverse cleverly disguised misogyny”); “at least two popular writers of westerns, one very good and one very bad, both deceased”; as well as *Virginia Woolf* playwright Edward Albee – Amory cites his second complaint.

The next wave is what I call the Gay Grotesque. This is the whole tiresome series of novels from *Fimistère* to *Myra Breckinridge*, also written for a straight public in which the hero is either killed off at the end or

straightened out, or else he is so ridiculous or repulsive that he allowed to live on in a hell of the author's making.

Amory's complaints are fascinating, but curious. It is true that there always has been criticism – from both gay readers as well as conservative heterosexuals – about the “closeting” of what-might-be-read as gay characters by some homosexual writers. (In 1961, *New York Times* theater critic Howard Taubman created a minor sensation and panic when he wrote a piece entitled “Not What It Seems: Homosexual Motifs Get Heterosexual Guide,” in which he accused writers like William Inge, Edward Albee, and Tennessee Williams – none of whom he actually named – as misrepresenting their gay content in order to fool a straight audience.) In the *Vector* interview, Amory seemed to be arguing for a more distinctly out and proud gay culture. But his complaints about *Finistère* and *Myra Breckinridge* feel off the mark. In other writings, Amory complained about the idea of the gay “problem novel” – and certainly Fritz Peters' *Finistère*, as well as many of the fine books from the 1950s and even the early 1960s – James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950), Russell Thacher's *The Tender Age* (1954), James Yaffe's *Nothing But the Night* (1957) – might fall into this category. This is all rather odd, since if there is one thing we can see in many of Amory's writings about literature, it is that he was a careful, smart, and observant reader. Surely he must have understood that *Finistère* is as much about homophobia as it was about a “gay grotesque” (given the fact that the “grotesque” character is a destructive closeted gay man who attempts to molest his stepson) – and certainly that Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* is a full-fledged attack on heterosexual America, not an attack on homosexuality.

Amory's critique of *Finistère* is also curious after one reads the positive, extraordinarily insightful review he wrote in the April 1972 issue of *Vector* of Charles Jackson's 1944 novel *The Fall of Valor*, about a

married man who discovers his sexuality when he is suddenly attracted to a heterosexually identified marine. *The Fall of Valor* hardly ends happily – its protagonist is badly beaten by the man he loves – so it surely can be (mis)read as a “grotesque.” But the key to much of Amory’s writing on literature – and perhaps the key to *Song of the Loon* – is that he was eager, even demanding for psychological truth in writing. In the early 1970s, Amory wrote two pieces for *Vector* explicating Mark Twain’s work – a long, smart analysis of *Tom Sawyer* (“Richard Amory reads Tom Sawyer”), and a larger examination, entitled “Mark Twain, Too,” of some of Twain’s other novels, including *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. In them, he came to the conclusion that Mark Twain had homosexual desires, if not encounters. While these observations feel dated now – his reliance on psychoanalysis was not as sophisticated as it might be today – his investigation into the subtext of these books was original and invigorating for the time. But one of his main concerns was that Twain was not being truthful to himself, a complaint that he also made against Somerset Maugham in a long *Vector* piece in which he castigated the author for concealing his homosexuality behind heterosexual situations. Throughout much of Amory’s writings on literature, one recurring theme is crystal clear: he demanded that homosexual authors be truthful to their own gayness. This was, apparently for Amory, an impossibility for almost anyone who chose to write for, and be compromised by, the mainstream.

It is probably safe to say that Richard Amory published *Song of the Loon* with Greenleaf Classics, at least in part, because he saw this house – and some of the other smaller paperback original publishers that were now catering to a gay male market – as the closest option to a “gay publisher” that was available. In his *Vector* interview, Amory shared his vision for the gay novel of the future: “I would like to see, and I think it’s coming, a genre written by gay authors, for a strictly gay audience, no holds barred, telling it like it is, or should be, *and put out by a gay publisher.*” There are two observations to be made here.

The first is that Amory experienced real problems with Greenleaf Classics. Not surprisingly, being a money-making company with no overt commitment to literature, art, or sexual politics, and certainly not to a gay culture or gay community (except as a source of revenue), Greenleaf produced books as quickly and as cheaply as possible – not the best situation for authors who cared about their work. In this interview, and several other writings, Amory happily enumerated every problem he had endured at Greenleaf: bad, sloppy, and politically insensitive editing; title changes without his permission; a refusal to honor his contracts or to send him royalty statements; and – at the heart of it – a refusal to take him seriously as a writer. Without a doubt, all of this is true; Dirk Vanden – another immensely talented gay writer who published with Greenleaf – had many of the same complaints. And why should it have been otherwise? These were writers with a vision of a new community and a new literature, and they were dealing with a publishing house that shared none of these same concerns.

But what is equally important to note is that in the interview, Amory was articulating a vision – granted, following the Stonewall Riots – in which he postulates an independent gay culture that was not held hostage by, or indebted to, the larger heterosexual culture. This was a tremendously revolutionary idea for the time – in accordance not only with the politics of the Gay Liberation movement, but with the desire for cultural autonomy that was also evident in the Women’s Liberation movement, the Black Power movement, and other nationalist and identity politics movements. This is what, in part, made *Song of the Loon* so vital, and so original and meaningful in comparison to the other erotica and soft-core porn titles being published by Greenleaf and other paperback original publishers at the time.

It would be easy to sketch a sharply dichotomized picture of the state of (non-mainstream) gay literature at the time of Stonewall in which pioneers such as Richard Amory and Dirk Vanden were being

exploited by publishing houses such as Greenleaf. While there is no doubt that these writers – indeed, probably most of the writers who worked with these houses – were underpaid, not given fair contracts, and often not treated with even minimal respect, there is a larger, and far more interesting, framework that also bears critical examination.

While Richard Amory and Dirk Vanden certainly have valid and well-articulated complaints against Greenleaf, we see a differing point of view in articles written by Larry Townsend during this period. By 1970, Townsend had published twelve novels with Greenleaf – including the now classic *Kiss of Leather* – and was then making his living as a full-time writer. In the April 1970 issue of *Vector*, Townsend penned a response to an interview with Dirk Vanden that had appeared in the previous month's issue, in which Vanden had complained that Greenleaf was only interested in acquiring and publishing novels with a high degree of sexual content, as well as offering the standard criticisms of their economic disregard of their authors. In his response, provocatively entitled "In Defense of 'Exploiters,'" Townsend gave his version of Greenleaf's side of the story:

The first fact we can't ignore is that publishing is one hell of a rough business. When the *Saturday Evening Post* can't make it ... well, face it, fellas – it ain't no bed of roses. Greenleaf, like every other successful business in this country – is run for one reason and one reason only. That long green – the break by which we live and buy our beers. And in the gay market, who determines what sells and does not sell? You! If you are more apt to buy a lurid title, that's what the publisher (gay or straight) is going to put out. If you buy stories with sex in every chapter over stories with a lighter saturation of "hots," what do you expect Greenleaf or any other house to publish? Anything that is produced and marketed in any art field is – and must be – a compromise

between the product the artist would like to produce and the product the publisher, studio, gallery, agent or what-have-you is able to profitably sell. However unfortunate this may be, it is very much a fact of life.

With Greenleaf I have found an outlet that will print what I write, allowing me a great latitude in subject matter so long as I slant the stories into their market. And this market is sex. Still, whether publishers like Greenleaf intend it or not, they are helping us to establish a core of working writers and (albeit of “porno,” by current standards) a core of literature where a great many ideas are finding the light of exposure to a large reading audience. Sexual? Of course! We are a highly sexual subculture.

Now accepting this, what is the answer for a writer like Dirk Vanden – or Larry Townsend? I want to write and I want to see my stories in print. I can either adapt (some will read “prostitute”) my art to this market, thereby making a living at it; or I can take a regular job, sweating my ass off at night in front of the typewriter, producing things that will make a lovely pile of unpublished manuscripts on a shelf in my den. I choose to go the Greenleaf route. Nor is it quite as bad a route as one might think from Dirk’s disgruntled evaluation. He was not patient enough.

Townsend continued pragmatically:

And let me add one final word – a plea if you will: The gay market is changing. Greenleaf Classics, like any other publisher who puts material into it, is aware of the situation. They are upgrading the standards of

their line by more careful selection of stories, vastly improving editing, and more careful proofreading of the finished products. The crap that hit the stands a year ago is no longer being bought. (Published maybe, but only to clear out the backlogs.) Writers like Richard Amory, Jeff Lawton, Peter Tuesday Hughes, Carl Driver, Dirk and (I hope) myself are selling. If we keep our stuff on a higher literary level, we will continue to sell. This is how it should be – whether we sell to a publisher who is straight or otherwise. But in the long run, the future of this market rests with you dear readers! If you buy the crap, they are going to keep publishing it. And that is going to make it tougher for the good writers to produce what they want to produce – and what I think most of you want to read.

I have quoted Townsend at some length here because I think his piece sits in fascinating juxtaposition to the complaints of Vanden and Amory. It isn't that one side is correct and the other wrong – they are both, to varying degrees, right – but that it gives us a window into the gay literary world of the early 1970s. What we see is a classic political conflict between the pragmatists and the idealists, between those who have made the choice to be patient and encourage change in increments, and those who have a vision of the future and can't wait for it to happen. As Larry Townsend wrote of Dirk Vanden: "He was not patient enough." But what we also see here is a wonderful, engaged, sometimes angry, very public conversation. It is about many things: art and capitalism, the nature of community, the burden of responsibility, the authority of the author and the power of the reader. But most of all, it is a discussion about the state and the future of gay male writing.

No matter where each of these men stand – and there are a series of overlapping positions that each of them take – it is clear that they all

care passionately about the relationship between gay men, the gay community, and literature. This is, I believe, a new discussion that is taking place; it is a discussion that has never before happened on this ground and on these terms. Beginning in the 1940s, a large, diverse, growing body of literature with gay male themes was being published by mainstream houses; there is no doubt that many men who grew up and came out before Stonewall were familiar with it. And certainly many men loved these books – they were important to them, and meaningful in a way that nothing else at the time could have been. And indeed, many of these books were written by gay men, with an insider’s perspective, and are quite good – some, even great. But for all of their worth, they were, by the mid-1960s, seen as relics of a bygone homosexual world that was being left behind as gay men and their communities moved forward.

But what we have seen so far here are the words and the ideas of gay male writers. What about their readers? What did they want? In an angry column published in the May 1973 *Vector*, Douglas Dean – who wrote twelve novels for Greenleaf Classics between 1969 and 1971 – took a dim view of the contemporary gay male readership. After complaining about the state of the mainstream gay male novel – he singled out *The City and the Pillar*, *The Sling and the Arrow*, *City of Night*, and *The Lord Won’t Mind* – as dealing with “highly neurotic types in extreme, melodramatic situations,” and noted that “straight readers gobbled these books up, because that’s how they want to think of us ... [and] gay readers went right along for the buggy ride.” And then he came to his real criticism:

Why is it though that we don’t have more honest gay novels and short stories? It is my contention that the reason for this, in the final analysis, may be found in the attitude of the gay readers themselves.

Most gay readers do not want “good” gay literature,

they couldn't care less about novels and short stories that are honestly written. What they want is, for the most part, crap – and that's why the publishers go on giving it to them. That's why the “fuck” books, ground out by some publishers in the way that a butcher grinds out hamburger, are good sellers, and its also why a writer who tries to elevate the tone of the gay paperback novel is doomed to a certain and never ending battle.

Dean ended his column by noting that “at the moment many gay writers are at the crossroads of their careers as writers of fiction. Should we continue when so few publishers are willing to take a chance on a quiet style of writing in this field when the reading public who cares for it is so limited?”

Dean didn't mention *Song of the Loon* – his only reference points mentioned were a non-literary novel entitled *Clint Wins His Letter* and the novels of James Colton, the pseudonym of Joseph Hansen – but it is probably safe to assume that Amory's novel would not have fit into his definition of “‘good’ gay literature.” Dean is looking for emotional and psychological honesty in the realm of realistic narrative. This is not *Song of the Loon*.

The enormous popularity of Richard Amory's novels are predicated upon their being, in essence, homoerotic fantasies of freedom. It is certainly possible to do an analysis of Amory's antecedents and his uses of classic tropes and themes in American literature – for example, his use of the specific American pastoral is resonant of Walt Whitman and the paintings and photographs of Thomas Eakins; his concept of freedom residing outside of the “civilized” realm of the urban reminds us not only of Mark Twain, but Melville and Cooper; and certainly his conceptualization of the “noble savage” can be traced back to Aphra Behn's 1678 novel *Oroonoko*. But these are all

the literary trappings that display one clear message – that “gay is good.”

It may be only possible to understand how important *Song of the Loon* was to its readership by seeing it clearly as a rejection of the many “problem novels” that preceded it in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Those books – no matter how well they were written, no matter how anti-homophobic many of them were – never had the luxury of *not* being problem novels. It was simply impossible in the pre-Stonewall era. Even Douglas Dean’s novels and stories – as well-written and psychologically astute as they are – were, on some level, still problem novels. Richard Amory’s genius was that he anticipated – by three years – the fullness of the freedom that Stonewall and the Gay Liberation movement would offer gay people across America. In Amory’s vision, and in his historical context, that freedom was necessarily a fantasy, and had to be set in the idyllic past. But the irony here is that despite its nineteenth-century setting, *Song of the Loon* is not an escape into a fantasy of the past, but a journey into the possibilities of the future. It is a message that is still needed, and applicable, today.