



# TIM TEEMAN IN AMERICA

## Tim wants a time machine this Gay History Month

At the heart of one of my favourite recent books, Bob Smith's *Remembrance Of Things I Forgot*, is the same endlessly intriguing, head-screwing idea manfully bellowed by Cher: if you could turn back time, if you could find a waaaayyy, what would you do differently? After his boyfriend Taylor invents a time machine, the novel's hero, John, zaps back to 1986, existing as both his 2011 self and his 1986 teenage self (there's a deliciously mad moment when John Jr fancies the older version of himself).

In 1986, John Sr and John Jr's mission is twofold: to stop George W Bush from becoming president and to stop his sister killing herself. Not only is Smith's book very funny – John gets

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to tell Dick Cheney where to shove his warmongering – it is also extremely moving, not least when John pleads with his mother to change how she behaves towards her daughter to help stop the suicide; and then, finally, face to face with his sister, he pleads with her to live. It's one of those books you weep over without realising that the tears started some time ago, and Smith makes you consider all the 'coulda-woulda-shouldas' that a time machine might resolve in your life. If only...

I read Smith's brilliant book while in San Francisco, where – in the heart of the Castro – the city's GLBT History Museum has opened. It has been called 'The Queer Smithsonian'. It is not; it is small and it features ephemera and history focused on gay San Francisco, but I spent hours there, not least next to the original recording of the assassinated Harvey Milk, prefiguring his own death with a call to come out. The museum is wonderful. It reminds us we should never forget the foundations of gay history – its lessons, individuals, inspirations, triumphs, tragedies, losses, gains, every inch fought for and agonised over.

In America there is much gay history still to be written, with Republican presidential candidates all too happy to kick us viciously and a Democrat president not willing (at the time of writing) to publicly support gay marriage equality.

Gay history – acquaint yourself with it – teaches us that progress is inevitable, if painful. After Smith's book I read David K Johnson's *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays And Lesbians In The Federal Government*. Not a catchy title, but a riveting tale of institutionalised homophobia. Michael Bronski's recently published *A Queer History Of The United States* reveals more of the US's tangled history of homosexuality.

Part of me wants a time machine, like in Smith's book, to go back and join the inspirational ghosts of the past, while another part of me wants to go into the future – 25 years? 50 years? Longer? – when Right-wing presidential candidates roll their eyes when asked about gay marriage and say, 'Of course I support it. I can't believe what all that fuss was about.'

## CLASSIC READ

**OUR LADY OF  
THE FLOWERS**  
Jean Genet

**JEAN  
GENET**

**Our Lady  
of the  
Flowers**

The original enfant terrible of literature, Genet's legacy to gay writing is legendary. *Our Lady Of The Flowers* is a devilish work of genius, focusing on a reviled community of prostitutes, pimps, homosexuals and outcasts, in which Genet examines and redefines conventional notions of morality and the self.

Scandalous for the mere circumstances of its inception, the novel was written while Genet was in prison and is dedicated to a convicted murderer. It was first published anonymously in 1943, but only a few copies were printed, and it was then officially republished by the literary journal *L'Arbalette* in 1944, after Genet had reworked some of the more explicit scenes.

Allegedly described by Jean-Paul Sartre as 'the epic of masturbation', Genet's novel tells the story of drag queen Divine, following him on a transgressive and lyrical journey through the Parisian underworld. Divine lives in Montmartre with his various lovers, including a pimp called Darling Daintyfoot. Our Lady Of The Flowers is the name of a young gangster and murderer brought back to Divine by Darling and fated to be tried and executed.

A contemporary of Sartre and Jean Cocteau, Genet also had an enormous influence on the Beat generation. *Our Lady Of The Flowers* remains to this day incendiary, unapologetic and brilliant.