WRITERS

TALES OF ARMISTEAD MAUPIN

Reflections on Life, Love and Liberation From the Author of *Significant Others*

by ADAM BLOCK

I first met Armistead Maupin in 1980, when I interviewed him on the publication of his second novel, *More Tales of the City*. I trekked somewhat warily up to his studio perched almost magically on the steep slopes of San Francisco's Telegraph Hill, and soon found myself engulfed in hilarity. Armistead snipped sinsemilla buds and recounted with disarming delight his unlikely journey from right-wing Vietnam vet to AP writer to author of the serial *Tales of the City* in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which had allowed him to come out to his parents at the same time as his character Michael Tolliver.

"When I told my mother," he recalled then, "she said, 'I don't mind, darling, about you being gay, but I don't want it to hurt your career.' And I said, 'But Mother, you don't understand. It *is* my career.' " He has remained true to his word.

In the seven years since, Maupin has continued to delight and outrage audiences as an unapologetic gay humorist, journalist and novelist, talking plainly in public appearances and in his writing to a growing international audience. He published two more volumes of his serial, in 1982 and 1984, selling a quarter of a million copies in five international editions. There may be no other contemporary gay voice that has reached so far, to so many, with such unrelenting good humor—insisting all the while that gay rights are simple human rights *and* common sense.

At this interview, I found him in a new residence across town, a similarly snug studio overlooking the Castro, dominated by a mahogany sleigh bed—a family heirloom—that his mother shipped out to him from Raleigh, North Carolina, after he had come out to his family. The walls are playfully embellished with false cracks and mock water-spots in shades of peach and rose, rendered by artist Jim Stoker. A larger-than-life impasto portrait of the author by Don Bachardy (dominated by large, eerily doleful eyes on a background of baby blue) is countered on the facing wall by a 1928 French Naval recruiting poster, featuring heroic *matelots* in a landscape of palms and parrots. A portrait of Quentin Crisp, by New Orleans photographer George Dureau, hangs in the tidy kitchen nook. It is inscribed, with impeccable propriety, by Crisp: "To Mr. Anderson and Mr. Maupin."

Mr. Anderson also answers to Terry, and lives with Maupin. The bemused blond 27-year-old is blessed with skeptical eyes and a wry sense of humor—and a Southern ranch-water accent equal to Maupin's. The dedication in Maupin's new book reads: "For Terry Anderson, who took his time getting here."

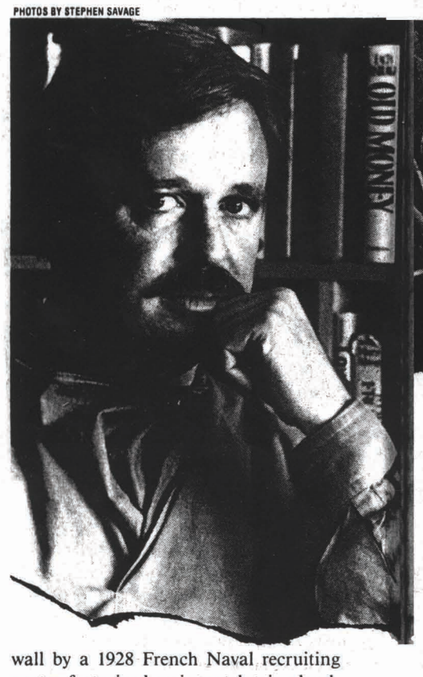
Now in his 43rd year, Maupin has much to be pleased about. He has weathered the storms that accompanied his forthright discussions of his friendship with Rock Hudson, and now finds himself healthy, happily in love, and welcoming the publication of his fifth novel, *Significant Others*. (The book, published by Harper & Row in early May, has already hit national best-seller lists.)

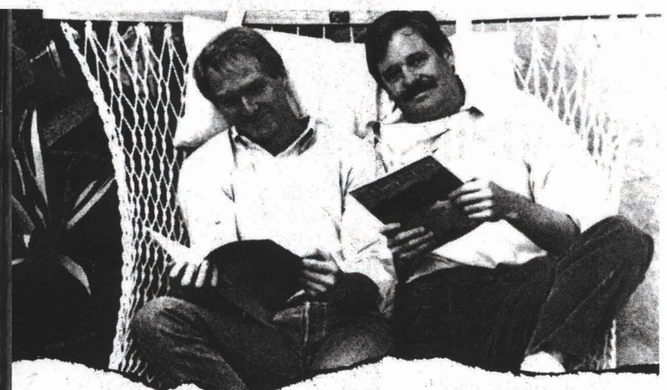
In plain terms, *Significant Others* is Maupin's finest work to date: an assured advance over his earlier volumes. Maupin has deftly enriched a signature cliff-hanger plot with insightful intimacy and emotional clarity that resonate long after the final page. In ever more troubled times, he trains a wicked and compassionate eye on his characters'—and many of *our*—most painful and hilarious dilemmas.

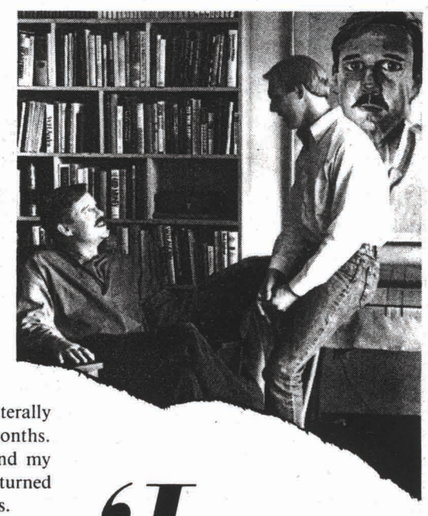
While readying for a national book tour, Maupin is already toying with plans for a sixth book in the *Tales of the City* series. He is planning a trip with Terry to the Greek island of Lesbos in the fall; he considers it a promising setting for the next installment of the serial. Gazing over some travel brochures, he confided, "I think I've found the perfect villa to rent: It has a view of Turkey, and is just down the road from a barracks that houses 600 18-year-old Greek boys." Obviously, he was already enjoying plot possibilities sure to daunt his editors on the daily paper and delight his fans.

After ushering Willy, his insistent long-haired russet poodle, out on the porch, we talked—over cannabis and iced tea laced with Equal—about his work, his politics and his career as a gay humorist, novelist and social critic in the age of dread. We laughed a lot.

PHOTOS BY STEPHEN SAVAGE







When did you first develop the idea for *Significant Others*?

I dreamed it up in the spring of 1985 when Steve Beery and I were renting a cottage in the Cotswolds, in England. I had gone there to research what I thought was going to be an "English" novel, and all I could think of was the redwoods of Northern California. I became intrigued with the idea of sexually exclusive summer encampments—specifically, the all-male Bohemian Grove and the growing phenomenon of women's music festivals across the country. Once I had the concept, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with it. It's the simplest story line I've ever had, and one of the most exciting to write.

But there was a year between the time you came up with that original concept and the appearance of the serial. That spring Rock Hudson was diagnosed with AIDS.

Yes. I actually lost a year. With Rock's diagnosis my life was just changed. It seemed to take over my life for a while there, and the book was put on hold. I literally fretted myself ill for an awful six months. I was feeling tired, run down, and my stomach was constantly burning. It turned out that I had given myself gastritis.

So, I had my own little AIDS hysteria, and learned a lot about myself in the process. The book really helped me work my way out of it. I realized, when I thought I might be dying, that I was lucky, I had a purpose in life—a way to talk about my experience. The books allow me to do that.

You have also talked a good deal on the road, traveling and speaking as—in the words of your press kit—a "gay personality."

[Laughs] I'm afraid Frankie FitzGerald laid that one on me in *The New Yorker*, and it became a convenient handle for other journalists. I've never described myself in that way. But I do feel a responsibility to live my life as publicly and honestly as possible. I know how important it was for *me* to have people to look towards. Christopher Isherwood made a huge difference in my life, because he showed me how wonderful it could be to be gay and 80. There've been times I've gotten really angry thinking of how little there was in the way of that kind of inspiration when I was a teen-ager. So I feel that one of my purposes in life is to put myself out there, to answer questions and to take the knocks as they come.

You took more than a few after Rock Hudson announced his diagnosis. Some people felt you shouldn't have spoken to the press about Hudson's homosexuality before he himself had.

Yes. Apparently a number of gay people still think homosexuality is the dirtiest secret of them all. I am sure that Rock himself felt that his AIDS announcement had been tantamount to an admission of

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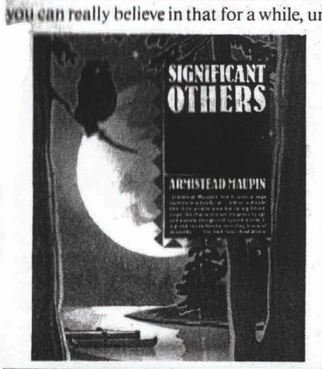
Armistead Maupin and his "significant other," Terry Anderson, at home. A portrait of the popular author by artist Don Bachardy (*above*) commands a special place in Maupin's book-lined cottage, which overlooks San Francisco's Castro district.

his gayness. He knew that the charade had come to an end, and many of his closeted friends—make that *all* of them—headed straight for the hills when the press came calling. That silence was damning, so I felt a duty to answer their questions as honestly and matter-of-factly as I knew how. It seemed to me that *someone* had to say that Rock had nothing to be ashamed of. There were people who regarded that as betrayal on my part; I saw it as going to bat for him. If Rock himself had seen it as betrayal he certainly wouldn't have asked his biographer to talk to me.

Did you lose any friends over your decision to talk to the press?

No. None that mattered. You know, when you first come out there's this little initial rush of being amongst others of your own kind—this thrill of brotherhood—and you can really believe in that for a while, until you start noticing what people's standards are, how they're really living their lives, whether they truly love themselves or whether they don't. It can make you a little lonely sometimes when maturity brings the eventual realization that gay people can be just as fucked up as anyone else. And that lots of them don't believe in the particular ideal of freedom that you believe in.



New tales and laughter in the age of dread

Of course, that cuts both ways—you find all kinds of people with their own standards or agendas for freedom. It's a problem that DeDe faces in *Significant Others*.

Yes. Actually, I probably felt closest to her of all of the characters in this book. Her whole dilemma in *Significant Others* involves the trauma of being a reformed debutante who is trying to fit into a women's music festival. One of her greatest embarrassments is that her stepfather is a card-carrying member of the Reagan Administration. The post he holds in the novel—by the *strangest* coincidence—is the same post that my father holds. And I sympathize with her because it's funny to be a scandal in your own family, yet to live in a world where your family is considered scandalous.

Did you worry about hurting your father's feelings with your characterization of Booter?

I asked his permission to use his credentials for Booter, and he granted it willingly. He's an adventurous ol' coot. I never worried about hurting or offending him, because I love all my characters, and I think that shows.

How would you describe your politics these days?

Actually, I'm fairly apolitical now. I'm scornful of most political solutions, because they almost always involve some compromise of the truth. Total honesty is still the most radical political act a gay person can commit—presenting yourself to the world exactly the way you are.

You came from a social setting where, had things gone a little differently—had you not gotten involved with these rag-tag gay activists—you might have ended up on that right-wing Terry Dolan-Spitz Channel cocktail circuit, raising money for the *contras*.

I well might have, and it makes my flesh crawl just to think about it. Fortunately, I got lucky. See, I think I embraced conservatism in the early days precisely because it was sold to me as the politics of the individual. Somehow that fit right in with my right to be who I was.

As we have seen over the past eight years, conservatives believe anything *but*. If the Supreme Court is sniffing into people's bedrooms in the matter of sodomy, obviously this is *not* a government that believes in minimal government interference in the personal lives of its citizens. It's not a government that Thomas Jefferson would have approved of at all.

Were you at all surprised to learn of this cabal of closeted right-wing fund-raisers?

No, not a bit. We've said for years that gay people are everywhere, as part of our own propaganda campaign, yet so many of us still refuse to believe it. Gay people *are* everywhere—in the Republican Party, in Jerry Falwell's church—everywhere.

And just being gay does not guarantee sympathetic qualities?

[Laughs] All gay men are not my brothers.

You have made no secret of your contempt for closeted people in positions of power.

No. I certainly haven't. For all our talk about civil rights, homosexuals aren't really a disenfranchised minority at all. We run networks, head up corporations, hold seats in Congress. Many of us use this age-old secret brotherhood—and sisterhood—to establish and maintain power. The Human Rights Campaign Fund—an organization for which I helped raise $150,000 last year—donates money to closeted gay politicians on the grounds that they'll "work for us on the inside." I don't buy that. We've had fags on the inside since the dawn of time, and where has it gotten us?

Gay periodicals—including *The ADVOCATE*—have published more than a few profiles that have collaborated with the subjects in concealing their sexual orientation. Does that offend you?

Very much so. I don't think that gay journalists—especially journalists working for publications that purport to have a social conscience—should tolerate that kind of homophobia.

But the gay press might say that these celebrities are actually doing us a favor, providing credibility and marketability by agreeing to an interview in the first place. Their cooperation is predicated on our willing discretion.

Every gay person I know cringes when they read a story in a gay publication about someone they know to be gay, and conspicuously absent is the reason they're in the magazine in the first place. How long are we going to put up with this? We've been good little boys and girls for so long that we're allowing people to die—to drop dead around us while a government refuses to take action. That's how far our so-called discretion has gotten us. How can we expect people to feel compassion for our suffering if they don't know who we are? Our invisibility is killing us as surely as AIDS is.

You've dealt with AIDS before, but *Significant Others* strikes me as your first novel to really ride the currents of dread.

Well, it involves finding a laugh in the middle of a holocaust. And somehow people manage to do that. Even in real life.

But is it harder to write? Is it harder to live?

The writing makes the living easier. I'm grateful that I have an outlet, a way to deal with it, to contain it. I'd be a much sadder and angrier person if I didn't have these stories to write.

I think one of the real strengths of this novel is its strong sense of place: its sure eye for the Bay Area. In the past you have worried about being pigeonholed or condescended to as a "San Francisco writer." You once even considered doing a serial based in New York.

Yes. For Clay Felker. *Walking Dogs*. [Laughs] About people walking their dogs in Central Park.

But Isherwood said to you: "Keep writing about San Francisco—that's your bailiwick."

Right, and he added, "Don't be silly, love. They'll eat you alive." [Laughs] It's the best professional advice anybody ever gave me. I still consider other projects from time to time, but when I think about leaving *Tales* I realize I would be leaving a huge chunk of myself behind—maybe even all of myself. Gore Vidal says that every writer has only six characters in him and that they keep coming back in different disguises. I'm sure that if I started on a "serious" novel I would find Mrs. Madrigal flouncing through the door in some other drag. This format seems to accommodate itself to any story I want to tell.

Do you feel that you learn things while writing the books?

Mrs. Madrigal teaches me things. She's a calm voice deep inside of me that doesn't get heard very often. By allowing her a permanent place in the books I force myself to listen to her.

Do you identify that voice with your mother?

My grandmother, actually. She was a suffragette in England just before the First World War, and I spent summers with her as a child. She was a vegetarian who read palms and studied theosophy—a wonderful, fey, loving woman. When I was a teenager we were walking to a garden party together in Raleigh, and there was a woman in front of us—a pink-and-white vision, sort of a Joey Heatherton type—tottering along in spike heels and a cloud of perfume. My grandmother squeezed my arm and said: "Any woman who is *all* woman, or any man who is *all* man, is a complete monster—unfit for human company!" I'd never heard anyone say anything like that before.

Well into her 80s, she dyed her hair champagne beige, wore huge picture hats, and was fond of reading palms at cocktail parties. The last time I saw her I'd been warned to be prepared for a big change—that she might not even recognize me. Sure enough, she was this little hunched-over thing with white hair—no longer able to dye it—and she had no idea who I was. I sat by her side for a long time, trying to give her clues, talking about my book and how much I loved San Francisco. It was very sad for me. She didn't seem to register a thing. Finally I got this brainstorm, and I stuck my hand out in front of her. She grabbed it, stared at my palm and said: "Teddy! You're in your *30s* now!" I *whooped* with relief. She was perfectly lucid from that point on: giving me specific instructions about my life, how to know when she'd be back. She believed fully in reincarnation, and spent her remaining days sitting in her room, fully dressed, holding a cane, as if she were waiting for a bus to take her to the next life.

This is the first of your books dedicated to a lover. And the first time you've written a book while living with someone. Did that have an effect on this novel?

[Laughs] Terry and I joke about which one of us gets to be DeDe and which is D'orothea from chapter to chapter. I've had a lot of lesbians approach me with kind words about my portrait of that relationship, wondering how I was able to do it. It was easy. I treated lesbians as if they were human beings. I get the same kind of compliments from heterosexuals who are *amazed* at my ability to write about heterosexual relationships. I'm writing about relationships—period. Any two people living together have a tendency to behave in certain ways after a while.

Now that the book is set in hard-cover, are there any things you are still unhappy with?

Welllll. . . [laughs] I have my doubts about my endings. I think I had a tendency this time to pull a happy ending out of thin air, but then that's what life is about anyway, so I'm not too hard on myself for erring in that direction.

There has been talk for ages about *Tales* being made into a movie, a TV series, even a Broadway musical.

Yeah. The most recent offer came from Warner Brothers, which wanted to make it into a weekly series for ABC. When I talked to them in depth, it became clear that most of the gay characters would be whittled away or reduced to campy walk-ons, because the networks *still* feel squeamish about the nonchalant depiction of homosexuality. There was also the issue of the period being dramatized. They wanted to change the 1976 story line to 1986, which is utterly preposterous; it's a different era altogether. Frankly, I'd rather wait until someone is willing to produce it the way I wrote it. Currently, Home Box Office owns the rights, but it's been on the shelf for years, and I expect it to remain there.

[Terry emerges from the study, joins us.] Armistead, how did you and Terry meet?

He was in charge of the speakers committee that brought me to Georgia State. He was the guy that met me at the airplane. I took one look at him and felt I'd known him all my life.

Terry: It was real instantaneous, that's for sure.

Terry, had you had any expectations?

I had not read *one* tale of the city. I was not a fan. [Armistead laughs]. In Atlanta, for me, he was known more as an activist than as an author. I first noticed him from his *ADVOCATE* piece "Design for Living," and fell in love with that. Before I met him, I'd been warned by this vicious Southern queen that he was a real prima donna. That guy is eating crow big-time these days.

So, Armistead: another happy couple brought together by *The ADVOCATE*?

Indeed! I also thought that any man who had been known to Xerox my writing and distribute it to large groups of people couldn't be all wrong. What I was drawn to in Terry was his complete sassiness. He was someone who felt exactly as I did about the world.

Now that you're in San Francisco, Terry, do you feel that you kind of jumped ship?

In some ways, because in Georgia I was more on the cutting edge in terms of being a fag. It's easy to be gay in San Francisco, because everything is so ghettoized, whereas in Atlanta, to live there and be who you are is lot more ground-breaking.

But you've helped organize the parade here for the past two years.

Yes, but I think it's lost some of its effectiveness. Gay rights have come so far here that a parade's almost unnecessary. It's exhausting to work on the inside, because *everything* has to be politically correct, every interest has to be represented. It's just so tiresome.

Armistead: You're catching him at a bad time. He's a little gayed out right now.

But what Terry is saying reminds me of what you said when I asked if you were going to the parade last year. You said: "Frankly, I don't need to eat lesbian falafels in front of City Hall to celebrate the pride I take in being gay."

Armistead: [Laughs] Oh, dear.

Terry: It's true, though. And I think a lot of the people who attend the parade are gay only on weekends and in the evenings. They haven't really come out at all.

But some people would say it's easier for you two, living in the Castro, doing what you do.

Armistead: You're probably right. That's one of the reasons I travel around, because I know people don't get to hear this often enough, don't get that wonderful sense of relief that comes with being told: "It's all right. Everything will work out. People will still love you." That's the *main* thing we're afraid of: that we'll lose the love of friends and family. I really think that despite all the talk about money—and that's the fashionable excuse this decade—it's really about love, about feeling out there and alone. Once you realize that coming out enables you to meet all the *best* people—it becomes a moot point. It isn't a heroic act at all. I'm not a particularly courageous or disciplined person. I wouldn't do anything that caused me discomfort for any length of time.

And it's worked for you and your characters. But folks are going to notice that *Tales* is highly romantic and idealized. . .

The whole message of *Tales* is that you *can* invent your own life. You can have *exactly* that degree of wonder and romance around you, if you choose to perceive it that way. All it takes is imagination. ■