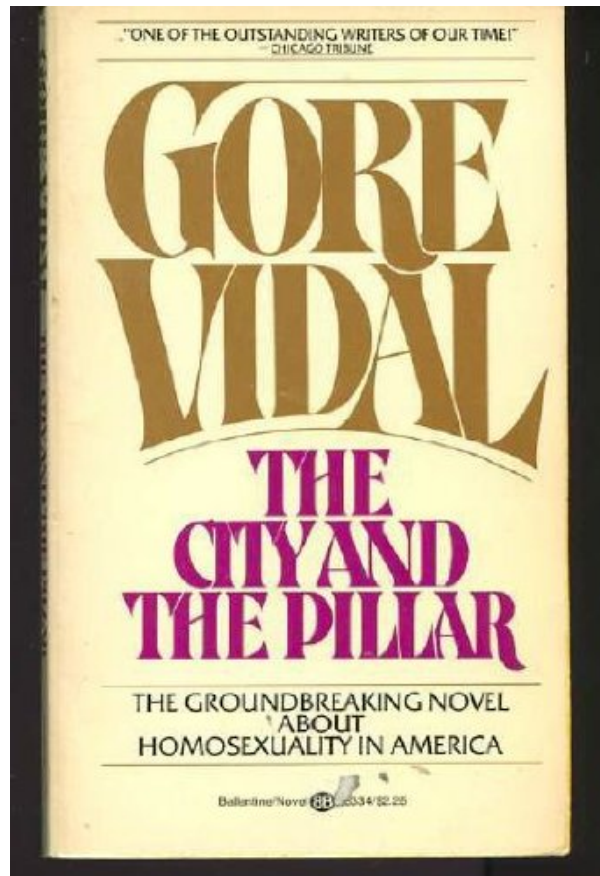


THE CITY AND THE PILLAR BY GORE VIDAL



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THE CITY AND THE PILLAR

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Review

A noble work -- Thomas Mann Certainly one of the best novels of its kind ... It isn't sentimental and it is frank without trying to be sensational and shocking. These are enormous virtues. -- Christopher Isherwood

About the Author

Gore Vidal was at the centre of literary and intellectual life for half a century and wrote 'The Narratives of a Golden Age' series as well as countless bestsellers. He died on 31st July 2012.

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Jim Willard, former high-school athlete and clean-cut boy-next-door-, is haunted by the memory of a romantic adolescent encounter with his friend Bob Ford. As Jim pursues his first love, in awe of the very same masculinity he possesses himself, his progress through the secret gay world of 1940's America unveils surreptitious Hollywood affairs, the hidden life of the military in the Second World War and the underworld bar culture of New York City. With the publication of his daring third novel *The City and the Pillar* in 1948, Gore Vidal shocked the American public, which has just begun to hail him as their newest and brightest young writer. It remains not only an authentic and profoundly important social document but also a serious exploration of the nature of idealistic love.

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Most helpful customer reviews

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Both historically, and at face value,

By Julie Vognar

I found this to be a fine book. The prose is spare, lean, direct--much like Jim, its protagonist. It does not have the eloquence or depth of Vidal's later work, but it doesn't TRY to--it stays within itself. The official amazon.com reviewer has said not to read it for the sex, and this is of course true. The only sex scene actually described is described metaphorically, but so beautifully as to inspire Thomas Mann to call it (in the words of one translator) "glorious." Vidal himself uses a more modest word in translating Mann's diary entry, though he's very proud that Mann credited this book with inspiring him to take up "Felix Krull" again.

The book is NOTHING like "Brokeback Mountain," either the movie or the short story. Although Jim resists for a time thinking of himself as gay, and spends the years between 17 and 22 on a quest for the lost love with whom he spent most of a weekend having sex near an abandoned slave cabin close to their homes in a small Virginia town, this quest is interrupted by fairly long-term relationships with other men, whom he meets after 'going to sea,' following in the footsteps of that lost love. The Hollywood actor and the sweet but not very successful writer, in Hollywood, New Orleans and further south--and then again in New York City,

where he meets both again, provide an interesting and very realistic sounding milieu for a young gay man on the loose in 1946 and shortly thereafter. He never has sex with a woman, and quits trying after one attempt with a woman he's very fond of.

The end of his quest--and I read the revised, less "black" version--made me scream "Oh no!" But after thinking about it a while, I shouldn't have been surprised.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

“But The Devil Had No Use For Him Either”

By The Wingchair Critic

Composed when he was in his early 20s, Gore Vidal's episodic 'The City and the Pillar' (1948) was one of the first American novels published that was overtly about homosexuality.

Concise written in plain language, the book tells the uncomplicated story of young, athletic Jim Willard, who, after a weekend tryst with close high school friend Bob Ford, makes his way into the larger world in search of Bob, who has shipped out as merchant marine. Idealizing their forty-eight hour adventure, Jim assumes their blissful relationship will necessarily continue if only he can locate Bob again. Masculine and 'all-American' like Bob, Jim initially shuns most homosexual and bisexual men, and doesn't believe himself to be either, as he thinks of Bob only as his physical and spiritual "twin."

But Jim's homosexual desire erupts in a variety of pleasant and unpleasant ways, leading him to southern California, where he becomes a sought-after tennis instructor. Taken up by the locals due to his dashing appearance, stolid Jim becomes the kept boy of a famous male Hollywood star, then the companion of a bitter, alcoholic New York City writer and later, enlists voluntarily for the war effort. All the while, Jim, who is of average intelligence and not terribly self-aware, continues seeking Bob, both in his heart and on the streets of America's cities.

Other than tackling the then-taboo subject itself, young Vidal wisely didn't attempt a great deal with 'The City and the Pillar.' The Hollywood party scenes, and others in which focus on the homosexual underground, are slightly ugly and reveal the author's disdain for effeminate men or those who identified themselves strictly in terms of their homosexuality. But the opening scene, which finds Jim alone and drunk in a dive bar, shows how well Vidal could write even at twenty-one years. Like Carson McCuller's 'Reflections in a Golden Eye,' 'The City and the Pillar' is short, confident, and tightly executed.

The original and more powerful ending, in which Jim, drunk and crazed with frustration, strangles Bob to death when the two finally meet again and Bob rejects Jim's advances, was completely rewritten for the 1965 edition, so that Jim rapes and then abandons Bob under the same circumstances.

Despite the downbeat ending, which would be typical of homosexually-themed novels for decades to come, 'The City and the Pillar' is not particularly depressing, since Jim is a fairly limited personality, not because Jim is a homosexual or Vidal tried and failed to make him a three-dimensional character, but because Vidal purposefully made Jim something of an empty vessel whose good fortune in life is largely the result of his youth, athletic talent and rugged looks. As the narrative makes its way evenly forward, nothing about it suggests that things are going to turn out particularly well for Jim and his quiet obsession, and the book is clearly not the kind of popular novel, written with commerce in mind, in which the hero or heroine faces adversity but inevitably succeeds in the end.

Vidal was involved in an unconsummated romantic relationship with the forty-three year-old Anais Nin at the time of the novel's writing, and an arid portrait of Nin appears in the reoccurring character of Maria, an

America-hating European woman with whom Jim tries, and fails, to have sexual intercourse and a normative heterosexual relationship.

Like Jim, year after year, Maria is consciously concentrating all of her time and energy on an endless search for fulfillment in love. But where Jim has his inevitable reunion with Bob as a fixed goal, Maria drifts from lover to lover, as Nin did in actuality. Nin hated the Maria character and the novel itself, and later in life, Vidal would have very little good to say about her, which is perhaps foreshadowed by Jim referring to Maria as "a goddess with a skull mask" and "the Death Goddess."

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Five Stars

By Goldie

One of the best books I have read in a very long time. Gore Vidal is amazing.

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