

June 27, 2013

# Dan Savage: By the Book

*The author, most recently, of “American Savage” keeps a copy of the “Anita Bryant Family Cookbook” on his shelves. Also: “Aflame for God,” a biography of Jerry Falwell.*

## **If you had to name a favorite novelist, who would it be?**

This question is unfair — to novelists, not to me. I mostly read nonfiction, typically history and biographies (I have dozens of books about the Second World War and dozens about the English Revolution, the Stuarts, James I and II, Charles I and II), so the size of my “favorite novelist” sample is tragically small. Gore Vidal’s “Julian,” his historical novel about the last pagan emperor of Rome, and Mary Renault’s “Persian Boy,” another historical novel, this one about a eunuch slave boy who falls in love with Alexander the Great after he conquers the Persian Empire, may be my two favorite novels. I’ve read them both at least four times each. But the last novels I read were Hilary Mantel’s “Wolf Hall” and “Bring Up the Bodies,” both of which I enjoyed tremendously. So, let’s just say that Mantel is my favorite living novelist?

## **Do you enjoy reading gay fiction? Any authors you’d especially recommend?**

Again, I’m not really into fiction. But my husband is a huge Steven Saylor fan — a fan of the murder mysteries Saylor sets in ancient Rome and a fan of the racier/pornier stuff Saylor writes under the pen name Aaron Travis. There’s a stack of Saylor’s books on my night stand. Terry is insisting that I read some Saylor/Travis on vacation this year and not the book I had been planning to read — another book about Charles I (“The King’s Peace: 1637-1641,” by C. V. Wedgwood). I “rescued” “The King’s Peace” from the lobby of a hotel in Kansas City earlier this year. There was a wall of books with beige bindings, and it was right at eye level, calling out to me, begging to be read. I don’t consider swiping a book that is being used as a decorative object to be theft. It’s a rescue. The last really good piece of gay fiction that I read was Mark Merlis’s “American Studies.”

## **What books might we be surprised to find on your shelves?**

I have so many books about queens. Tragic queens (“Queen of Scots: The True Life of Mary Stuart,” by John Guy), murderous queens (“Queen Isabella: Treachery, Adultery, and Murder in Medieval England,” by Alison Weir), adulterous queens (“A Royal Affair: George III and His Scandalous Siblings,” by Stella Tillyard), beheaded queens (“The Wives of Henry VIII,” by Antonia Fraser), queens with poor personal hygiene (“The Trial of Queen Caroline: The Scandalous Affair That Nearly Ended a Monarchy,” by Jane Robins) and truly crazy queens (“The Mad King: A Biography

of Ludwig II of Bavaria,” by Greg King). They’re my beach reading. But there are no books by or about drag queens on my shelves — which is odd, since I was a drag queen in my formative years. People might also be surprised to find “Bless This Food: The Anita Bryant Family Cookbook” and “Aflame for God,” a biography of Jerry Falwell.

### **Do you ever read self-help? Anything you recommend?**

I loved my mother very much, but she kind of ruined the self-help genre for me. She was big into self-help books — and religion — when I was a tween and a teen. Leo Buscaglia was right up there with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John as far as my mom was concerned. Her collection of self-help books got her through some tough years (the end of her marriage, having four children between the ages of 13 and 16 at once), and she thought they could help me. I was her sensitive kid, I was a loner, and she sensed that I was unhappy. But I wasn’t unhappy. I was closeted. The stress of keeping my sexuality secret from my siblings and parents was making me nuts. Once I came out, I was fine. But self-help titles drag me back to those unhappy days — my parents’ divorce, my time in the closet — and leave me feeling more anxious, not less.

### **What book has had the greatest impact on you?**

Strange as it sounds, the paperback edition of Mart Crowley’s 1968 play “The Boys in the Band.” I shoplifted a copy — this was a petty theft, not a high-minded rescue — from Unabridged Bookstore in Chicago, where I grew up. Unabridged is a terrific independent bookstore in Chicago’s gay neighborhood, and I was a closeted teenager who was too afraid to buy the book because what if the clerk knew someone who knew someone who knew my parents and it got back to my mom and dad that I bought a book about gay people? It’s crazy, of course, but the closet makes you crazy. Gay people have all sorts of different feelings about that play. Yes, the guys are vicious, and there’s a lot of drama and self-hatred on display. But “The Boys in the Band” gave me hope. These guys had friends, they had relationships, they had jobs and apartments. O.K., some of them were vicious jerks — but lots of people are, right? I read that play and figured: “O.K., one day I’ll come out and I’ll have lovers and friends. I’ll just try to find better ones.”

### **If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?**

“End This Depression Now,” by Paul Krugman.

### **If you could require all high school teachers to read one book, what would it be?**

It seems self-serving, but all high-school and middle-school teachers should be required to read “It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living.” It’s a collection of essays by contributors to the It Gets Better Project. Not all L.G.B.T. kids are miserable or being

bullied, but for the ones who are — particularly the queer kids who are being bullied by homophobic or transphobic parents (and those kids are at the greatest risk) — school can either be a place of refuge or a place of additional torment. There are stories in the book by kids who were saved by something as seemingly trivial as a kind word or gesture from a single teacher.

**If you could require all high school students to read one book, what would it be?**

The same.

**What books are in your kitchen?**

Terry cooks, I clean, so the books in the kitchen are all Terry's. He was a first-wave Martha Stewart fan/acolyte, so we have a worn, greasy, battered and batter-splattered first edition of "The Martha Stewart Living Cookbook." He also relies on Mark Bittman's "How to Cook Everything" and "Tom Douglas' Seattle Kitchen." Terry grew up in Spokane, Wash., and his family went camping a lot when he was a child. When he's feeling nostalgic, he cooks in the yard using a scary-looking cast-iron Dutch oven. It looks like a witches' caldron. He has a couple of cookbooks about Dutch ovens, but I've never seen him open one. When he wants to cook in his Dutch oven, he digs a pit, builds a fire, tosses some meat and vegetables in, and a couple of hours later we're eating like cave men. He also makes the most spectacular pineapple upside-down cake in that thing. I don't know how he does it.

**What books are on your coffee table?**

We have no coffee tables, so no coffee-table books. On the side table next to my chair in the living room is Jon M. Sweeney's "The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation." It was published in 2012 and it's already out of date. There was just one quitter pope in history back in 2012. Now there are two. Also, Aaron Hartzler's "Rapture Practice," a terrific new memoir about growing up gay in a fundamentalist Christian home and community. Hartzler was a guest on my podcast, and I just finished his book — it's terrific. What's most interesting about it is that Hartzler hasn't come out to his parents by the end of the book. It's a coming-out story without a big coming-out scene.

**If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?**

Gore Vidal. I admire his range, his passion and the rate at which he cranked out work. Novels, essays, plays. My process is very, very slow, and I am in awe of writers like Vidal. I'm in awe of writers who write like it's what they, you know, actually do for a damn living. I don't think writing comes easy to anyone. Writing is a painful process. But some writers have a higher tolerance for

pain. It makes me jealous. Also, “United States,” a collection of Vidal’s essays (including “The Birds and the Bees,” which I consider one of the best essays ever written about sex), was the first gift I gave to Terry after we started dating.

### **What do you plan to read next?**

My bossy husband insists that I start in on the stack of Steven Saylor/Aaron Travis books on my night stand. But last week I found a book about the writing of the King James Bible at the Fremont Sunday Market here in Seattle (“Majestie: The King Behind the King James Bible,” by David Teems). I may sneak that in first.



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