AFTERWORD

How could it be that I never heard of Sanford Friedman's amazing novel *Totempole*? How is it possible that I, a gay man of a certain age, who spent the first half my life covertly reading any novel that was rumored to have something—*any*thing—to do with homosexuality, and the second half of my life overtly reading just about every queer novel I could find, how is it possible that until very recently *Totempole* had entirely escaped my attention?

I was five when E. P. Dutton first published the book in 1965, and six when Signet released a mass-market paperback edition the following year (it was reprinted at least three times). I was a precocious and intrepid reader, but understandably *Totempole* eluded me in its first two incarnations. Still, how could I have missed the handsome edition that North Point Press published in 1984? By then I had made my way to New York City, worked in publishing (briefly), begun to publish stories, and routinely cruised the shelves of A Different Light and Oscar Wilde Bookshop, two of New York City's gay bookstores, and yet somehow *Totempole* managed to slide beneath my literary gaydar. In fact, it wasn't until 2013 when this new edition of the book was announced (nearly fifty years after its initial publication) that I finally, belatedly, and gratefully became a member of the *Totempole* tribe.

I had heard the book was a novel about two men having a love affair in a Korean prisoner-of-war camp, so I was unprepared for the first chapter, which in a stunning literary coup features an eerily authentic exploration of a two-year-old boy's interior world, while he vacations at the Jersey shore in 1930 with his older brother and his relentlessly bickering

parents. This seemed about as far from a gay love affair in a Korean POW camp as one could get, and I concluded I had been misled, or mistaken, and was reading a different book. Even so it was extraordinarily clear to me that this was a book about homosexuality—about the inherent, basic, and undeniable fact of homosexuality. I had never encountered a book that so indigenously represented a child's sexual experience of the world. I forgot all about Korea, and soldiers, and illicit love during wartime, and continued to read *Totempole*, with an ever-mounting fascination and almost disbelief: Could this book really be doing what it seemed to be doing?

Like Sanford Friedman, Stephen Wolfe, the hero of *Totempole*, was born in 1928, and the two have many things in common, though the Friedmans came from a more rarified world than the upper-middle-class Wolfes. Sanford's mother, Madeline Copland (Uris), was the sister of Percy and Harold Uris, the philanthropists and real estate entrepreneurs (the Uris Brothers Foundation gave more than $60 million to educational and cultural institutions in the New York area before closing its doors in 1989), and the cousin of Aaron Copland. Sanford's older brother, B. H. Friedman, was also a novelist, as well as a biographer and art critic. Like Stephen, Friedman attended a private high school in New York (Horace Mann), studied theater at university, and served for two years in Korea as a military policeman, where he was awarded a Bronze Star. After several years writing and producing theater (including a play by Arnold Perl based on the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the basis for the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*), Friedman turned to fiction and published four novels before his death in 2010: *Totempole* in 1965; *A Haunted Woman* in 1968, a roman à clef about Lee Krasner, with the theater world replacing the art world (the protagonist, an actress, is the widow of a brilliant director); *Still Life*, a collection of two thematically linked but narratively dissimilar novellas, in 1975; and *Rip Van Winkle* in 1980. (Friedman's final novel, *Conversations with Beethoven*, completed some years before his death but never published, will be released simultaneously with this edition of *Totempole*,

and will feature an introduction by Friedman's former partner, the poet and translator Richard Howard.)

Totempole was Dutton's lead fiction title in the fall of 1965, and the book was greeted with mostly hostile and condescending reviews. *Kirkus Reviews* called it a "homosexual novel," of which, the reviewer dismissively noted, "there have been several recently." According to *Kirkus*, this type of novel "elicits a problematical receptivity at best. The (clinically) established recoil from the homosexual may carry over into the literature about him." The review in *The New York Times Book Review* by Webster Schott (identified as the "poetry editor of *Focus/Midwest* magazine") is even more disturbing. Observing the book from a grudging distance, like a potentially dangerous curiosity, Schott decides that *Totempole* is nothing more than "a case of talent spent on a Cause." As the novel progresses and Stephen grows to accept himself, his body, his mind, and his sexuality, Schott believes "he acquires no additional dimension as a human being; and life itself flattens out . . . the acids of life evaporate. The complexities of personality disappear." In other words, by becoming a homosexual Stephen becomes a lesser, diminished human being: A homosexual character is interesting only when tortured and despondent. The review concludes: "The explicit homosexual novel now can be published in the United States. What has freedom wrought?" According to Schott, merely "a maudlin hash . . . a pretty good report on genteel deviant behavior."

Some critics, however, were welcoming and receptive. Granville Hicks, writing in the *Saturday Review*, declared "I do not know of any piece of fiction that deals more *perceptively* with pre-adolescence sex—wholly honest. . . . Friedman treats the homosexual theme, as he does the theme of infant sexuality, with great candor." And Hilton Kramer called *Totempole* "the most audacious affirmation of the homosexual experience by an American writer I have ever seen."

It's notable that all the reviews, positive or negative, treat the book as a special case (though to be fair, Dutton announced and advertised it as such). The hostile reviews made a point to welcome such books (in theory),

but it is clear that the welcome lasted only as long as these books about deviants did not challenge or offend the prevailing heterosexual status quo. Schott, in his *Times* review, states "I gather this is one of those novels that *had* to be written . . . a plea, eloquently phrased but fictionally weak, for homosexuality as a form of romantic love." Of course according to him the book fails in this attempt, resulting only in an "ungodly amount of Whitmanesque hugging, singing, dancing, kissing, etc." When *Totempole* was first published, a homosexual novel was still expected to end badly. Homosexuality had to be presented as a doomed and damning affliction from which the only recourse was drug addiction, alcoholism, suicide, or a miraculous conversion to heterosexuality. Homosexuality must be fatal, or must be renounced. The literary historian Neil Pearson, in his discussion of Michael de Forrest's 1949 novel *The Gay Year*, provides one example of this phenomenon:

> While use of the word "gay" to denote homosexuality can be traced back at least to the 1920s and Gertrude Stein, de Forrest may well have been the first to use it in a title. The author's blurb on the back panel falls over itself to proclaim de Forrest's heterosexuality, but the book itself attests to his ignorance: hardly an "attempt at understanding," as the blurb claims, more a toxic stew of prurient misconceptions which lurches to an end by having the central character find salvation in the arms of a woman.[1]

If the arms of a woman were not forthcoming, or were refused, the only alternative was suicide. This is made even clearer in a short summary, by Henry Gerber,[2] of another early gay novel, Niles Blair's (the pseudonym of

1. *They Were What They Were: A Catalogue of Early Gay Fiction: 1862–1960* (London: Natalie Galustian Rare Books, 2011).

2. Henry Gerber was a pioneering gay rights activist who founded America's first known homosexual organization, the Society for Human Rights (1924), and published the country's first known homosexual publication, *Friendship and Freedom*. Both the organization and the publication were short-lived: police arrested members of the organization, and the publication was declared obscene under the Comstock Act, as were all homosexual publications until 1958.

Mary Blair Rice) *Strange Brother*, published in 1931: "The author causes [the central character] to go through as many mental sufferings as she can, then puts a pistol in his hand and lets him shoot himself and end the book."

There were gay novels before *Totempole* that presented more positive views of homosexual life,[3] but they were few and far between, and *Totempole* stands apart even from these by virtue of its honest and unapologetic depiction of a homosexual child, a homosexual adolescent, and a homosexual man. In this way *Totempole* is inherently and heroically transgressive, an affirmation of homosexual existence that precedes the discovery of sex and sexual identity.

Totempole is not merely a book about homosexuality but a homosexual book. And I think this is what offended and frightened straight readers, and why the book is such a unique and powerful reading experience for gay readers. Our sexuality undoubtedly affects how we see and experience the world, and how we read and respond to books. For fiction to affect us, we need only an ability to sympathize and a willingness to understand characters who are unlike us; it is not necessary to identify with characters, to recognize ourselves in them. But when that happens—when a character's experience of the world corresponds with our own—a deeper and more profound connection arises between reader and book. And I imagine this connection is one that is frequently and regularly experienced by heterosexual readers, simply because the majority of novels are written from a heterosexual point of view. For a long time homosexual authors could not write forthrightly about their lives, and were forced to transpose genders or employ other codes or obfuscations, leaving gay readers to gaze into foggy, distorted mirrors. There is nothing foggy or distorted about *Totempole*. It is a book of almost unnerving clarity and brilliance.

Totempole is constructed like a totem pole, in discrete successive parts, each marked by a symbolic animal figure and each representing a distinct

3. Richard Meeker's *Better Angels* (1933), Gore Vidal's *The City and The Pillar* (1948), Harrison Dowd's *The Night Air* (1950), James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950), Lonnie Coleman's *Sam* (1959), to name but a few.

stage in Stephen's life. Skipping in this way through time, the novel succeeds in presenting Stephen as a constantly evolving creature, which is of course exactly what he is, especially during his childhood and adolescence. *Totempole* was a daringly conceived and executed novel when it was published, and its refusal to fill in the gaps, to coddle, may also have alienated readers. It can be frustrating: Stephen's parents, the inimitable Saul and Harriet Wolfe, disappear (as parents do) as Stephen reaches adulthood, and the reader misses them. In "Lice," the penultimate section, Stephen goes home from college for the Christmas vacation, but we hear nothing about it; the story resumes with his return to campus. And in "Rats," the book's final section, we get only a secondhand glimpse of Harriet through Stephen's letter to his brother. As with many homosexuals, Stephen's struggle to free himself, to *become* himself, increasingly removes him from his parent's sphere of influence.

This self-protective distancing from toxic parents may have been inevitable, especially at the time when the novel is set. By contrast, consider the fate of the homosexual teenage protagonist of *Still Life*, the first of two novellas in the book of the same name that Friedman published ten years after *Totempole*, in 1975. Danny Wahl, the son of cultured French Jewish parents, also lives in New York; unlike Stephen, Danny has two brothers and lives on the Upper East Side. The concerns and dynamics of *Still Life*, though pitched at a nightmarish level, are very similar to those of *Totempole*. The difference here is that Danny cannot escape from his family's (and society's) toxicity. It has, in fact, driven him into a mental institution, a cocoon where he has found some measure of peace and self-esteem. But at his mother's insistence he is returned home on a weekend pass to see if he can cope with "normal" life. It is obvious that he cannot: The first evening at home, unable to endure his mother's passive-aggressive manipulation and asphyxiating love any longer, he leaps out of his bedroom window onto Park Avenue.

Stephen Wolfe survives (and perhaps, if the final sentences of the book are any indication, flourishes) by escaping halfway around the world, to a culture where his sexuality is accepted. Through his love affair with Sun Bo he comes to understand that being penetrated—the interaction he has

feared in both literal and symbolic ways—is not a submissive act. It is a form of "self-assertion" that brings him to the brink of death—or a new life: "Stephen thought his heart had stopped, before he heard himself let out a long ecstatic cry… now, in the midst of ecstatic joy, he realized he was being born." "Being born"—these words are echoed on the final page of the book when Stephen realizes he has lost, or freed himself from "some central part, some fiercely personal, yet antenatal, even prehistoric part he would have thought he could not live without" and is "being borne back to the Pacific Coast…" A new life requires a new world. Stephen is returning home but to the opposite coast from the one he grew up on, to San Francisco, a city that has always welcomed the other and is poised on the brink of a social revolution.

Totempole is an unusual gay novel: It isn't about life in the closet, and it isn't about coming out. It's about the space in between those two stages of gay life, a complex and murky area that has not often been written about: coming out to oneself. Things are (mercifully) changing for gay youth, at least in certain parts of the world, and young people are assuming their homosexuality without first dragging themselves out of a swamp of fear and shame and self-loathing. Before accepting himself—before he is born again—Stephen spends most of this book in that swamp, in a never before charted literary territory. *Totempole* is a unique and seminal novel that unequivocally and in the boldest possible terms states what it feels like to grow up, and be, homosexual.

And so perhaps Webster Schott was right, at least about one thing: *Totempole* "is one of those novels that *had* to be written."

—Peter Cameron