

sex, and culture.

Ruff divided the 32 short stories into nine distinct sections, each corresponding to various emotional themes in the lives of gay men and lesbians. His titles are visceral and set the tone for what awaits the reader. The breadth of the writers is vast and includes such literary icons as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and contemporary writers Sapphire and Charles Harvey. Here too are works that Ruff rescued from anonymity such as one by Alice Dunbar-Nelson written almost a century ago.

Family can be the site of emotional turmoil for anyone discovering their sexuality. In "Blood is Thicker Than Water" desperate characters struggle with the constraints of their history and the blurry boundaries of family ties. Jacqueline Woodson's protagonist in "What Has Been Done to Me" wanders through a painful reunion with her mother in the neutral territory of New Orleans. Pauline and Mama have disparate memories of Pauline's youth—memories that contain events that Mama denies and Pauline has spent twenty years rendering impotent. They remain strangers.

The four selections in "Behind Closed Doors" represent longing—wanton, illicit, raw—realized or not. "The Place of Excrement" by Samuel R. Delaney details the crudely titillating sexual encounter of a homeless man and a New York graduate student. Although worlds apart from John Edgar Wideman's tale of a jogger's fantasy, both speak of the place where choices are made with little regard for the consequences.

Maude Irwin Owens wrote "Bathesda of Sinners Run" in 1928, yet her message of compassion and understanding still rings true. This story, like others in "Blood, Sweat, and Tears" chronicles faith, hypocrisy, and acceptance. In Owens' transcendent tale, Bathesda is a fourth generation "needle-woman" and first in her family to be born a free person. Although she lives a life of simplicity, Bathesda is challenged when she is set upon by the ignorant sisters of a woman whose son she healed.

Ironically, in the aftermath of the ambush and beating, Bathesda undergoes a transformation.

Writers often mine the dark side of life when writing about human experience. Fear and vulnerability are the focal point in "Bashers." Poignant, disturbing—these are the psychological nightmares no one wants to talk about. Max Gordon exposes the cruel naivete of a grade-school boy in "Babylon." Corbin sneaks out around 3:00 a.m. each day to play a sadistic video game in a convenience store. His fate is sealed when he witnesses an event not unfamiliar to his numbed conscience. Walking home one morning, he stumbles upon a vivid scene in an alley. Corbin eats his Milk Duds while watching the action. " 'If you say it's okay, kid,' the tall man said, 'I'll kill him.' Corbin didn't know what to say. He shrugged....the tall man standing opened up his arms and the man from the ground slid through them. The man from the ground went down, slow motion like. His cheek hit the ground with a final solid smack, and his eyes slammed open, shocked. They stared at Corbin's candy box." To the people inhabiting these stories appearances can have a deadly effect.

Not surprisingly, the final section is about hope and love. Rather than seeming too neat or trite, Ruff's selections allow one to wash away the bitter taste of violence with ecstatic fantasy. Fittingly, Carolivia Herron's imaginative "Epithalamion" speaks of love—as realized through the passionate longing of woman for woman, man for man. "Desire is the name of the tapestry beyond which you have passed, desire of human life for human life. Bodies urging one toward another with sweetness the trembling in the flesh covering the stomach, the rising accentuating sex, the trembling chest all echoing there upon cloth the tapestry of your desire."

Go the Way Your Blood Beats is a distinctive collection—a melding of intense perceptions and diverse experiences regarding homo- and bisexuality. Through his meticulous selection, Ruff has added a long-missing piece to the ever-growing African-American literary canon. As readers encounter the fear and ignorance that fuel racism and homophobia upon these pages, perhaps it will become clear that being different isn't so bad after all. Maybe they will see that being different just is.

Barbara Bond lives in Portland, OR. She has contributed to Outlines, a Chicago monthly, and the San José biweekly OutNow!

Loading the Canon

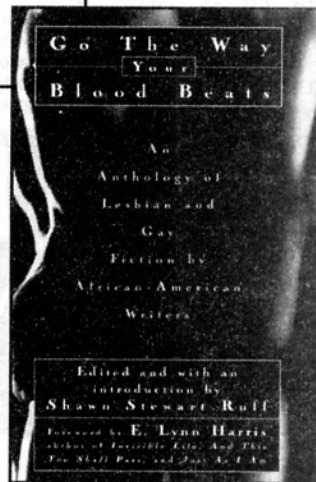
by Barbara Bond

Go the Way Your Blood Beats

An Anthology of gay and lesbian fiction by African-American Writers

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When Shawn Stewart Ruff compiled **Go the Way Your Blood Beats** he took a risk. Instead of choosing fiction written by African-American gay men and lesbians, he chose to represent the various facets of gay and lesbian life as viewed by African-American writers. A subtle difference perhaps, but his insightful decision shaped an anthology that will enrich and challenge readers. Encompassing almost a century of literary tradition, **Go the Way Your Blood Beats** seeks to explicate the complex relationships between race,



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