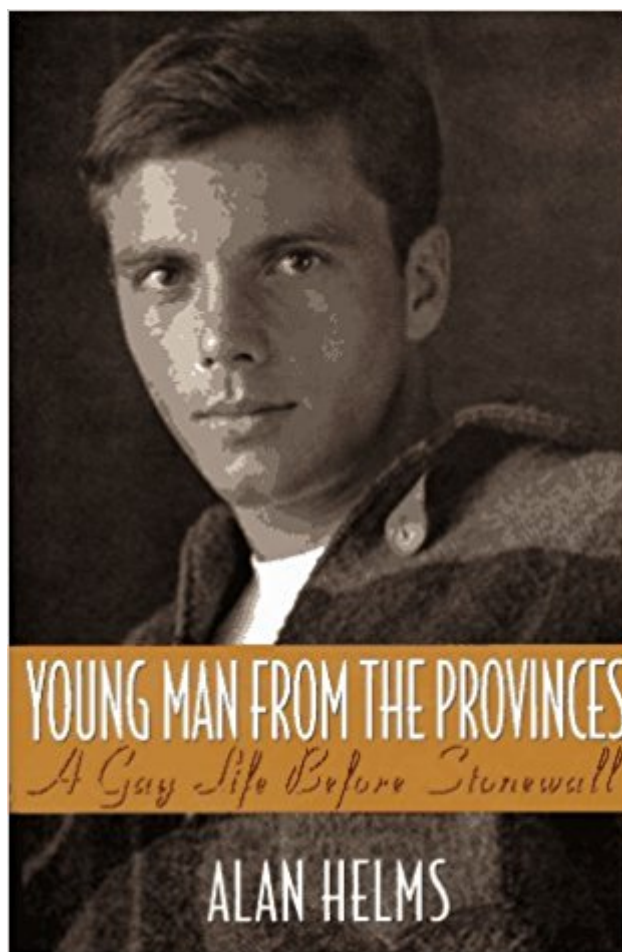


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Young Man From The Provinces: A Gay Life Before Stonewall



Synopsis

Helms vividly brings to life the time just before Stonewall and the Gay Liberations Movement in this poignant, insightful, often humorous remembrance of his journey from a midwestern adolescence to a self-absorbed life as a male model in New York and Europe in the 1960s, ending with his self-acceptance as a gay man in a homophobic society.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In his 20s and early 30s, Helms was at once the most privileged and self-destructive of men, at the giddy peak of his career as "the most celebrated young man in all of gay New York." The Manhattan of the 1950s and '60s embraced the Columbia student as a "U.T."—a "universal type," or "someone everybody wants," photographed by Avedon, directed by Edward Albee and pursued by any number of men. Repudiating the drab miseries of his Indiana boyhood, Helms pursued those who pursued him: his more celebrated lovers included Anthony Perkins, Larry Kert and Luchino Visconti. Leonard Bernstein wooed him ardently, and chum Noel Coward helped Helms reconcile with a lover. But the relationships were doomed to fall apart, as Helms (held aloft by adoration, alcohol and drugs; brought thuddingly to earth by excess—bulimia; alcoholism; joyless, frenetic promiscuity) began to self-destruct. Self-acceptance came with the more temperate joys of work as a college professor and with counseling from the Harvard psychologist Robert Coles. As he grew older, Helms was better able to distance himself from the past. Because Helms is neither an elegant nor a modest writer, the reader is less willing to repudiate his glittering excesses; Helms's vigorous name-dropping has more charm than the somber self-reproaches that accompany his sobriety. This

self-described "D student in the school of life" depicts a New York that, after the Stonewall riots, would never be as closeted?or as cozily familiar?again. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Even if you don't recognize Helms as the epitome of New York's and Europe's golden "boymen" during the late 1950s and 1960s, you will appreciate his poignant, picaresque memoir, which vividly captures with humor and insight the chronicle of his journey: from the unhappiness of his abusive, alcoholic family life in Indianapolis and an overwhelming need for acceptance, seemingly fulfilled by becoming a cynosure in the world of the beautiful people, to his aborted careers as a model, actor, and writer. Among the many names dropped are friendships with Noel Coward, Leonard Bernstein, and Luchino Visconti and affairs with Larry Kert, Tony Perkins, and scores of other famous and/or handsome young men. But after years of addiction to the gym, cigarettes, adulation, booze, sex, dope, and later drugs and bulimia, Helms finally faces his fears and creates a new life as professor of literature at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. For gay studies collections. James E. Van Buskirk, San Francisco P.L. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Actually, the memoir goes beyond the 60's, but the 50's and 60's were the time when the author was the "Golden Boyman" -- the most attractive & sexiest gay man in New York. Although few people knew it, Alan was also an emotional wreck: not only did he have an extremely abusive childhood, like every other gay man at the time he was considered a sinner, a criminal, & mentally ill to boot. Well, how would you react if the great mass of your fellow citizens thought you were scum, and highly disposable scum at that? Alan's incredible beauty led him on a wild roller-coaster ride in the gay world, where he was introduced to such people as Noel Coward (a neighbor), Leonard Bernstein, Steven Sondheim, Marlene Dietrich, Edward Albee...well, the list could be extended with another hundred names, many of them "scum" just like Alan. Of course, beauty fades like the rose, and inevitably Alan had to deal with his lost looks and try to lead some sort of normal life -- very difficult with a monkey on his back (booze). He survived, and became a professor of English. But what a life! What a story! Highly recommended.

A fascinating chronology of a young man who is blessed with good looks and high intelligence but burdened with an alcoholic father and dysfunctional family from an unsophisticated mid-Western background. It is the story of how he escapes the homophobia and narrow mindedness of his background to wallow in the overly free gay world of pre-Aids New York of mid-Century. He barely

escapes HIV (preceding it by several decades) but his friends do not, and along the way encounters the highly sexualized, promiscuous and talented world of an earlier New York City, befriending and becoming intimately involved with many of the literati and gliteratti of the period, among whom are the likes of Noel Coward, Stephen Sondheim, Anthony Perkins , Leonard Bernstein, Lucino Visconti and others. He ultimately struggles with his reputation of being "the most famous piece of ass of my generation" and realizes that his destiny has higher goals, gets a PHD in English, moves to Boston, and settles into a more sedate but arguably safer and saner academic world of Professorship. Through all of this he moves from the purely physical world of youth and gay culture into the more mature but challenging world of ideas and learning. He learns too late to appreciate the love given him by his family of origin. The book is an honest appraisal of a gay life marked by opportunity, tragedy and ultimately deep insight into the human condition.

I am introducing this book on [...], a site for and about memoir. The introduction will appear in June. It would be hard for me to be more enthusiastic about this book which gives a full sense of the author's life as a golden boyman in the days before Stonewall, when he was famous and desired. And it gives a rich sense of how coming from a brutal home life, with an alcoholic father and a beleaguered mother, effected his very shaky sense of self-worth, how this became the basic for many of his choices and how long it took, how hard he worked, to become a very different person. I think it's an essential read for anyone interested in recovery, and for those interested in the pre-Stonewall history.

This is a candid and powerful account of Helms' journey of growing up in 1940's Indianapolis in an alcoholic home, attending Columbia University on a scholarship, navigating his way through the gay beau monde of New York in the 1950's and 60's as a highly desirable young man, burning out on his lifestyle, and eventually settling into a more sedate life in Boston as a middle-aged professor. In large part, the memoir swings between the poles of Helms' agony and ecstasy. The agony was that Helms was a deeply wounded and insecure young man who was emotionally unprepared for his high octane life in New York. Despite the constant stimulation of sex, drugs, travel, and celebrity, he feels depleted and empty, suffering, at times, from insomnia, bulimia, and suicidal thoughts. The ecstasy was the thrill of that same lifestyle. Helms was one of the most desirable young men of his time, and the temptations surrounding him were thrilling and irresistible. It's titillating and exhausting simply reading about his constant exploits. Helms was lucky to survive all his excesses; many of his contemporaries did not. Some of his recovery was due to that nascent part of him that wanted to be

whole, the person who sought out therapy, a twelve-step program, and a teaching career outside New York. And much of it was simply the result of the diminishing opportunities that come with middle age. This book tells a remarkable story. It shows that so many of the forces that compel us through life are unchosen: our family background, our sexual orientation, our physical and intellectual capabilities, the era in which we come of age. It's also a cautionary tale that no one can get enough of what he really doesn't need, be it sex, money, drugs, power, or fame. This account also shows that with courage, luck, and grace we can find our way to a more authentic life, one we can respect and call our own.

OMG what a psychologically messed up kid. Professor?? Whew! By a sexologist in Durango.

A somewhat interesting autobiography with some insights that were new. I purchased the book because Henri Nouwen read it and I thought it worthy to read.

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