

ARTISTS & ENTERTAINERS

CHRISTOPHER BRAM
AUTHOR, *FATHER OF
FRANKENSTEIN*

"Twenty-two years ago, when he was the editor of *Christopher Street* magazine, Patrick Merla published an unsolicited short story by an unknown kid from Virginia. He gave me my first big break—and not just as a writer but as a gay writer. I've written as a gay man ever since," says Christopher Bram, author of seven books, including *Father of Frankenstein* (the basis of the film *Gods and Monsters*) and the recently published *The Notorious Dr. August*.

"In his years at *Christopher Street*, then the *New York Native*, Merla introduced scores of young writers to print, including Douglas Sadownick (*Sex Between Men*), Sarah Schulman (*Raf Bohemia*), and Ed Sikov (*On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder*). He worked with established authors as well, the brand names of gay lit—Edmund White, Andrew Holleran,

Samuel Delany—yet when he put together his wonderful anthology, *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*, he pursued not just the famous but a whole new set of fresh voices—Alex Chee, Rodney Christopher, and William Sterling Walker.

"Editors are the chameleons of literature: They are invisible if they do their job right. As anyone who's ever met or worked with Merla will attest, he is not invisible in person. Yet his personality never shows on the page. The work he's edited has nothing in common except high quality and the secret fact that it has become better while passing through his hands.

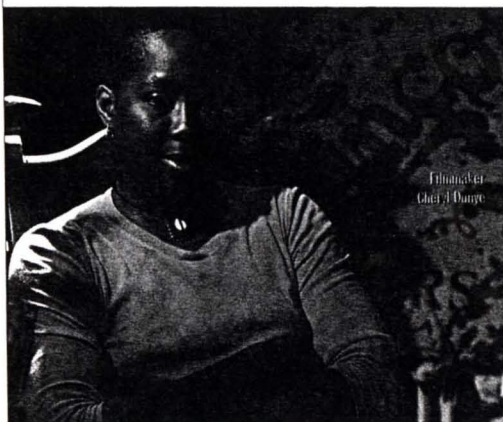
"Merla is currently the editor of *The James White Review*. He continues to publish younger writers but does not forget the old. Recent issues were devoted to the fiction of James Purdy and the poetry of the late Tim Dlugos. For over 25 years now, Merla has been adding the new to the

old, assembling a pyramid of books that should enable us to see the future more clearly. Gay life would be a different, smaller, flatter place without him."
—Michael Giltz

CHERYL DUNYE
FILMMAKER, *THE
WATERMELON WOMAN*

"Michelle Parkerson is a trailblazer for a lot of people. She's a D.C.-based documentary-fictional filmmaker and an out African-American lesbian," says Cheryl Dunye, who goes into production this summer on her second feature, *Stranger Inside*. "Michelle invented the politics that I believe in for filmmaking and set me up to become who I am, not just as a filmmaker but as an African-American woman. She's done pieces on drag kings, *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, and recently, poet Audre Lorde.

"I first saw her work when I was an undergrad at Temple University back in the mid '80s. I thought, *Wow, this woman is* ▶



Filmmaker
Cheryl Dunye

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES HARRIS

onto something. I was just figuring out how to make work, but she was actually speaking the words with her work that I wanted to speak. She rose above queer politics and lesbian-gay politics by being out back in the early '70s and making documentaries about the subjects she wanted to make when no one was doing it or funding it. I always consider her [opinion] a litmus test on my work." —M.G.

PAULA VOGEL
PLAYWRIGHT, *HOW I
LEARNED TO DRIVE*

"In 1969, as a freshman at Bryn Mawr College, I met Prof. Adrienne Lockhart. She was an extraordinary woman—the most popular teacher on campus; her classes were always filled," remembers Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel. "[Lockhart] did many things—she drove a truck across Australia in the summer, she was the female judo champion of Australia, and her classes were standing room only. She also encouraged us to ask questions, to love W.H. Auden poems. She cooked curry dinners for freshmen. And she told me to take my writing seriously. She told me I was meant to be a playwright. And I believed her.

"But most important, gently, quietly she let me know that she was gay by introducing me to her lover, another intense and brilliant woman, when I was 19. I was grappling with the torments of lesbian sexual identity at the end of the '60s. When I saw the way these two college professors looked at each other across the room, the floor opened under my feet. I re-



Designer Todd Oldham (above) is inspired by filmmakers; writer Paula Vogel, by a teacher.

peated it as a mantra in the years ahead: "Adrienne Lockhart, this brilliant, beautiful woman, is a lesbian! That quiet courage, that role-modeling for me—one could teach, one could write, one could drive trucks and compete and be admired and giving and be a lesbian—gave me an example to follow. I entered graduate school in 1974, determined to teach, the year that she succumbed to breast cancer." —M.G.

RITA MAE BROWN
AUTHOR, *RUBYFRUIT
JUNGLE*

"My inspiration was Aristophanes. The quality of his work, the outrageousness of it, made me realize that true comedy is much more difficult and glorious to do than tragedy. And that was the path I wanted to follow," says Brown, who has had 24 books pub-



lished since her saucy lesbian debut novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, in 1973. "As for gay influences," says Brown, "there weren't any. Not that I knew. Not at that time. The only lesbian I knew was Sappho. Nobody was out, so why bother with trying to find a model? You just had to go do what you had to do. And I wanted to write, so that's where my energies went.

"*Rubyfruit Jungle* was the only book I could write at that time. That's where my skill level was. And I was very young—I was 27. I don't remember how long it took me to write. I remem-

ber it took the summer, maybe four months. I just remember wishing I had air-conditioning."
—Anne Stockwell

MARCUS HU
COFOUNDER,
STRAND RELEASING

"Back in the '70s and '80s there were few out Asian men," says Marcus Hu, co-founder of Strand Releasing, which since 1989 has been a leader in distributing gay and lesbian independent films. "I remember being in high school and flipping channels on the TV, and I saw this handsome Asian man, Arthur Dong, who identified himself as

gay. He was attractive, and even though I hadn't seen his films, I sought them out and was totally in awe of him. Arthur has become both a friend and a colleague. He gave me the inspiration to do what I wanted to do, which was pursue film and not be afraid or ashamed of

TODD OLDHAM
FASHION DESIGNER

"The directors John Waters and Gus Van Sant have been really important to me," says designer and director Todd Oldham, who's working on a script he plans to shoot next year. "I saw [Waters's] *Female Trouble* in a movie theater in Dallas, and my jaw was on my lap the entire time. It inspired the first five years of my design career. And Van Sant's *Mala Noche* is so beautiful, so pretty—it's a fairy tale brought to life, in an intriguing way." Oldham particularly admires how both directors tackle gay subject matter without being boxed in by it. "The gay parts are just included," says Oldham. "The movies are never defined by them." —M.G.

what I am—a film nerd. "But my mentor is definitely Gregg Araki, another Asian role model, who was gay back when we first met but is now decidedly straight. Gregg taught me everything I know about no-budget filmmaking; he hooked me up with the Sundance Institute; he taught me and legions of other filmmakers how to get things done cheaply and efficiently. Most of all he is completely a filmmaker in the real sense: He is capable of writing, directing, shooting, and editing his work. I am eternally grateful to Gregg." —M.G.

ROSS BLECKNER
PAINTER

"Unfortunately for many gay people, there really was no one," says painter Ross Bleckner. "Gay men from previous generations never thought of it as their responsibility to create role models of themselves to make it easier for younger gay people.

"The historical figures who were known to be gay weren't much comfort either. You couldn't glean who they were as political and social entities through their sexuality. It was hinted at, but you had to read between the lines. And reading between the lines is discouraging. That's the social model most gay people had to deal with. Hopefully, the generation that is established now will feel the responsibility to be out so that younger gay people don't have to do that anymore." —M.G.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES HARRIS