

# **Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America Study Guide**

**Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America by Mel White**

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# Contents

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <a href="#">Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America Study Guide.....</a> | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>   | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>   | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter One, In the Beginning—The Ghost of Silence.....</a>                   | <a href="#">4</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter Two, Adolescence—The Ghost of Fear.....</a>                           | <a href="#">5</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter Three, High School—The Ghost of Loneliness.....</a>                   | <a href="#">6</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter Four, College—The Ghost of False Hope.....</a>                        | <a href="#">7</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter Five, 1962-1964, Learning to Tell the Truth.....</a>                  | <a href="#">9</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapter Six, 1964-1970, Learning About Friendship.....</a>                    | <a href="#">10</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Seven, 1970-80, Taking the First Steps Toward Integrity.....</a>      | <a href="#">11</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Eight, 1980-81, Facing Reality.....</a>                               | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Nine, 1981, Surviving Infatuation and Isolation.....</a>              | <a href="#">13</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Ten, 1982-83, It's Going to Be All Right, Dad!.....</a>               | <a href="#">14</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Eleven, 1984-90, Giving Up the Ghost.....</a>                         | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Twelve, 1990-91, One Last Year of Silence.....</a>                    | <a href="#">17</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Thirteen, 1991-93, A Ghost No More!.....</a>                          | <a href="#">19</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapter Fourteen, 1993-94, Time for Doing Justice!.....</a>                   | <a href="#">20</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>   | <a href="#">21</a> |
| <a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>   | <a href="#">24</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes.....</a>   | <a href="#">26</a> |
| <a href="#">Style.....</a>  | <a href="#">28</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>   | <a href="#">30</a> |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>  | <a href="#">32</a> |

# Plot Summary

*Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America* is the story of pastor and ghostwriter Mel White, who was once a major ghostwriter for leaders of the Religious Right, including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Billy Graham and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, but simultaneously struggled with his sexuality. Today White is an openly homosexual religious and political activist, but he grew up in a Christian evangelical household where homosexuality was never talked about and was considered a sin.

*Stranger at the Gate* is an autobiographical work that focuses on White's relationship to his homosexuality. White was never attracted to women but nonetheless married Lyla and had two children, Erinn and Michael. It was only in middle-age that White's sexuality became too much for him to bear, leading him to come out of the closet and leave his family for his life partner Gary Nixon. For most of his life, White struggled with depression, anxiety, self-hatred, and engaged in numerous attempts to eliminate his homosexual identity, including prayer, counseling and even more extreme methods like electroshock therapy.

White's family and culture knew nothing about homosexuality and never spoke about it. White grew up popular, handsome and athletic. He dated lots of girls. No one ever suspected he was gay. Towards the end of high school, White started dating his future wife and they married towards the end of college. He loved Lyla but she could ultimately never satisfy him sexually. White grew up with a great verbal and theatrical talent, producing a number of widely respected films within the Christian community. He also attended Fuller Theological Seminary and served as a minister for three years before transitioning into ghostwriting. As he became more famous, he started to work for major figures in the evangelical community; eventually, however, he realized that their political agenda was dangerous. White ends the book with his decision to leave the closet in order to fight the lies and misinformation he believed was being spread by his employers.

*Stranger at the Gate* contains fourteen chapters that move chronologically through White's life. The first four chapters explain White's youth, starting from his childhood, moving through adolescence, high school and college. Chapters five, six and seven take White through the sixties and seventies and his increasing stress and struggle to do without true male intimacy. Chapters eight through twelve take White through the eighties, which includes his rise to prominence, coupled by his decision to end his marriage and leave the closet. Chapters thirteen and fourteen explain how White's life had changed in the early nineties and how he became dedicated to the struggle for homosexual rights.



# Chapter One, In the Beginning—The Ghost of Silence

## Chapter One, In the Beginning—The Ghost of Silence Summary and Analysis

Mel White recalls hearing a young seminarian preach at a church camp he attended when he was twelve. The seminarian explained that masturbation was a gift from God and invited the boys to ask him questions about sex. Mel wondered why he was only attracted to boys but was afraid to ask. In those days, that is, in 1952, no one talked about homosexuality. The Religious Right did not exist, nor did televangelists attack homosexuality as the scourge of society. The forefathers of the Religious Right were like the parents who phoned the camp to have the seminarian sent home. Today, they attack homosexuality based on gross misinterpretations of Scripture, Catholics and Protestants alike.

Nonetheless, Mel White considers himself a child of the Religious Right, raised in evangelical nondenominational churches by an incredibly devout family, always in the thick of the evangelical movement. Among his family members, his grandmother Noni was the most outgoing and zealous. She kept the family inspired and while she didn't scream and yell, she kept the fires of hell burning in White's mind. She, like so many other Christians, believed in a war between the body and the spirit and that the spirit must conquer the body. Noni herself had always felt pressed to be perfect, since when her sister Ruth was killed, she was conceived as a replacement.

One of White's first homosexual memories was dancing in Indian dress at a camp meeting with a bunch of other boys. Across the group, he made eye contact with a boy named Darrel. Darrel ran over and put his arm through White's and they danced together. The next day, the boys all went home and White couldn't do anything but think about Darrel. He eventually found photos of the camp boys and tried to track him down but couldn't. White had fallen in love for the first time. He now sees God's grace in his feelings, because it showed him that love, homosexual love, between men was pure and beautiful.



# Chapter Two, Adolescence—The Ghost of Fear

## Chapter Two, Adolescence—The Ghost of Fear Summary and Analysis

No one suspected that White was gay as an adolescent. He was tall, blond, gifted and was elected student-body president of Mission Hill Junior High. While he may have looked happy to everyone from the outside, on the inside he was miserable, feeling guilty and alienated due to his homosexual desires. He knows now that his desires aren't his fault and that there is nothing wrong with having them. And he also knows that he can't blame anyone in his community. He can't blame Noni; she didn't know any better. He can't blame his father, the self-made man's man who he always felt somewhat alienated from. And he can't blame his mother, a strong, but passive mother totally committed to Jesus. They all gave him a rich life, them and his community and childhood pastors.

In fact, White has no idea where his self-hatred came from. No one imposed it upon him and no one mentioned homosexuality to him. He simply hated himself and still cannot understand it. To avoid detection, White pretended to like girls and was intent on not letting anyone know that he liked boys. He worried constantly about getting an erection in the locker room. When he'd share beds with boys at sports events or camps, he'd have to restrain his desperate desire to hold hands or touch.

White's second male crush was on a classmate named Johnny B., a beautiful and fit member of the track team. White had learned to avoid anyone he might be attracted to and tried not to be Johnny's friend but Johnny insisted. White was terribly disappointed to learn that he had a girlfriend. One day when White heard the term "Sodomite" and that it was taken to refer to men who had sex with other men who were killed by God in the Bible he decided to research what the Biblical destruction of Sodom was really all about. He found out that, in fact, Sodom was destroyed for many reasons, not one of which seemed tied to homosexual sex.

White had no idea about homosexual orientation when he developed his third male crush on Peter W., a shorter, exceptionally built sports friend who he often shared beds with. At night, White would watch Peter sleep and struggle to control his urge to touch him sexually. He is amazed that today those with homosexual desires can meet and talk about their struggles. But at these places, one will always find hateful members of the Religious Right. White recalls that a friend of his family was killed by a male prostitute, which exposed the fact that he had been secretly practicing homosexual sex. His family simply did not talk about it, but White identified with the man who felt like he couldn't risk sharing his feelings, so much so that he preferred to risk having anonymous sex.



# Chapter Three, High School—The Ghost of Loneliness

## Chapter Three, High School—The Ghost of Loneliness Summary and Analysis

Mel White met Lyla Lee Loehr in middle school and started dating her in 1958. In 1962 they were married. White was eager to please his family and focused on winning souls rather than dating. In middle school, Lyla was totally uninterested in the Bible study group that White led. But they were both on the student council in high school, with Lyla the gorgeous blond director of social affairs. By that time, White had dated many Christian girls and was an overachiever. Inside, he thought God abandoned him. When he started to get to know Lyla as a friend, he sometimes wondered whether the comfort she helped him feel was God's gift to him. When senior prom rolled around, White was not inclined to go as his parents taught that dancing was sinful but Lyla insisted that he go. He had never really danced before; instead, he had merely skated with other Christians at a local rink and often skated with Karen K. who was probably, in retrospect, a lesbian.

Near the same time as the prom, White met Gordon H., a handsome, quiet boy. It was almost as if they were looking for each other. White felt himself aroused by Gordon at the young age of sixteen but he was scared of his feelings. On a walk home together in the woods, Gordon held his hand and kissed him. For a moment, White was overwhelmed with joy and felt at home. He now believes that this was God's way of shining happiness into his life, if only for a moment. Despite this, White kept the supposed Biblical condemnation of homosexuality in his mind and ran home. White notes the horror that gays and lesbians must feel all over the world trapped in their bodies, wanting to escape the pressure created by being accepted by their communities and their passions.

At prom, White was nervous and wanted to escape until Lyla asked him to dance. He enjoyed himself though he didn't tell his parents. Instead, they pushed him to see winning souls as his primary responsibility. He invited Gordon to his Bible club, but Gordon was uninterested. The two never talked about their kiss. White felt obligated to win souls because his church leaders and families used guilt to motivate him and others.

White brought Lyla to a religious meeting, which was only her second such meeting in her life. They had a great conversation and Lyla eventually became a Christian, though not due to social pressure but because she sought the truth. When they started to date, they did not kiss their entire senior year. Instead, they read together, talked passionately about ideas, and the like. White stayed away from Gordon H. and heard that he died ten years later; it was possible that he committed suicide.



# Chapter Four, College—The Ghost of False Hope

## Chapter Four, College—The Ghost of False Hope Summary and Analysis

When Lyla and White graduated from high school, they quickly enrolled at Warner Pacific College, their local denominational college. At that time, Martin Luther King, Jr. was arguing that Christians were obligated to fight social evil on behalf of the Gospel and he even criticized the church for dragging its feet when it came to social justice. He called people to respond morally, not just socially and White regrets sitting on the sidelines. Instead, he was too busy in college life, repressing his homosexual desires and being a model student by leading church choir and being president of the Warner study body. He really did enjoy life, though; he thought he was straight and resisting satanic temptations. But sometimes he would take a stroll on isolated trails in the forest and came upon men embracing and kissing. It made White feel lonely.

At nineteen, White met another boy his age named Jeffrey S. who confessed to him guilt over masturbating. White insisted that masturbation was not a sin and the two prayed together. Jeffrey also had fears about being gay. Eventually he dropped out of their common social activities and ended up at a state hospital after removing his own testicles out of guilt and despair.

All the while, White and Lyla were growing closer. They kissed on a small boat in the ocean for the first time. He could have told Lyla about his feelings but did not understand the idea of a sexual orientation and that it was not a choice. At the same time, Johnny B. occasionally showed up in their lives again. He aroused White and Lyla did not, despite the fact that White loved her dearly. All during that time, Lyla and White broke up and got back together. Lyla wanted a real relationship and White resisted. Lyla dated other boys but she still wanted white. Inside, White was scared because he wanted boys. Nonetheless, he loved Lyla so much he asked her to marry him and she said yet.

After they got engaged, White left on a national church choir tour. A boy in the choir, Ted D., poured out his feelings to White one night about his romantic feelings for White. White said nothing but did not put any distance between himself and Ted. Ted would try to hold him in the night and White would sometimes let him. In retrospect, White sees that he was sending Ted mixed messages. Eventually they formed a ridiculous routine of bunking together and White letting Ted hold him and then withdrawing. One day, after White had told some counselors about his concerns about Ted, Ted came to him enraged and holding an ax; Ted then ran away from the choral group because White had exposed him. Ted hitchhiked all the way to New York. For thirty-one years, White searched for Ted on and off. When he found him, he told him the truth. Ted said it

helped some. But at the time, White was focused on Lyla and quickly asked her if they could hold their wedding as soon as possible.





# Chapter Five, 1962-1964, Learning to Tell the Truth

## Chapter Five, 1962-1964, Learning to Tell the Truth Summary and Analysis

Lyla and White got married days after White's return from his choir tour and his complex relationship with Ted. Despite his conflicted feelings, White was excited. He tells the reader that he does not think he played a cruel trick on Lyla because he honestly loved (and loves) her and wanted to be with her forever. White was scared about performing sexually but he could do so with the help of complex fantasies. While on their honeymoon, White met an attractive Frenchman that made him feel overwhelmed with guilt as a result of his attractions. But he was determined to fight his lusts as hard as possible.

When they returned from their honeymoon, Lyla went to school to get her education degree and White pursued his communications degree along with working for Portland Youth for Christ. To avoid his sexuality, White worked day and night and shot theatrical films about being honest with one's self, particularly about sex (he did this, he thinks, without realizing it). At the same time, his little brother Denny was in a horrible accident and despite a brief recovery died of an associated infection of spinal meningitis. He had gotten the disease in part because he went off antibiotics too soon in order to attend a speech White was giving so White's guilt about his sexuality was compounded with his guilt about his mother.

When White and Lyla graduated from college, they moved to Los Angeles where Lyla taught English and White pursued his Ph.D. in communications at the University of Southern California. He could no longer handle the stress of his sexuality and wanted to talk to someone. Despite his fears about smashing his rising career, he spoke to Christian psychologist Dr. Don Tweedie, immediately confessing his homosexuality. Tweedie assured him that God could heal him and told him to immediately tell Lyla. When he told her, she accepted him and told him that they would get through it together.



# Chapter Six, 1964-1970, Learning About Friendship

## Chapter Six, 1964-1970, Learning About Friendship Summary and Analysis

Several brief stories occupy Chapter Six, such as White's experience watching director Cacoyannis's movie, *Zorba the Greek*, and loving it. He also mentions that he wrote Jerry Falwell's autobiography and that before he met Falwell, he knew him as one of the biggest opponents of the Civil Rights Act. But Falwell's mind was changed when a black man who shined his shoes asked if he could join his church. White then rhetorically asks if he can join Falwell's church as well as an open homosexual. Falwell also thought that Christians should not be political but focus on winning souls (he believed that at the time, that is).

White began to pursue prayer and therapeutic treatment for his homosexuality. He doesn't blame his doctor, Dr. Parker, for trying to cure him. Ignorance about sexual orientation was widespread in those days. White himself begged for healing but his attraction never lessened. He feared that he could not be healed and emphasizes that no one should believe that God will necessarily change his or her sexual orientation.

White's series, *Charlie Churchman*, was successful; pastors were showing it around the country. This led him to think about going to Fuller Theological Seminary to pursue the ministry. He was admitted and spent the next five years studying the Bible and teaching speech and preaching on the side. He made good friends with fellow seminarian Jim Morgan, who taught him a lot of theology and to get over his worries about drinking. Morgan had studied with Christian theologians like Karl Barth in Europe, where Christians did not believe alcohol was sinful. In teaching White to drink, Morgan showed White that his conception of God was too small and that goodness wasn't determined by the rules one followed.

At the same time, Lyla and White made friends with Jim and his wife Jean and two other couples that began twenty years of friendship. During this period Lyla got pregnant four times but always miscarried. They decided to adopt Erinn Kathleen and, ironically, their biological child Michael Christopher was born nine months later. White felt like he had everything. His films were winning prizes, his business was paying the bills, and they were able to buy a home. But, White's confidence was shaking; he wanted a man and the conflict was tearing him apart.

The chapter ends with Jim's tragic struggle with cancer, which he initially would not face because he saw fighting cancer as a test of faith. White helped him to accept that he might die and from the experience White learned that no one could be certain that God would heal him.



# Chapter Seven, 1970-80, Taking the First Steps Toward Integrity

## Chapter Seven, 1970-80, Taking the First Steps Toward Integrity Summary and Analysis

Throughout the Seventies, White's film-making and writing talents took off. His first film was made about a Christian survivor of imprisonment during Vietnam named Howard Rutledge, who said his faith got him through. The film and book was called *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* and tens of thousands of copies of the film and book were sold. The book was on the best-seller lists. White directed the documentary and wrote the book because he felt just as socially trapped as Rutledge did in prison.

In 1973, White was working triple time and helped to organize one of the first major successful religious fund-raising telethons. He was called to become the Senior Pastor of Evangelical Covenant Church in Pasadena. Lyla led worship and directed special programs. Over his three years there, the young crowd grew quickly, though White was dismayed by many of their intolerant opinions, say, on women serving communion. During that time, White made *Though I Walk Through the Valley*, which documented the last year in the life of a dying man. He produced the prizewinning books *He Restoreth My Soul* and *Tested by Fire* in the next two years.

But all the while, White still had his secret longings. He knew many homosexuals were celibates and admired them but did not have that level of control. When he would preach, he was terrified that his congregation would discover his secret. White simultaneously pursued behavioral therapy for his homosexuality, sometimes using electric shock. It did not work.

White resigned from being Senior Pastor in 1977, as he was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. One day when White flew to Los Angeles, he drove to City Hall to find gay men in the area. He quickly met an African-American man named Mark and they had a sexual encounter despite White's love for his wife. They continued their relationship for a year. Mark was a first-year engineering student in graduate school and was generous and kind. White does not think he could have survived without him.

Many of the Religious Right would say White gave into lust, but he would not have needed Mark if he had been allowed to mature as a homosexual. At the same time, White made *Lust: The Other Side of Love* and *Deceived: The Jonestown Tragedy*. The films were used in seminaries across the country. The following year, White discovered a local club, Club Baths, which he frequented to meet gay men. He met a fellow pastor and evangelist who was part of an informal network of homosexuals in Christian churches. This "Dr. Smith" died of AIDS a few years later.



# Chapter Eight, 1980-81, Facing Reality

## Chapter Eight, 1980-81, Facing Reality Summary and Analysis

In the late 1970s, a Christian political revolution was stirring. White would help the leaders of the new Christian Right, including Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, promote this movement with his writing. Falwell got into politics to speak out against communism, abortion and divorce on behalf of family values. White did not see Falwell as dangerous but as a sincere follower of Jesus. At the same time, Falwell formed his famous Moral Majority in part through the influence of Christian theologian Francis Schaeffer, who White got to know well. Schaeffer was White's first client; White ghost-wrote *How Should We Then Live*. In these years, White also saw a dark, arrogant side to these men, despite their putative holiness.

At the time, he declined to write several books that were anti-gay; he could not stand to do damage. But anti-homosexual rhetoric would take new Religious Right leaders like Falwell far and help them mobilize support for their causes. White thinks people like Falwell believed what they were saying but were ignorant; they did not understand the distinction between orientation and preference. At the time, Falwell scared parents into fearing that gays would "recruit" their children. White claims that studies show that homosexuals as a whole are no more promiscuous than heterosexuals. Today White sees homosexuality as one of the mysteries of creation. But at the time, White ran to avoid his lust and piled up guilt.

In the summer of 1979, White took his family to Hawaii for a vacation. He spent a wonderful time with Lyla, but she could not satisfy his demands for intimacy, even though they loved each other deeply. White despaired and realized that celibacy was not possible for him. He thought about trying to commit suicide but making it look like a Scuba diving accident; he did not go through with it. To finish his Scuba training, White stayed behind in Hawaii for a few days after his family left. He met a young man named Tony, who came into his hotel and invited him to skinny dip with him and then invited White into the shower. White resisted his advances because he loved his wife and family. Tony stormed out and White never saw him again.

When White finally went Scuba diving, he experienced the beauty of the ocean and realized that God's love was a clear part of the universe. Back in Pasadena, White visited Phyllis Hart, a psychologist at Fuller Theological Seminary. He told her about his homosexuality and she advised him to "get over it" and fall in love with a gay man. She had viewed his psychological profile and struggles. White felt great support from Hart.



# Chapter Nine, 1981, Surviving Infatuation and Isolation

## Chapter Nine, 1981, Surviving Infatuation and Isolation Summary and Analysis

In 1981, White sometimes discussed his homosexuality with friends Philip and Janet Yancey, who encouraged him. However, one day White entered a gay bar near their house and met a young man named Tom Montgomery, who White immediately fell in love with. They went to a hotel and had sex, with White's body responding immediately to Tom's. White knew it was adultery but he could not handle repressing his sensual needs any longer. After having sex, White felt relaxed and peaceful; it was as if Tom's arms were the arms of God. He could finally be himself and did not feel awkward.

A social tempest quickly followed when White told Lyla what was happening. They had many fights and saw many counselors, all of whom encouraged them to separate. White felt terrible that he had no erotic connection with Lyla; without it, he could not be intimate with her. White had tried celibacy for a dozen years but could not pursue it. A lifetime of celibacy is not possible for most people. After falling in love with Tom, White told his parents. They felt as if they lost another son after Denny. Both were full of misinformation from the religious right. They thought White's behavior was simply that of a fifty year old man who wanted to have sex but it was so much more.

White could not stop thinking about Tom, but Tom told White he was simply infatuated, in love with the idea of free, homosexual love. White was impressed by Tom's huge network of gay and lesbian friends, all productive citizens. While Tom was angry with the Religious Right, he was still spiritual and took White to a Metropolitan Community Church, a Christian church with a gay and lesbian congregation. White felt a great sense of welcome and had a wonderful worship experience.

In the meanwhile, Lyla suffered horribly and said that Tom was simply experiencing retarded adolescence. Something about this was true. White was desperate to move to Chicago to be with Thomas and prayed every day that God would be present with him and forgive him. One night, Billy Graham called White and asked him to help him work on an important book. Graham was one of White's childhood heroes, so he immediately went to work with him in Acapulco. To do so, he had to miss a welcome party Tom had set up to announce White's move to Chicago, which destroyed their relationship and sent White into an incredible depression. After finishing up with Graham, White immediately went to work with Christian psychologist John Finch at Fuller; they worked for an intense twenty-one days to cure him but it only made White worse.



# Chapter Ten, 1982-83, It's Going to Be All Right, Dad!

## Chapter Ten, 1982-83, It's Going to Be All Right, Dad! Summary and Analysis

White was determined to sacrifice all sensual pleasures. His lust was destroying his family and he could not risk losing them. His family was disappointed in the conflicts in their lives, though White's children did not know the details of what was going on. White still went to church with them, despite being gay. He pretended to be happy at parties but he could not stand losing Tom. His family simply could not meet all of his needs. And being honest with himself only exacerbated his suffering.

One night, White gave into temptation and went to a local gay bar; there he met David, a Spanish-American who never missed a Catholic Mass. He was in the closet due to the cultural stigma against homosexuality in his community. White immediately became infatuated with David and after getting to know him a bit more, he hoped that they could have an in-the-closet relationship. In order to be honest, White told Lyla about David and introduced them to each other. He hoped that the three of them could have a "time-share" relationship. Lyla liked David immediately and they became, in a way, "co-conspirators".

But David and White's relationship only lasted a year as the in-the-closet relationship was too stressful; White believes one's sexuality affects every area of life. And all the while, White was writing speeches for Billy Graham. Lyla and White's fights got worse; one night White even started slashing his wrists in front of her. He wanted to die. Soon thereafter, White started to see a new psychiatrist, Dr. Warren Jones, who was a great listener and helped him to think through the structure of his nightmares and dreams. In this time his children also provided him with some much needed comfort.



# Chapter Eleven, 1984-90, Giving Up the Ghost

## Chapter Eleven, 1984-90, Giving Up the Ghost Summary and Analysis

Eventually White decided that only he could know what was best for him and that he could not stay innocent any longer, but had to move on with his life. In August 1984, White and Lyla began their separation and in March 1985 proceeded towards divorce. The kids hated it; their image of having a perfect Christian family was destroyed. In many ways, they ceased being a regular family and White went out of his way to try to be a good father, clearly overcompensating.

At the same time, White started working with Jerry Falwell on his book *If I should Die Before I Wake!* The two men liked each other enormously. White reports that Falwell was not always political; only with the advent of *Roe v. Wade* did Falwell become a conservative political activist. He was not too focused on homosexuality initially. White believes that Falwell really believed his rhetoric but did not realize how dangerous he was at the time. Falwell preached that many gays should simply stay in the closet and White in fact often wondered if he should have tried harder. Yet he had friends who had tried. They were often killed during anonymous sexual encounters or contracted AIDS. White decided that gays had a God-given right to life and liberty. It was his desire to come out that ended his relationship with David. He had casual sex with gay friends and occasional strangers to satiate his sexual appetite in the meanwhile.

At the same time, White was travelling across the world. At All Saints Episcopal, White met a young male baritone in the church choir named Gary Nixon who he got up the courage to ask out. They had a great first date. Gary was a talented musician and property manager; he enjoyed hard work.

Soon after he began working with Falwell, White met Pat Robertson to help him write *America's Dates With Destiny*, a political treatise on his views. But when White got clearer on Robertson's views, he refused to do the job unless changes were made. White found that Robertson and Falwell contrasted; Falwell was often silly and fun, but Robertson was always serious. White was also invited to write Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's autobiography but it never came out due to the fact that Jim Bakker went to jail. Before he met with them, he spent some time off with Gary and truly fell in love, making love for the first time in a pure way. In 1987 they engaged in their first major civil rights demonstration; White believed he would never be the same afterward. He and Gary also helped care for some gay AIDS patients.

In 1989, Lyla sold their family home. Gary and White lived in a smaller condo, with Lyla in a larger one; they had no clean break. Christian leaders started to find out about White's life style and accused him of being immoral and irresponsible, but Lyla

maintained that he acted in a Christian way despite how painful his life choices were for her. White realized that it was too hard for him and Gary to worship in a largely heterosexual church and so started attending a gay Metropolitan Community Church in the San Fernando Valley. The services moved him. Soon after joining their church, White helped Falwell write his autobiography, *Strength for the Journey*. In 1989, White also helped Philippines Prime Minister Aquino write his autobiography before he was killed. Communism also fell in that year, but as that form of oppression died, gay-bashing ratcheted up among the Religious Right as they needed new issues to push.





# Chapter Twelve, 1990-91, One Last Year of Silence

## Chapter Twelve, 1990-91, One Last Year of Silence Summary and Analysis

In 1990, Gary and White moved to Laguna Beach, a gay-friendly town. Lyla freed him and his struggle was over. He was finally content to be gay. But now White struggled with whether he should simply live a private life or speak up to help others who suffered like he did.

White continued to write for many people on the Religious Right, such as writing speeches for Oliver North. The Religious Right started to make increasingly false and outrageous claims about homosexuality. White started to collect samples of the hate speech. Robertson followed Falwell in talking about homosexuality, as did James Dobson. They said that homosexuals wanted to recruit children into homosexuality for instance, all while maintaining that they had no desire to discriminate. White came to believe that the Founders did not want to establish a religion in the law but the Religious Right believed in theocracy. They were organizing to gain the power to cleanse the nation of immorality. It was at this time that Robertson formed the Christian Coalition.

White does not want to be alarmist, but he sees genuine connections between the ways in which the Religious Right fanned the flames of bigotry against homosexuality and the way that the Nazis did the same. White makes these comparisons at length, seeing awful similarities. But White believes in freedom and democracy and references many of the stories of hate crimes committed against even Christians who were gay, some of whom are members of an organization called Evangelicals Concerned. At their meetings, White saw men cry and tell their tales of suicide attempts. While many gay-friendly churches exist, they are the exceptions. And the more serious Christians are about their faith, the more anti-gay they tend to be. White is proud that, despite all of this, gays and lesbians have successfully fought to undo sodomy laws across the country and expand civil rights laws.

However, the hatred of homosexuality was truly great, particularly with Christian intellectual and "Christian Reconstructionist" R. J. Rushdoony arguing that the Book of Leviticus authorized the killing of homosexuals. White argues that Rushdoony dramatically misused the Bible and shows how many Christian leaders misread the Bible in the past, such as the great number of Christian leaders who misread Scripture to be anti-science.

At this time, White also got increasingly involved helping gay men with AIDS and with euthanizing those who were in advanced stages of dying from AIDS, helping them die with dignity. He prayed about helping a man with advanced-stage age, Marty James, euthanize himself. White later came to believe that he did the right thing. He decries the

fact that conservative Christians are so hesitant to reach out to gays who suffer with AIDS. Ultimately, all of this and more pushed White to decide to end his silence. He was a closeted ghostwriter but came to believe, with the homosexual advocacy group ACT-UP, that "silence is death" and that he had to fight for justice. The chapter ends with White explaining how he discovered recently that his first love Tom Montgomery was in advanced stages of AIDS and facing death. They reconciled and Tom died soon thereafter.



# Chapter Thirteen, 1991-93, A Ghost No More!

## Chapter Thirteen, 1991-93, A Ghost No More! Summary and Analysis

The Religious Right's hate campaign finally pushed White to the brink. On December 24th, 1991, White wrote a coming out letter to Falwell, asking to meet with him and talk about his treatment of homosexuality. After a year, White received no reply. In the meanwhile, Falwell and his ilk continued to repeat their lies, bad Scriptural interpretation and hate-filled rhetoric. No one would meet with White, despite the destruction the hate campaign was perpetrating on families all over America. At the same time, the Religious Right pushed Measure Nine in Oregon, which would add anti-homosexual language to the Oregon constitution. White spoke out against it, which helped to defeat it. But many pastors in the Religious Right sent him letters of condemnation.

White decided that he could no longer continue to serve the Religious Right in any fashion. It became difficult for him to support his family. One day Reverend Michael Piazza, the leader of the largest gay church in American, travel to White's home and asked him to be dean of the new cathedral they were building in Dallas, the Cathedral of Hope. They wanted to create a Christian environment where it was safe to come out. White wanted to go, to do whatever he could to help stop the needless death of guilty homosexuals. Lyla was busy with her own work, Erinn had gotten married and had a daughter and Michael had graduated from college and was writing and directing films. White ended his closet days forever and accepted a position that paid no salary. Gary was happy to go with him and was comforting as well. So many good people were confused by Roberson and Dobson and Falwell that White had to fight back. Homosexuals, White argues, only want their place in the wider American and global community.



# Chapter Fourteen, 1993-94, Time for Doing Justice!

## Chapter Fourteen, 1993-94, Time for Doing Justice! Summary and Analysis

White's debut in the cathedral somewhat confused him, as it engaged in "high-church", liturgical, formal worship; White had been raised in totally low-church style worship practices. The hymns were beautiful and led White to tears. After forty years of guilt and fear he was free. He came to believe that his sexual orientation was something to celebrate. All his worries about destroying his family were misplaced, for they have triumphed. When White came out, he quickly became a gay celebrity and was interviewed on network television several times. The phones have not stopped ringing.

White's old struggle was over and he turned to declare war on the Religious Right with his Truth in Love campaign. The campaign first focused on gathering data to counter antigay propaganda, which quickly started to pour into their offices. Robertson, among others, argued that he could become "ex-gay" and that thousands were being healed of homosexuality. But White had spent years trying to become an ex-gay and knew the depression such attempts could cause. White repeats a number of tragic stories of people who tried to change their sexual orientation. White also praised President Clinton's decision to allow homosexuals to serve in the military but was saddened, along with many gays and lesbians, that they could not serve openly. In White's view injustice prevailed. But White does not blame Clinton, as his hand was forced by the right-wing. At a protest of Clinton's decision, White and his friends were arrested, along with several gay military veterans. White spent his first night in a jail cell and recognized it was the price of doing justice.

In White's view, doing justice is the work of God. The freedom of gays and lesbians is at stake. Gays can begin to fight back against conservative Christianity by withholding their tithes from anti-gay churches. They can also engage in positive, tolerant preaching and teaching. White continues to repeat the comparisons between the Religious Right and Nazi Germany. His goal has become to bring light into dark, hateful places. He ends the book with a story about how another friend of his died of AIDS and how the persecution of gays led to his death.



# Characters

## Mel White

Protagonist and writer of *Stranger at the Gate*, Mel White was born into an evangelical Christian household in the Baby Boom period. Growing up in the fifties, White discovered that he was not interested in women like the other boys he was friends with. While he worshipped God and had a good family, and was a valuable member of his community, he still felt alienated from all of them because he knew that he felt different inside. Mel grew up hating himself, feeling intense shame for his homosexual feelings and wondering if there was anyone else like him. While his community did not "oppress" him, as they were simply ignorant of his sexual orientation and about the nature of sexual orientation (versus sexual preference), Mel was simply confined to the closet.

But White eventually learned about homosexuality and what homosexuality meant. He resisted vehemently the idea that he was gay and prayed for God to heal him. Over the next several decades, he tried to force himself to become straight and eventually gave up and came out of the closet, accepting himself for who he was.

White's personality shines through the book, despite the period of his life. He is extremely verbally talented, loves art, connects easily with people and communicates effectively. He is loving and kind, but also tends to be melodramatic and demonstrates intense selfishness at various points in the book. Towards the end of the book, he becomes politically active and clearly demonstrates resentment at his former employers on the Religious Right.

## Lyla White

Lyla White was Mel White's wife for around thirty years. While *Stranger at the Gate* is written by Mel White from his perspective and about his personal struggles, Lyla is undoubtedly the second major character. Mel met Lyla in high school. He had grown up in an extremely religious household, whereas Lyla had barely ever been to church when she met Mel. Mel was not romantically interested in Lyla when he met her, but he adored her personality and became fast friends with her. He helped to lead her to Christianity though he emphasizes that she came of it freely and only when she was convinced that it was true. Afterwards, Lyla and Mel dated on and off for several years. She wanted to become more serious but he was always hesitant, as he wasn't sure that God was behind the relationship given his struggles with homosexuality.

When Mel decided to put his worries about his sexuality aside (to the best of his ability), they were married. Lyla stayed involved in church and they had two children. She supported Mel's career and they were happy together in many ways, but Mel simply couldn't fall in love with her and she was just never enough for him. When he confessed his homosexuality to Lyla, she was understanding and supportive. In fact, one might



argue that she was surprisingly and perhaps unhealthily supportive, not divorcing him when he had an affair on her and even permitting him to have a relationship with a man while they were still married. Mel admits that he caused Lyla incredible suffering, but she always supported him.

## **Gary Nixon**

White's life partner that he meets after he and Lyla are divorced. When the book was published, they were still together.

## **Noni Rear**

White's extremely religious and domineering grandmother who became the voice of his evangelical conscience throughout his life.

## **Erinn and Michael White**

Mel and Lyla's children, both of whom seemed supportive of Mel during his struggles.

## **Thomas Montgomery**

A love interest of Mel's while he was still married. When Mel refused to leave his wife and move to Chicago with Tom, they split up. Decades later, Mel saw Tom before Tom died of AIDS.

## **David**

A Spanish-American gay man who wished to both have a relationship with Mel and stay in the closet. This was not enough for Mel.

## **Jerry Falwell**

One of the leaders of the Religious Right and the leader White knew most personally and worked with the closest. He also blames Falwell the most for fanning the flames of bigotry.

## **Pat Robertson**

Another major leader of the Religious Right who Mel ghostwrote for on at least one occasion. Unlike the affable Falwell, White found Robertson deadly serious. White also blamed Robertson for making life harder on homosexuals.



## **James Dobson**

The founder of Focus on the Family and another major leader within the Religious Right who White blames for endangering the safety and spiritual health of homosexuals.

## **Billy Graham**

One of the 20th centuries great Christian evangelists who was White's idol growing up. White had the chance to write for him and, unlike other major figures within evangelical Christianity, says little or nothing bad about.

## **Michael Piazza**

The head pastor at The Cathedral of Hope in Dallas. Michael invited White to serve with him.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Santa Cruz, California**

White's hometown.

### **Warner Pacific College**

The college White and Lyla attended.

### **University of Southern California**

White pursued his Ph.D. in communications at USC.

### **Fuller Theological Seminary**

When White left USC, he decided to get his seminary degree at Fuller.

### **Laguna Beach, California**

A gay-friendly city where White lived with his partner Gary.

## **Bible Passages Condemning Homosexuality**

White talks extensively about the Biblical passages used by the Religious Right to condemn homosexuality and argues that these leaders substantially misrepresent the passages.

## **Homosexual Orientation**

White argues that when he was growing up, people only believed in homosexual preferences and choices, not that people were hardwired from birth to be gay or not, or so White insists.

## **The Ex-Gay Movement**

A largely Christian movement of homosexuals who claim to no longer be gay. White tried to be a member of this movement but failed and argues that they are largely frauds.





## Films

White made many films prior to becoming a ghostwriter and discusses several of them in the book.

## Ghostwriting

One of White's claims to fame is the fact that he ghostwrote for some of the most famous evangelical leaders in the world, including Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell.

## The Religious Right

The collection of right-wing Christian leaders and pastors and their followers who sought to impose their conception of Christian morality onto the United States by force of law and who White declared war against because he thought their teachings on homosexuality were bigoted and deeply damaged to homosexuals.

## Dallas, Texas

White moved to Dallas to become a leader at the Cathedral of Hope.

## The Cathedral of Hope

The largest gay church in the world and where White worked when his book was written.



# Themes

## Homosexuality

Stranger at the Gate is the autobiography of Mel White that heavily emphasizes White's lifelong struggle with his sexuality. White is a homosexual and grew up having no interest whatsoever in women in the 1950s in Santa Cruz, at a time when almost no one knew anything about homosexuality, much less his family. White's family was very conservative and very serious evangelical Christians. They seemed to never suspect that White had no sexual or romantic interests in girls. Somehow White was able to hide his feelings for decades until, finally, stress and depression began to overwhelm him.

Stranger at the Gate is not only about White's struggle; however, it's about his moral evaluation of his struggle. For the vast majority of White's life, he believed the fact that he was homosexual meant something was wrong with him. Perhaps God had abandoned him or perhaps he had just been given a cross to bear for his entire life. Maybe he should simply hope that God would heal him. But in any event, homosexuality was wrong, evil, and dirty.

White believed this long into his adult life until he finally started to realize that he simply was born with a particular sexual orientation and that he was not guilty of anything at all. White started to convince himself that God had made him a homosexual because there was something divine and beautiful about loving men. White also started to resent and condemn those who continually pushed homosexuals into a constant state of guilt. Towards the end of the book, White's struggle with homosexuality becomes not only a spiritual but a political struggle aimed at promoting gay rights and fighting against bigotry and fear.

## Integrity

White's struggle with homosexuality is also a struggle to be true to himself and to understand his true identity. He often describes himself as a "ghost" or as lurking in the shadows due to his secrets. White was not one of those who had trouble hiding his homosexuality. He had no idea what sorts of sex acts homosexuals performed as a young adult and was athletic, popular and masculine seeming in a number of ways. White was also too guilty to ever act out on his feelings. But on the inside White knew that he was living a lie. White pretended not to be gay but his lack of integrity led him to feel completely isolated from everyone around him, including his family, friends, wife, children and Creator. White's inability to be open about his sexuality, a very deep part of who he was, was in his view killing his soul.

Many men spend their entire lives in the closet but as White got older, he saw this as less and less of an option. At times, he regretted his later decisions to be honest with himself as he wondered why he couldn't just remain hidden away, perhaps even



admitting his homosexuality to close friends and family. No, White's personality demanded that he be open and honest; he was tired of hiding, tired of lacking any integrity and needed to be true to himself, even after living in the closet for decades.

## The Religious Right

Without White's experience with the Religious Right, he would, perhaps unfortunately, not have gained the notoriety that he has. As a filmmaker, ghostwriter or even child of a "fundamentalist" family, White's story of his struggle with homosexuality would be uninteresting on the whole. But White was not only a good ghostwriter, but a great one and his deep connection to the Christian community allowed him to quickly rise to prominence as a ghostwriter for some of the greatest and most prominent member of the Religious Right. For the unfamiliar, the "Religious Right" is a term that denotes a collection of orthodox Protestant non-denominational Christians in the United States that were politically active from the late 1970s far into the 21st century, along with their leaders, who became prominent in conservative politics and the Republican Party. Their names will be familiar to some readers: Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, James Dobson, etc. White wrote for all of them, particularly Falwell who he clearly knows the best.

White's struggle with homosexuality became most acute when the leaders of the Religious Right became focused on homosexuality as a social and political issue. In White's view, they began to stoke the flames of hatred of homosexuality for their own benefit and propagated misinformation about homosexuals, including their friend and business partner, Mel White. When communism died in the early 90s, the Religious Right turned from the communist threat to an "enemy within", homosexuality and the "homosexual movement", White was becoming more comfortable with who he was and ultimately decided that he not only could no longer work for the Religious Right but had to oppose them publicly in every way that he could.

# Style

## Perspective

Mel White's perspective is built around an explicit spiritual, political and social agenda. He is very open about his views and his main argument about the relationship between Christianity and homosexuality pervades the book. White is a member of the Baby Boom generation, growing up in a conservative household in the 1950s. He spent most of his life in the closet, despising himself and doing his best to destroy his homosexual desires, even going to ridiculous extremes like using electroshock therapy. Arguably, his self-hatred simply became too much for him to bear and he had to find a way to psychologically and spiritually accept himself despite a community and even nation who condemned what he was as perverse and sinful.

As a result, White's book is full of arguments that there is widespread confusion about homosexuality. He believes that sexual orientation is fixed at birth and that the Religious Right is wrong to maintain that homosexuality is a choice. He also thinks that homosexuality is a gift from God. White argues at great length that the Christian Bible does not condemn homosexuality and that those who think it does so use Scripture improperly. He also in places defends legalized abortion, gay marriage, gays' ability to serve openly in the military, and euthanasia.

However one feels about the controversial issues White discusses, there are at least two areas in which he arguably engages in rationalization and exaggeration. First, White blames figures in the Religious Right, in part, for his decision to have sex with men and maintain relationships with them despite having a family and a wife who cared for him deeply. White clearly recognizes the pain he caused his family and he seeks to justify his decision at length. Further, White continually compares the tactics of the Religious Right with the Nazis; comparisons of any social movement with the Nazis are almost always exaggerations and almost never constructive.

## Tone

The tone of *Stranger at the Gate* mixes despair, hope, resentment and righteousness. The book begins by discussing White's struggles in the closet growing up. Most of the book is filled with White's disappointments, despairs, confusion, depression, self-hatred and fear. Accordingly, most of the book has a tone of despair and sadness. The despair and sadness he expresses is, however, marked by some happiness. For instance, White is able to develop some homosexual connections in his life that are of great solace to him. His relationship with God is in many ways positive and Lyla and White's children bring great joy into his life. Further, White's professional successes are substantial, from his youth leadership as a young adult, to his successful Christian films to his career ghostwriting for prominent Christian leaders.



As White comes to terms with his sexuality, the tone turns to one of hope and excitement. White is scared to be open about his sexuality but he feels his need for integrity pushing him forward. He comes to believe that his homosexual orientation is a gift from God and a challenge to believe that God loves him despite the condemnation of his community. White also takes big risks by coming out against the Religious Right and moving to become a member and leader of the Cathedral of Hope, the largest gay church in the United States. Towards the end of the book, the tone also manifests resentment at the Religious Right for making life harder on homosexuals but also maintains a sense of righteousness. As one who punished himself to live the morality the Religious Right demanded of him, White feels obliged to stand up and fight for those who are still vulnerable.

## Structure

Stranger at the Gate has fourteen chapters that range over particular time periods in White's life. White thematizes each of these periods in order to focus on particular issues during those periods and bring out consistent points and lessons, even those he discusses all of the major life events that occurs in each one of the periods. Thus, the book is driven chronologically, not by argument or idea. Instead, White structures the book so as to bring out the themes in a wholly chronological fashion, despite occasional asides. The chapters themselves do not have sections but simply move gradually through the relevant time period.

Chapter One, "In the Beginning—The Ghost of Silence" and Chapter Two, "Adolescence—The Ghost of Fear" explain White's youth in Santa Cruz as a young member of a Christian family and a homosexual with no idea who he is. Chapter Three, "High School—The Ghost of Loneliness" and Chapter Four, "College—The Ghost of False Hope" show White coming to an ever increasing realization that he was different and that he was probably going to stay different no matter how hard he tried.

Chapter Five, "1962-64, Learning to Tell the Truth" and Chapter Six, "1964-70, Learning About Friendship" show White gradually coming to the point psychologically where he can be open about his sexual orientation. Chapter Seven, "1970-1980, Taking the First Steps Toward Integrity" and Chapter Eight, "1980-1981, Facing Reality" depicts White taking his first steps out of the closet and accepting who he was. Chapter Nine, "1981, Surviving Infatuation and Isolation" and Chapter Ten, "'It's Going to Be All Right, Dad!'" explains the consequences White and his family suffered due to his decision to come out of the closet and start a relationship with a man.

Chapter Eleven, "1984-90, Giving Up the Ghost!" and Chapter Twelve, "1990-1991, One Last Year of Silence" discusses why White started working for the Religious Right and how he became alienated from them as time progresses. Chapter Thirteen, "1991-93, A Ghost No More!" and Chapter Fourteen, "1993-94, Time for Doing Justice!" takes White to his most open and happy and most eager to fight against the forces oppressing his homosexual brothers and sisters.



## Quotes

"I wanted to know, why didn't I feel the same way about girls that my friends all seemed to feel?" (Chapter 1, pg. 12.)

"In fact, that first adolescent crush on Darrel was one of God's great gifts to me" (Chapter 1, pg. 27.)

"Feeling lost, lonely, and afraid, I spent my childhood and adolescence living in a closet" (Chapter 2, pg. 28.)

"I know now that God was laughing with delight at my new found pleasure, my adolescent guilt and fear levels skyrocketed off the top of the charts" (Chapter 3, pg. 51.)

"We loved each other and we were convinced that our love would take care of everything. Looking back now on the thirty-one years that followed I am amazed at how right we were and how wrong" (Chapter 4, pg. 84.)

"I may be a homosexual, I thought to myself during those painful days, but I will spend the rest of my lifetime fighting my homosexuality like an alcoholic in a twelve-step program fights his or her need to drink" (Chapter 5, pg. 90.)

"Your little brother, Denny, is dead" (Chapter 5, pg. 95.)

"I think I'm a homosexual" (Chapter 5, pg. 97.)

"I think he's just discovered grace" (Chapter 6, pg. 112.)

"I was isolated, not by iron bars or guards in uniforms, but by fear" (Chapter 7, pg. 123.)

"I survived the next year in large part because of Mark's generous, loving spirit" (Chapter 7, pg. 133.)

"Now, fifteen years later, Jerry is still using homosexuality to raise money and mobilize support. I hate that his ignorance and superstition leads to the suffering and death of my brothers and sisters, but I understand how he was so terribly misled" (Chapter 8, pg. 147.)

"Mel, you aren't sick. You're a gay man. You just need to fall in love with another gay man, and get it over with!" (Chapter 8, pg. 155.)

"No longer did I feel awkward or embarrassed. I felt alive and free" (Chapter 9, pg. 162.)

"My publisher says you can help me, Mel" (Chapter 9, pg. 171.)

"We've been the Brady Bunch all too long" (Chapter 10, pg. 190.)



"It's going to be all right, Dad. You'll see" (Chapter 10, pg. 191.)

"Finally, miraculously, it was happening. Lying together on those cool, fresh sheets, with the island sun shining through the open windows and the tropical breezes caressing us, I made love as I had never made love before" (Chapter 11, pg. 208.)

"I was a gay man, and with God's help I would do my best to live my new life with integrity" (Chapter 12, pg. 223.)

"Over the years, I have seen conservative Christians, clergy and laity alike, work hard and sacrifice much to help end suffering of various kinds across the nation and around the world. So, it amazed me when I saw how slow those same Christians were to reach out a hand to help end the suffering of lesbians and gays, especially those with AIDS, even when those Christians have contributed to that suffering" (Chapter 12, pg. 245.)

"We are church organists and choir directors, deacons and members of the board, pastors, priests, and rabbis. We pray to the same God. We read the same Scriptures. We are responsible parents, pastors, teachers, and lay leaders. Gay people are at the core, not at the fringe, of this great nation. Our only desire is to be seen and accepted as we really are" (Chapter 13, pg. 251.)

"We are not the enemy. The real enemies are those who teach hate instead of love, those who use misinformation and fear tactics to raise money and mobilize volunteers, those who play on ancient superstitions to destroy lives and ruins families. All we want is our God-given right to live and to love with integrity and to take our places in the community as responsible neighbors and faithful friends" (Chapter 13, pg. 262.)

"There is a war raging against gay and lesbian people in our country right now. Our civil rights are on the line. Our freedom is at stake. The homophobic lies of the religious right are murdering the souls and threatening the civil rights of gay and lesbian Americans. We must stand against those lies" (Chapter 14, pg. 284.)



## Topics for Discussion

White claims that he does not blame his childhood community for their attitudes about homosexuality. Do you think he is right not to do so?

Explain some of the ways in which White tried to eliminate his homosexuality; why does White think they failed? Why do you think they failed?

Discuss some of White's films. How were they connected to his internal spiritual struggles?

Why does White excuse himself for having homosexual affairs on his wife Lyla? Do you think he excuses himself? Do you think his rationalizations are justified?

How did White come to work with major figures in the Religious Right? Who were some of the major figures? Why did White stop working with them?

Explain the sense of spiritual relief that White experienced when he was open about his homosexuality. How did White feel after engaging in homosexual sex acts with men he cared about?

What are White's criticisms of the Religious Right? To what extent do you think they are fair? Do you think his comparison of the tactics of the Religious Right to the Nazis are fair? Why or why not?