



Totempole

Sanford Friedman

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Totempole is Sanford Friedman's radical coming-of-age novel, featuring Stephen Wolfe, a young Jewish boy growing up in New York City and its environs during the Depression and war years. In eight discrete chapters, which trace Stephen's evolution from a two-year-old boy to a twenty-two-year-old man, Friedman describes with psychological acuity and great empathy Stephen's intellectual, moral, and sexual maturation. Taught to abhor his body for the sake of his soul, Stephen finds salvation in the eventual unification of the two, the recognition that body and soul should not be partitioned but treated as one being, one complete man.

Quotes:

Totempole is the most audacious affirmation of the homosexual experience by an American writer I have seen, and its success is the more remarkable because nearly all the materials of this novel are not only familiar but fashionable...[Friedman] explores a recognizable terrain and leaves it deeply illumined.

—Hilton Kramer, *The New Leader*

It proves to be the most candid, and least pornographic, of studies of the genesis of a homosexual; paradoxically, by close concentration on the agonies of a young man searching for sexual fulfillment...This was a dangerous book to write...Its impact as a document of great honesty will, without doubt, be considerable.

—Anthony Burgess, *The Listener*

I think Totempole an extraordinarily courageous and highly moral work. The author tells us exactly what it was like to be himself at a certain time and place and, uniquely, I believed him. Truth is rare; he seems to have it.

—Gore Vidal

An extraordinary book, vivid and utterly convincing...The truth of Mr. Friedman's book is not the truth of autobiography, but the truth-making that the best fiction is.

—James Dickey

I do not know of any piece of fiction that deals more perceptively with preadolescent sex...Wholly honest...Friedman treats the homosexual theme, as he does the theme of infant sexuality, with great candor and no lubricity...There are episodes developed with unusual imaginative power.

—Granville Hicks, *Saturday Review*

Totempole Details

Date : Published September 2nd 2014 by NYRB Classics (first published 1965)

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Author : Sanford Friedman

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From Reader Review Totempole for online ebook

Ayreon says

2.5

Benjamin says

Totempole tells the story of Stephen Wolfe from his early years to his mid twenties, and shows how much he is influenced and changed, for good and bad, by those he with whom he comes into contact. The changes in the young Stephen are quite extreme, from adorable to obnoxious, until later influences begin finally to mould Stephen, the young man. It is clear too how events in his childhood are responsible for the many hang-ups that plague Stephen as he comes of age.

For later, when Stephen is serving in Korea we see a very compassionate side of him, as he develops a friendship with the Korean prisoners, and particularly a male doctor, which becomes blatantly and almost naturally sexual.

This is a captivating story, the more so as it progresses, and I found the latter part of the book especially moving. Highly recommended.

Jamie Marks says

Everybody forgot about--or never heard of--this delightful, important 20C work of fiction, until NYRB recently reissued it. Like Portnoy's Complaint, Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz or Foreskin's Lament, it has male sexual coming of age, humor and a Freudian ("Totempole") consciousness--but here it's gay AND it's without bitterness. Instead, it has a much kinder awareness of self and others. Moreover, the vivid details from Jersey Shore 1930's to Korean War 1950's manage to make the backdrop of growing up at once familiar and remote. Amazing that a gay narrative with this depth of emotional awareness and frankness could be published in 1965. Deserves to be among the greats.

Earl Adams says

Possibly the only gay novel that features both the Jersey Shore and Pusan, South Korea as settings. TOTEMPOLE is wonderful experience.

Macartney says

Defied my expectations and more than lived up to the hype. A gay novel for the ages. Friedman delivers a masterful rendering of dialogue, along with acute, sensitive psychological observations of a boy's developing sensual and sexual desires. An interesting balance of intimate character insights presented at an almost clinical, distant remove--we feel both at one with the characters and also apart from them, particularly the

protagonist Stephen. This dichotomy neatly (and subtly) mirrors the “coming out” process so beautifully and delicately explored in the story. The book's only flaw is the heavy-handedness of the politics (global and sexual) in the last section, which--while understandable in the context of being published in 1965--unfortunately cements this as a “book of its time” and not a timeless masterpiece. But it’s so, so, so close to being one that, even at 400 pages, it felt unfairly and tragically short; I wanted so much more of Stephen and the Wolfes. A shoutout of thanks to New York Review of Books for bringing this classic gay novel back into print.

Tom Wascoe says

Decided I was not interested in the book. Did not read

KC says

This was a lovely book. As has been mentioned by many, the fact that this book disappeared for many years until NYRB reissued it, is surprising. I found it beautifully written and the structure somewhat unique in that it was not a flow of events but sort of snippets of a young man's life from about two years old into his early twenties. "Totempole" reads like a modern classic - and hopefully this reissue will make it one!

Lobstergirl says

It's interesting that such a sexually and emotionally explicit novel about a young man's gay sexual awakening could/would be published by a major American publishing house (Dutton) in 1965. Good for them. It received mixed reviews, given its subject matter. Many praised it, but some reviewers (the *New York Times* is mentioned in Peter Cameron's Afterword) were squeamish and couldn't control their own eyerolling.

Friedman's writing style is very straightforward and matter-of-fact. There aren't a lot of literary curlicues here. He recounts the life of Stephen Wolfe, a Jewish boy born into a middle class New York City family in 1928, from age two to age twenty-two. Stephen is always highly aware of his body, his sexuality, and his emotions, although he doesn't always understand them. (Who does?) His religious Jewish upbringing, along with his secular education, assist him in learning to be ashamed of his body and his erotic feelings. Even at college, where he manages to end up with a gay roommate who is very comfortable with his sexuality, and with whom he has a physical relationship (after dating a girl), Stephen can't rid himself of his sense of shame. Only as a soldier serving in the Korean War, where he becomes an English teacher to a group of Korean POWs, does he develop an ability to love and be loved, and to integrate it fully with his sexual feelings. Friedman was lauded for being one of the first serious novelists to create a gay novel with a happy ending.

Kim says

American contemp....1930s-1950s New England, Korea....discovering oneself. Refreshingly raw and

insightful prose - nice surprise for a random pick from a used bookstore in Vancouver.

Shawn says

Obviously I was much more impressed with this in 1986 than I was when I read it again this week. Today, I probably wouldn't give it even three stars, and I find that the section in which Stephen is an adult in Korea is the only part that appeals.

But of course, like most of us, I've read a great many more gay-themed novels in the intervening years and so have much more with which to compare this early (1965) example.

Martin says

Fascinating and oh-so Freudian, this "novel" tracks Stephen Wolfe from infancy to adulthood. The psychology is well done--specific to the character but also universally relatable to anyone who grew up gay and struggled with this realization, no matter the time or era. The prose was overcooked at times, serviceable more than memorable. Recommended, but this won't go in my "reread" pile.

Tony says

This begins not with a moo-cow but with a horsie. *Horsie*. Stevie Wolfe is two years-old and he is fascinated with the sight and smell of the horses in the stables across the road from his family's vacation home. He is an observant child, and will grow introspective. Upon *Horsie* will be stacked the other sections of his life: *Ocean*, *Salamander*, *Loon*, *Moose*, *Monkeys*, *Lice* and *Rats*. Like the sections of a totempole, serving an allegorical and figurative purpose.

Stevie moves from the ocean to summer camp, to high school, college and finally to war. His father was overbearing, abusive to Stevie's mother. His brother was cold, demeaning. His body, like the totempole, is itself a character in the story, beautiful to others but horrid to Stevie. In a middle chapter, Stevie mentally and physically tortures another boy. I'll let Freud figure that out.

This has been described as a gay novel (an nyrb-classics description, not mine). And through the first six chapters I felt, okay, the author, very autobiographically and with almost embarrassingly broad strokes, is attempting to explain a painful confusion. Then Stevie Wolfe went to college, a drama school, and crossed a physical threshold.

Yet all that is simmering prelude. Drafted into the Korean War, Stevie is assigned to the personnel section in a Prisoner of War camp. The prisoners there were North Korean soldiers who were avowedly anti-communist. Neither one thing nor the other. Stevie becomes their English tutor. He is barely recognizable from the child torturer or confused adolescent of the earlier sections. He falls in love, and what follows is a remarkable dialogue between Stevie and Pak Sun Bo, about the War, and about human relativity.

And yet, Stephen thought, opening his eyes and seeing the empty barracks, the empty beds, the truth is that I am neither! Neither gook nor GI, neither here nor there, fish nor fowl, straight nor queer, prisoner nor free!

I'm neither one nor both but in between . . . without myself . . . partitioned, like Korea. . . .

So, finally, Totempole tells us not what it's like to be gay, but what it's like to be human.

R says

TOTEMPOLE is an episodic novel written in eight sections, and one I had been looking forward to reading for a long time. Unfortunately, the last two sections disassociate from the previous six in such a jarring, sudden way that I ended up drifting off, and not enjoying the last 150 pages of the book. I enjoyed the "young" Stephen much more than the 22 year old Stephen. I would have given the book more stars if it had just stayed on the trajectory of the first 200 pages. This is all just a matter of "taste" however, and the brevity of the writing is impressive, even at 400+ pages. The last section "Rats" is incredibly powerful, but the Stephen in "Rats" doesn't feel like the Stephen in any other section of the book. I really wish "Rats" had been its own novel.

I highly recommend the Afterword by Peter Cameron. Make sure to read that first to get a better understanding of the novel's function and history.

A says

An incredibly rich reading experience -- one of the more complex, emotionally sophisticated books I've read in a while.***

Friedman "gets" how sexuality is expressed at the most gut level, and writes so beautifully about its ineffability -- how it is an essential, controlling part of us and yet still remains utterly mysterious and unknowable. Or is he perhaps saying that if childhood is our most innocent, open time, perhaps its also the time we are closes to understanding sexuality? It definitely feels like this is his argument, and I don't mean it in a sicko pedo way. For even though the book is filled with one disturbing animalistic moment after another -- the priapic monkey, the writhing chopped lizard tail, the discarded underwear filled with lice -- it all still feels completely natural and human, and without malice. As many reviewers have written, this is in contrast to such shame-filled stories of pubescent randiness from the likes of Roth and Updike.) Moreover, this is not a Logo Special Episode about The Perils of Coming Out Before Stonewall, and that is a merciful relief.

The book is very clearly split in two parts -- the final chapter (really more a standalone novella) in the Korean POW camp and then the series of bizarre sketches from childhood that precede it. Except for its setting in the "Forgotten War," that final novella doesn't feel particularly unique as far as story line or emotional depth -- a nice enough story, sure, but nothing that hasn't been done before. But putting that traditional story of thwarted love in the context of the churning, surreal, emotionally destabilizing passages that come before makes it sing, like going to a concert and hearing a series of ever more virtuosic cadenzas first before you hear the actual concerto they are meant to be the capstone and climax of. Further proof that Stephen's most alive moments are in childhood -- at 2 years old, before speech no less -- and that his adulthood pales in comparison. What that means as far as how Stephen deals with his sexuality and his subconscious longings is something even the greatest Freudian could never parse.

Peter Cameron's afterword mentions that Signet chose this as the lead title on its 1965 fiction list, which is

absolutely astounding. The bestseller list of 1965 reads like a Midcentury Macho Man Studies syllabus -- Bellow, Fleming, le Carré, and Roth and Updike were soon to follow -- so to think that this tender, bizarre, thoroughly queer (in sensibility and structure) story would be worthy of attention in this context makes me want to jump in my DeLorean and go hug whoever was the head of marketing and sales at the time. Of course, bestseller lists mean nothing as far as longevity is concerned. Does anyone read Michener anymore? For here are some other books released in 1965, not nearly as popular as the Bond novels but much more enduring, in the context of which *Totempole* seems to fit perfectly: *Ariel*; *In Cold Blood*; *Everything That Rises Must Converge*; *Cosmicomics*; *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*.

***Listen (and I don't care if I have to give up all my hipster bona fides on admitting this): the truth is that I have hated every single NYRB Classics I have ever read (except *The Dud Avocado*). It seemed that the NYRB was engaged in a futile exercise, trying to revive awful books that clearly should have been left to die out and slip out of print forever on their own. I made a pact with myself to read this one final NYRB title, and if I hated it, give up on them forever and ever and ever. CURSE YOU SANFORD FRIEDMAN!

Edward says

My favorite moment in the novel concerns a toy monkey that our hero has had since childhood. He's arrived at college at age 17 to study acting. Gottlieb is his roommate whom he's just met.

It the time it took Gottlieb to get ready Stephen unpacked the entire contents of his trunk, including Oscar II. He couldn't decide whether to keep the toy on his bed or out of sight. In his heart he knew he would want to have Oscar with him at night, but he was afraid of Gottlieb's ridicule. "Forgive me," he whispered, petting the monkey's head and placing him in the top drawer of the bureau..."

Yooperprof says

This very strong and successful novel was published all the way back in the pre-Stonewall era, in 1965! It contains the best account I've ever read of what it was like to grow up gay and Jewish in New York City in the 1930s and 40s. The novel ends with a fascinating account of the experiences of a gay army officer during the Korean War - in Friedman's telling not at all what I was expecting! What prevents it from receiving from me that elusive fifth star is its episodic construction, as well as the fact that I felt it spent a little too much time dealing with experiences of the central character at summer camp in Maine.

Margaret says

Review to come...I need to let my thoughts on this digest a little more.

