The Lost Tribalism of Years Gone By: Function & Variation in Gay Folklore in Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City Novels

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"THE LOST TRIBALISM OF YEARS GONE BY:"
FUNCTION AND VARIATION IN GAY FOLKLORE
IN ARMISTEAD MAUPIN'S TALES OF THE CITY NOVELS

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in Folk Studies

by
Jimmy D. Browning
May 1992
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This thesis intends to demonstrate that, because of the unusual circumstances of its writing—a semi-journalistic piece produced during a period of crisis in the real-life community fictionally depicted—Armistead Maupin’s Tales of the City series stands as an unusually accurate and reliable ethnographic source for information concerning the gay male subculture of San Francisco in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, not only the practices and behaviors themselves, but also reflecting their personal and communal function. The methodology employed in demonstrating this thesis is necessarily subjective. Like gay folklore scholar Joseph P. Goodwin in More Man Than You’ll Ever Be, the seminal study of the folklore of gay men in the United States, I am a gay man who, to some degree, draws on personal knowledge and observation to recognize and identify elements of gay folklore depicted in the fictional milieu I have chosen to study. This is unavoidable to an extent: ethnographic work within the gay communities has been limited
by a number of factors, including the covert nature of the group, the biases of exoteric analysts, and the lack of observations informed by insiders' perspectives. Nonetheless, the groundwork that has been accomplished by Goodwin and a handful of other scholars provides an adequate basis for comparison between the "real" world, professional folk study, and the fictive domain of Armistead Maupin.

In addition to an examination of gay oral folklore in the novels—including how gay oral tradition informs both the content of the novels and Maupin's authorial voice—this thesis also considers aspects of gay customary folklore and gay material culture, including how the content of the novels chronicles some of those folkloric forms and how the novels themselves have become a significant part of gay customary and material tradition. To a large degree, folklore functions in gay folk culture to encourage communication and cohesion and to divulge important psychological insights into the minds of many group members.
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To Thom and Sadie
A novelist has made a fictional representation of life.
In doing so, he has revealed to us more significance,
it may be, than he could find in life itself.

Bernard DeVoto
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Although their ideological aims may differ dramatically, in many instances folklorists and fiction writers share a significant charge: the documentation of the cultural life of a group of individuals. The folklorist chronicles the folk-cultural traditions of a group in an effort to better understand the life of the group and to preserve the traditions of the group for posterity, as a lasting ethnographic record of human interaction and endeavor. Folklorists sometimes attempt to reconstruct vanished communities or cultural groups; oftentimes they delineate the drama of a contemporary culture in conflict. Conversely, the cultural documentation which occurs in fictional renderings of group life--while often accurate and incisive--remains incidental, although serendipitous for the folklorist, as with the recreations of community life in Gloria Naylor's Mama Day or William Faulkner's fictive Yoknapatawpha County. The ultimate aim of the fiction writer is often an evocative and artistic recreation of life through which the author hopes to express an important personal observation on the circumstances of human existence. The primary purpose of the folklorist
is to illuminate the life of the group as the group itself understands living, whereas the writer of fiction must first and foremost evoke his or her own singular vision. The line between the ethnographic document recorded by the folklorist and the novel created by the fiction writer is, in some instances, indistinct, blurred by the blend of the fictional and the actual which occurs in some novels. Just as the fiction writer appropriates the life of a group through which to convey a personal perspective on human endeavor, so can the folklorist utilize the image of group life depicted by the author to observe and analyze group folk-cultural traditions--particularly when the fictional representation of folklife is exceptionally reliable and a paucity of actual ethnography of the folk group exists.

In his series of six novels chronicling gay and straight life in San Francisco during the last two decades, most often referred to as the Tales of the City series, author Armistead Maupin documents, perhaps inadvertently, many of the folk-cultural traditions of contemporary gay men, whose number comprise a significant segment of the population of that city. The novels emerged from a series of fictional journalistic sketches describing San Francisco and its citizens, and many critics have commented on Maupin's accurate recreation of life in the metropolis, which contributes greatly to the ethnographic quality of
the books. In general and unfortunately, folklorists in America have long ignored the folklore of gay men, except for a small cluster of studies which examined narrative forms concerned with AIDS; even those few papers largely addressed the oral lore about the disease from the perspective of heterosexual narrators and audiences, rather than the oral traditions of gay men. Tens of thousands of gay men have already died during the AIDS epidemic in this country, and many tens of thousands more have become infected with the virus which triggers the fatal syndrome. The cultural heritage of the group remains endangered. Given these severe circumstances and the dire dearth of ethnographic documentation of gay male folklife, folklorists may choose to examine the folk-cultural traditions of gay men through a circuitous route, through the literary efforts of gay authors, like Maupin, who have so evocatively incorporated gay male folklore in their fictive renderings of contemporary life, taking into consideration, of course, that the fictional recreation of the folk group is an artistic, literary (albeit reality-based) refraction of the life of the subculture.

This thesis intends to demonstrate that, because of the unusual circumstances of its writing—a semi-journalistic piece produced during a period of crisis in the real-life community fictionally depicted—the Tales of the City series stands as an unusually accurate and reliable
ethnographic source for information concerning the gay male subculture of San Francisco in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, not only the practices and behaviors themselves, but also reflecting their personal and communal function in context. Through the experience of his protagonist, Michael Tolliver, Maupin explores the life concerns of gay men in a particular time and place. Michael's relationships with his friends and neighbors (his acquired family), with his biological family, and with his romantic interests reveal significant psychological, social, and cultural truths about contemporary gay life. Inasmuch as Michael mediates his experience largely through gay folk-cultural traditions, the Tales of the City novels are as much about some of those traditions as they are about one fictional gay man's life. In the Tales of the City novels, through an analysis of the character and the behavior of Michael Tolliver, one can examine the dynamics of contemporary gay folklore as refracted through the prism of Armistead Maupin's insightful intelligence.

While Michael, a fictional character created by Maupin, cannot be considered symbolic of every gay man in one particular time and place, Michael's experience as depicted in the series can be viewed as representative of the experience of many gay men of one milieu and moment. A close analysis of Michael's experience reveals the remarkable role of gay folklore in the lives of contempo-
rary gay men. In More Man Than You'll Ever Be, the seminal study of the folklore of gay men in the United States, folklorist Joseph P. Goodwin identifies four major types of gay folklore: "verbal and nonverbal communication, humor, drag (female impersonation), and personal experience narratives" (Goodwin 1989a, xiv). According to Goodwin, these traditions "serve the gay subculture as a means of communication and identification, as an aid to subcultural cohesion, and as ways of coping with conflict both within the subculture and between the gay community and the straight world" (Goodwin 1989a, xiv). Ironically, gay men --a minority subculture and a folk group--survive in the world at large only by possessing a clear command of the traditions and behavior codes of the dominant, heterosexual culture; conversely, a knowledge of gay traditions is not necessary for the existence of members of the dominant, heterosexual culture. Goodwin has noted that without the formal, institutional support systems of the empowered majority, gay men must depend on their folklore to communicate with others and for others to communicate with them (Goodwin 1989a, xiv). Maupin's fictive depiction of the experience of Michael Tolliver in the Tales of the City novels dramatically demonstrates and aptly illustrates, by example and by implication, the formidable force of folklore in the lives of many contemporary gay men.

The methodology employed in demonstrating this thesis
is necessarily subjective. Like Goodwin in his approach to More Man Than You'll Ever Be, I am a gay man who, to some degree, draws on personal knowledge and observation to recognize and identify elements of gay folklore depicted in the fictional milieu I have chosen to study. This is unavoidable to an extent: ethnographic work within the gay communities has been limited by a number of factors, including the covert nature of the group, the biases of exoteric analysts, and the lack of observations informed by insiders' perspectives. Nonetheless, the groundwork that has been accomplished by Goodwin and a handful of other scholars provides an adequate basis for comparison between the "real" world, professional folk study, and the fictive domain of Armistead Maupin.

As eminent folklorist Richard Dorson has advised, the study of folklore in literature requires a consideration of three types of data to verify the authenticity and reliability of that folklore, to discern between literary created episodes of folklore and actual folklore found in the fictive text: biographical evidence, internal evidence, and corroborative evidence (Dorson 1957, 5-7). Biographical evidence involves confirming the author's actual experience with folklore; in this study, Maupin, who has lived openly as a gay man in San Francisco for the last two decades, can be understood to have experienced firsthand the gay folklore of which he writes. Internal
evidence concerns identifying and enumerating folkloric phenomena in the literary text which indicate the direct familiarity of the author with folk-cultural traditions; the abundance of examples of oral, customary, and material folklore forms found in Maupin's novels and delineated in this thesis disclose his intimate exposure to contemporary gay male folk-cultural forms. Beyond identification and enumeration—after which methodological concerns often prove inconsistent—corroborative evidence must verify the folklore located in the literary work with traditions documented outside the text; in this thesis, corroborative evidence includes comparing Maupin's evocation of gay male folklife (on America's west coast) with critical commentary from many different scholars, particularly Goodwin's participant/observer and professionally informed insights into the gay subculture (in mid-western America), and my own personal observations and experience as a gay man and a folk studies scholar (in mid-south America).

Once these three criteria have been addressed, an interpretation of the significance of the folklore found in the literary offering can be proffered: in this case, the value of Maupin's novels as an accurate and reliable source of ethnographic data concerning the practices and behaviors (their functional significance and their variation) of the gay male subculture in San Francisco during the last two decades.
For purposes of organizational clarity, this analysis of the use of gay folklore in Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series, particularly the function and the variation of gay folklore in the novels, will utilize Jan Harold Brunvand's three analytical categories of folklore, based on the mode of existence of the folkloric phenomena: oral folklore, customary folklore, and material folk traditions. According to Brunvand, oral folklore, from the simplest level to the most complex level, includes folk speech (the single word, dialect, and naming), folk proverbs and proverbial sayings (traditional phrases and sentences), folk riddles (traditional questions), folk rhymes (traditional poetry), folk narratives, folk songs, and folk ballads. Under the rubric of customary folklore, which may embrace both verbal and nonverbal elements, Brunvand lists folk beliefs and superstitions, folk customs and festivals, folk dances and dramas, gestures, and folk games. Finally, Brunvand defines material folk traditions as encompassing folk architecture, crafts, arts, costumes, and food (Brunvand 1986, 6).

Not every genre of folklore listed in Brunvand's three major analytical categories will prove applicable to this analysis of gay folklore in Maupin's series; also, many of Brunvand's classificatory groups will require a less restrictive interpretation than his to incorporate emergent traditions in contemporary gay folk culture.
Brunvand has written that his system of classifying folklore is "a means of clarifying and organizing the processes and materials that are to be observed and analyzed" (Brunvand 1986, 7). Using his classification system as a framework for analysis—in addition to applying the insights of other folklorists in areas outside the scope of his generic approach—an explication of the function and the variation of folklore in the lives of the fictional characters in Maupin's novels (and, to a lesser degree, Maupin's manipulation of folklore as a literary device) can be undertaken with insight and illumination.

Before beginning an explicit analysis of some of the genres of gay folklore in Maupin's Tales of the City novels, the cultural contexts—social, literary, and academic—in which the series emerged must be briefly addressed, including an overview of the modern gay rights movement in America, a survey of contemporary gay male fiction in this country, and an examination of gay folklore scholarship in the United States. The peculiar evolution of the publication of Maupin's novels will also be delineated, in addition to a short biography of the author. Discussion of the relationship between the disciplines of folklore and literature will follow in a later chapter.
Modern Gay Rights Movement

Without the social and political inroads paved by the earliest advocates of gay rights in America and the continued efforts of today's gay activists, Maupin's voice—and the voices of many other gay writers—might never have had the opportunity to be heard and might not enjoy the right of continued expression. Most observers agree that the roots of the modern gay rights movement in the United States can be traced to the early 1950s with the establishment of such organizations as the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and ONE, Inc., groups formed by and for gay men and lesbian women to protect the civil liberties of gays and to promote the social respectability of gays. Yet not until 1969 did a cataclysmic event occur which would galvanize the gay community and redirect the gay rights movement toward more militant advocacy. At approximately 3:00 a.m. on June 28, 1969, a routine police raid of the gay Stonewall Bar at 53 Christopher Street in New York City turned riotous when patrons unexpectedly resisted arrest. At one point, police barricaded themselves inside the bar for protection from the enraged crowd. As the violence escalated, police contemplated firing upon the group; however, the angry gathering dispersed upon the arrival of reinforcement officers, although additional altercations occurred over the following few evenings. Thus in gay folk history was
born the Stonewall Rebellion: what many mark as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement in America (The Alyson Almanac 1989, 17-21).

The 1970s proved to be a decade of firsts and milestones for the modern gay rights movement in the United States. In 1971, the National Organization for Women (NOW) acknowledged the oppression of lesbians as a main concern for the feminist movement, and the first statewide gay rights march in America occurred in Albany, New York, with an estimated 3,500 people in attendance. In 1972, San Franciscan Jim Foster addressed the Democratic National Convention, the first openly gay individual to ever speak at a national convention of a major American political party. In 1974, Dr. Bruce Voeller of New York formed the National Gay Task Force, which became a formative force within the gay rights movement; also, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official manual of mental disorders. In that same year, the first openly gay elected officials in the country assumed their offices. In 1975, Sgt. Leonard Matlovich was discharged from the United States Air Force for his admission of being gay; a cover story in Time magazine about his ordeal helped change many widespread stereotypes about gay men. In 1977, popular singer Anita Bryant initiated an emotional campaign to repeal a Dade County, Florida, gay rights ordinance; Bryant's effort received nationwide attention, pitting the gay community and anti-
gay forces in a high-profile, hysterical battle. The ordinance was repealed by a two-to-one margin, but, like the Stonewall Rebellion, Bryant's campaign fostered further solidarity in the gay community. Also in 1977, Harvey Milk was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, becoming the first openly gay official in a major American city; tragically, Milk and San Francisco mayor George Moscone were assassinated by ex-police officer Dan White one year later, and an era of unparalleled advancement in gay rights ended, ironically, with its first, modern-day gay martyr. On October 14, 1979, between 50,000 and 100,000 gay men, lesbian women, and other supporters convened in the nation's capitol for the first National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, the largest such gathering ever held at that time (The Alyson Almanac 1989, 21-23).

As the decade of the 1970s closed with a show of force supporting the gay rights movement that had never been witnessed in this country, an ominous pall was soon to be cast on the gay community worldwide. On June 5, 1981, the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, issued its first warning of the health crisis in gay men which would later be labelled Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. On the political scene, in 1983 Massachusetts Representative Gerry Studds announced that he was gay, amid a sex scandal concerning an incident which
had occurred a decade earlier, becoming the first openly gay national legislator in the country. In 1986, the United States Supreme Court upheld the right of states to outlaw gay sex between consenting adults, and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT-UP, formed in New York City, promoting an aggressive, confrontational activism in gay rights. On October 11 and 12, 1987, an estimated crowd of between 200,000 and 600,000 gay men, lesbian women, and other supporters assembled in Washington, D.C., to march for gay civil rights and to protest for more government action against AIDS; on that same weekend, the Names Project displayed a massive quilt containing approximately 2,000 panels, each of which commemorated an individual who had died of AIDS. Finally, during the summer of 1988, the United States Public Health Service mailed a brochure, entitled "Understanding AIDS," to every household in the country, the first instance in which the federal government had addressed a health issue in such a manner (The Alyson Almanac 1989, 24-27).

Despite the negative backlash against gays triggered by the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, a 1989 Gallup poll revealed that 47 percent of the respondents believed that gay relations between consenting adults should be legalized. With at least 50,500 gays dead and approximately 82,500 infected with the HIV virus (as of 1990), AIDS remains the first item on the gay political agenda in the 1990s, followed by family rights, social security benefits,
medical benefits, inheritance, child custody, and gay marriage. As the current era unfolds, activism, rather than advocacy, best characterizes the gay rights movement in the United States. Organizations such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign Fund, and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, among many others, work diligently and successfully for gay rights within the existing political structure. Other more militant groups, particularly ACT-UP, manipulate the media with guerrilla theatre shock tactics, alienating some of their audience and endearing others to their cause. While the gay community itself suffers from a schism—the separatists versus the assimilationists—engendered by the tensions of discrimination, disease, and death, the ultimate goals of the gay rights movement remain constant, threads which bind the past to the present and the present to the future: acceptance, equality, and, above all, life (Salholz et al. 1990, 20-27).

**Contemporary Gay Male Fiction**

Contemporary gay male fiction reflects the cultural schism from which the gay subculture is currently despairing, and noted gay novelist Edmund White offers an in-depth, insider's examination of that literary genre in "Out of the Closet, Onto the Bookshelf," an article appearing in *The New York Times Magazine* on June 16, 1991.
Providing a historical and a personal context for the current literary phenomenon, White recalls his teen-age years, in the early 1950s, when he first discovered fiction dealing with gay characters and themes, particularly Thomas Mann (Death in Venice). In the 1960s, White remembers encountering other gay authors, including Christopher Isherwood (A Single Man), André Gide (If It Die), William S. Burroughs (Naked Lunch), John Rechy (City of Night), and Jean Genet (Our Lady of the Flowers). After the beginning of the gay rights movement in the early 1970s, White observes that gay fiction began to address the emerging gay culture, and he cites the novels of Larry Kramer (Faggots) and Andrew Holleran (Dancer from the Dance), both published in 1978, as primary examples of the new gay novel—which emphasized cultural as well as personal realism (White 1991, 22).

Echoing White's observations on the development of the new gay novel, J. Michael Clark, in Liberation & Disillusionment: The Development of Gay Male Criticism & Popular Fiction a Decade after Stonewall, writes:

Concurrent with the personal coming-out of the decade, gay fiction moved from its previous, often ingenuous craftedness—as during those decades in which the serious artist must either thoroughly submerge or disguise gay concerns or otherwise make them palatable by couching them in artistic expertise—toward celebration, protest, and advocacy (Clark 1987, 1).

In 1979, White and six other New York gay writers formed the Violet Quill, an informal forum through which
the authors could share their works in progress. In addition to White (Forgetting Elena; States of Desire; Nocturnes for the King of Naples; Caracole; A Boy's Own Story; The Beautiful Room is Empty; The Darker Proof), the group included Felice Picano (The Lure; Late in the Season); Andrew Holleran (Dancer from the Dance; Nights in Aruba); Robert Ferro (The Family of Max Desir; Second Son); George Whitmore (The Confessions of Danny Slocum; Nebraska); Christopher Cox (A Key West Companion); and Michael Grumley (Life Drawing). From 1983 through 1990, White lived in Paris; when he returned to New York, four members of the forum (Ferro, Whitman, Cox, and Grumley) had died. White believes that while AIDS has killed many gay writers and many potential gay authors, the disease has also made more gay men reflective on the human condition and more likely to express those meditations. Too, he suggests that AIDS has piqued the curiosity of more people concerning gay life and gay culture. Ironically, the genre of gay fiction flourishes while gay writers die or are threatened by death (White 1991, 22, 24).

While many mainstream literary critics argue that gay fiction is too specialized for a mass reading audience, White responds that all great fiction is particularized. White agrees with George Stambolian, editor of three anthologies of gay fiction entitled Men on Men, who suggests that gay fiction has entered the mainstream of
American literature because of the pluralistic nature of American society. American literature has historically been revolutionized by writers from diverse ethnic and racial groups, and gay fiction can renew American literature by challenging current social and literary assumptions. While White believes that the genre of gay male fiction remains exactly undefinable, he avers that a gay literary movement in the United States is undeniable, citing the gay short stories which are appearing in quality journals—such as Outlook, The James White Review, Christopher Street, and Tribe—and the proliferation of gay and lesbian studies which are being introduced on campuses across the nation (White 1991, 24).

Arnold Dolin, editor of the Plume imprint for NAL/Dutton, who publish approximately thirty titles in gay paperback fiction, does not believe the audience for gay male fiction is growing significantly, outside of newer, crossover gay writers such as David Leavitt and Michael Cunningham. White believes the world of publishing reveals a different scenario: the organization Publishing Triangle, a group of gay and lesbian editors and book people, numbers 250 members; twenty prosperous gay and lesbian bookstores operate in the United States, offering a strong backlist which allows gay writers time to locate their audience; and gay mail-order bookstores—including Glad Day (Boston), Giovanni's Room (Philadelphia),
A Different Light (New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles), and Lambda Rising (Washington, Baltimore, and Rehoboth Beach, Delaware)—report record sales. White characterizes gay novelist Armistead Maupin as the best-selling author in gay publishing, with over 600,000 copies of *Tales of the City* sold in the United States alone (White 1991, 24).

While some hostile heterosexual literary critics may often judge gay fiction on a political basis, White thinks that gay writers have been freed by the extremity of their circumstance to pursue their most intimate emotions as they attempt to orient themselves to a new gay world. If a gay sensibility can be defined at all, White characterizes it as lyrical, psychological, and self-conscious, qualities which encourage the depiction of esoteric lore. Gay writers are more interested in changing public opinion than pleasing mainstream literary critics, and their artistic expression is inextricably entwined with their political persuasion. Of the newest novelists, White lists Robert Gluck (*Jack the Modernist*) and Alan Gurganus (*Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All; White People*) as his personal favorites. Of current gay novelists in general, White divides the number into two camps: the assimilationists—those who place gays in the larger context of the straight world (Cunningham, Leavitt, Maupin)—and the separatists—those who express gay singularity (Cooper). White
realizes that gay writers are not immune to political pressures from within the esoteric group, particularly in relation to the AIDS issue. Some advocates aver that AIDS is the only appropriate subject for a contemporary gay author to address, and other patrons plead for a more holistic depiction of gay culture, lest the cultural heritage of the group be irretrievably erased. White concludes:

Gay fiction, written by anguished writers for readers in disarray, is under extraordinary pressures. Holocaust literature, exiles' literature, convicts' literature—these are the only possible parallels that spring to mind. Seldom has such an elusive and indirect artistic form as fiction been required to serve so many urgent needs at once. Some of our best imaginative writers, like Larry Kramer and Andrew Holleran, have turned away from fiction to essays, as though only direct address is adequate to the crisis. But many have remained true to their art. Will the world recognize those writers who have had the courage and energy and honesty and sympathy to raise a cenotaph to this era of blasted lives (White 1991, 24, 35)?

Armistead Maupin and the Tales of the City Series

Of all the current gay male novelists, Armistead Maupin can be viewed as the most critically and commercially successful of the assimilationists, consistently enjoying the largest crossover reading audience. Maupin was born on May 13, 1944, in Washington, D.C. (May and Trosky 1989, 125:325). He was reared in a conservative family in Raleigh, North Carolina; he became aware of his gayness by the age of thirteen, and

From the start of the Tales of the City series, Maupin has enjoyed tremendous success with both the general
reading public and professional reviewers. For instance, the first printing of *Sure of You* (50,000 copies) sold out before the official publication date (Clifton 1989, 77). Also, as of 1987, the first four novels had sold over 200,000 copies cumulatively (Spain 1987, 53). Maupin's readers are legion and loyal; critic David Feinberg voices a confession with which most of Maupin's readers would agree: "I know I'm not the only one who was up until 2 in the morning with the latest installment, promising myself to stop after just one more chapter" (Feinberg 1989, 26). Reviewer Wendy Levins describes the first novel, *Tales of the City*, as "frothy as California surf, quick as a jazz joint pickup and bitchy as the morning-after brush off, and unerring as a coked-up tattoo stylist. Move with it" (Levins 1978, 1662). Levins characterizes the second novel, *More Tales of the City*, as a "scintillating mischievous, bittersweet chronicle of romantically restive straight/gay San Francisco. The author's trademarks--crackling repartee and cunningly interwoven plot--prevail" (Levins 1980, 744). Of the third novel, *Further Tales of the City*, Levins writes: "In Maupin's third novel, readers following the exploits of San Francisco's gay/straight singles get another flaky, snaky trolley car ride. . . . Poignantly madcap, and recommended" (Levins 1982, 1482). An anonymous reviewer in *Booklist* describes the fourth novel, *Babycakes*, with the following assessment: "From
wicked bon mots to witty asides that may sink nonbay residents, Maupin's novel romps through San Francisco's yuppie wonderland" (Booklist 1984, 192). Critic Simon Brett lauds the fifth novel, Significant Others, as "a book of enormous humanity. It is funny, wise, melancholy, topical and a terrific read. . . . In spite of the looming shadow of AIDS which tinges it with melancholy—or perhaps because of its defiant reaction to that shadow—Significant Others is a joyous book" (Brett 1988, 46). Finally, reviewer Nicci Gerrard characterizes the sixth novel, Sure of You, as a narrative as easy to pick up as The Archers after a long holiday, and as hard to put down as any good potboiler. . . . But in spite of its political messages and sense of life lived on the edge of tragedy, Sure of You is a bright, funny, engaging and loquacious soap. . . . And, unlike so many other soaps, is never boring. Which is why, of course, it has run and run, but never dribbled away (Gerrard 1990, 36, 38).

In a 1990 interview, Maupin revealed that he had never experienced gay sex until the age of twenty-six, which ended years of psychological self-denial of his true sexual nature. Maupin credits that experience, along with the ensuing self-discovery, for his rediscovery of his love of writing and his creative genius. Maupin encourages all gay people to publicly reveal their sexual preference, believing that if more gays in influential positions were to share their sexual orientation greater efforts would be made to stop the AIDS epidemic (Hubbard and Sheff 1990,
51-53). Life imitated art when Maupin allowed Michael's letter to his mother telling her of his gayness in *More Tales of the City* to be his own revelation to his parents (Clifton 1989, 77). Maupin and his lover of six years, Terry Anderson, live in San Francisco, where Anderson owns and operates a bookstore. The couple met in 1985, when Maupin lectured at Georgia State University, where Anderson presided over the gay student alliance. Anderson was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1986, and, as of 1990, Maupin remained HIV-negative (Hubbard and Sheff 1990, 51-53). "It's very hard to tell you how it feels to be in love with someone who might be dead in six months," says Maupin. "But the knowledge makes love infinitely more exquisite" (Clifton 1989, 77).

**Gay Folklore Scholarship**

Prior to the social and political momentum achieved by the gay rights movement in the 1970s and the advent of the AIDS epidemic in the United States in the early 1980s, gay folklore scholarship can best be characterized as almost nonexistent. For example, an examination of the major, scholarly journals of the discipline reveals only one article, prior to 1980, directly addressing the folklore of gay men. Norine Dresser's essay "'The Boys in the Band Is Not Another Musical': Male Homosexuals and Their Folklore" appeared in *Western Folklore* in 1974 and
is generally acknowledged as the first published analysis, albeit limited and stereotypical, of gay male folklore. Five years into the AIDS health crisis, folklorists began to tentatively take notice of gay men and their culture. In 1986, International Folklore Review published Mary O'Drain's "San Francisco's Gay Halloween," which emphasized a discussion of the gay tradition of dressing in drag on that particular holiday, and Joseph P. Goodwin's "Humour and Conflict in the Gay World," which examined the function of humor in mediating conflict inside the gay subculture and between gay men and individuals outside the esoteric group. Also in 1986, Folklore offered Venetia Newall's "Folklore and Male Homosexuality," an overview of folk-cultural traditions of both European and American gay males. By 1987, as essay titles indicate, AIDS began to receive a large share of folklorists' attention. Gary Alan Fine's "Welcome to the World of AIDS: Fantasies of Female Revenge" in Western Folklore interprets urban legends about AIDS as narratives about rape and revenge when related by women and as stories about distrust of women and sex when told by men. Alan Dundes' "At Ease, Disease--AIDS Jokes as Sick Humor" in American Behavioral Scientist places AIDS jokes in the context of a larger joking tradition concerning disastrous events, a phenomenon which functions as a type of psychological defense mechanism (Goodwin 1989a, 112-114). In 1989, Jan Harold
Brunvand devoted an entire chapter to a survey and an analysis of AIDS narratives in his fourth collection of urban legends, *Curses! Broiled Again!* By addressing AIDS urban legends in his latest compilation, Brunvand offered insightful observations into a timely and topical narrative form to his wide readership outside folklore academia (Brunvand 1989, 195-205).

Also in 1989, the first, full-length, scholarly study of the folklore of gay men in the United States was published by Indiana University Press, Joseph P. Goodwin's *More Man Than You'll Ever Be: Gay Folklore and Acculturation in Middle America*, based on the author's 1984 doctoral dissertation at Indiana University. The focus of Goodwin's study is the role of folklore in the process of acculturating gay men into the gay subculture. Goodwin bases his analysis on interviews with gay men that he has personally conducted and on extensive, personal observation of the gay subculture, along with additional information from printed sources. According to Goodwin, the gay subculture is more well-known than ever before; however, social stigmas still imposed on gay men by the dominant, heterosexual culture force many gay men to live covertly. Because gay men often lack the formal institutions which assist in socialization--such as family, school, or church--they must depend on their folklore, exchanged through personal interactions, to achieve acculturation into the
In the first chapter, "Coming to Terms," Goodwin discusses definitions, distinctions, the stages in the acculturation process of gay men, and the theoretical foundations for his proposals. The second chapter, "It Takes One to Know One," addresses how folklore assists communication and identification in the gay subculture. In the third chapter, "There's No Version like Perversion," Goodwin examines the part folklore plays in maintaining group cohesion in the gay subculture. The fourth chapter, "Better Blatant than Latent," covers the role folklore assumes in coping with conflict in the gay subculture, both that within the esoteric group and that between the esoteric group and exoteric forces. Finally, in the fifth chapter, "O Brave New World," Goodwin concludes by reiterating the ways in which gay folklore assists in the process of the acculturation of gay men into the subculture, by addressing the position of the gay subculture in relation to the dominant, heterosexual culture, and by discussing the role of the gay community in reaction to the AIDS epidemic (Goodwin 1985, 46(1), 230A).

Goodwin's achievement in *More Man Than You'll Ever Be* is threefold. First, as already noted, the effort exists as the first, full-length study of gay male folklore, informed by years of academic endeavor; in addition to the insights into gay folklore that the author shares, the book
concludes with an extensive, partially annotated bibliography of works dealing with gay folklore and other relevant resources, providing a bountiful source of rare reference material for other scholars. Second, Goodwin's work remains the first published perspective on gay folklore from an esoteric point of view; his status as a gay man allows for an outlook on gay folk culture unbiased by the stereotypical assumptions which often accompany the observations of individuals outside the subculture.

Goodwin is an observer of gay folklife and a participant in it. Third, unlike many other earlier studies which examined gay men and their culture to address "deviant" or "abnormal" behavior, Goodwin views gay folklore as a positive dynamic in gay folk culture, one which encourages communication and cohesion in the community of gay men.

In much the same way that Armistead Maupin appropriates gay folklore in the Tales of the City novels to reveal that the experience of gay men is much like that of their non-gay counterparts, so Goodwin divulges the fundamental function of gay folklore in mediating the daily existence of some gay men, one subculture among many.
CHAPTER II

FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE

In 1984, Steven Jones published an annotated bibliography of studies of folklore in American literature in which he offered the following assessment of the scholarship in that area: "The study of the interconnection of folklore and literature in the United States has been a surprisingly active and yet paradoxically disjointed affair" (Jones 1984, xi). One reason for the fragmented state of this academic endeavor, he suggests, is the lack of bibliographical tools to help scholars widen the range and enhance the quality of their study; because the concept of folklore itself has often been misconstrued, he adds, the role of folklore as a central element of literature has often been overlooked. As a result of folkloristic and anthropological examinations into the true nature of folklore during the last century, a clearer conception of what comprises the discipline has emerged: folklore includes the cultural traditions created and perpetuated by individuals or groups through oral transmission or by example. The study of the folk cultural traditions of a group illuminates the important personal and social concerns of those individuals, as well as
offering insight into fundamental human character (Jones 1984, xi-xiv). This understanding of the expansive nature of folklore, Jones asserts, encourages the full realization of the interconnection between folklore and literature:

It reveals to us the profound extent to which the appeal of a literary work is fundamentally dependent upon its evocation of audience concern and identification through the expression and elucidation of its topic in images, symbols, characters, events, situations, attitudes, expressions, and customs that are the product of folklore (Jones 1984, xiv).

Jones characterizes early folklore-in-literature studies as item-enumeration approaches which usually lacked any interpretive analysis. Such studies, while not without merit, would identify one folk tradition or another as it occurred in a literary offering, then cite a folklore text from which the writer documented the authenticity of the tradition under consideration. More often than not, concerns with methodology and similar studies were overlooked. The initial promise of such early efforts has been more fully realized in recent folklore and literature scholarship, which stress comprehensive review of relevant sources, rigorous methodological considerations, and the perceptive interpretation of data. Contemporary scholars, Jones asserts, have become more keenly cognizant of the integral connection between folklore and literature and more adept in the manner in which they examine that relationship.
To illustrate more fully this heightened awareness and insightful inquiry, Jones suggests examining the methodological approaches to the study of folklore and literature advanced by folklorists Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes, and Roger Abrahams (Jones 1984, xi-xvii).

In "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," Richard Dorson critiques current methods of examining folklore in literature; he finds most efforts either inaccurate in the labeling of folkloric items or lacking any interpretation of the folkloric items. Dorson's methodology for the study of folklore in literature involves identifying three types of data to verify the actual folkloric value of the items under examination: biographical evidence, internal evidence, and corroborative evidence. Biographical evidence concerns confirming the author's actual experience with folklore. Internal evidence concerns discerning particular references in the literary work which approximate folk traditions. Corroborative evidence concerns verifying folkloric references in the literary work with documented traditions outside the text (Dorson 1957, 5-7). Once these three criteria have been considered, Dorson concludes, "we are then in a position to discuss whether or not this folklore contributes to a given literary work in any important way" (Dorson 1957, 8).

In "The Use of Printed Sources," Dorson identifies printed materials as the folklorist's main resource for
comparative study. Dorson defines a printed source as a publication in which folklore has been casually documented. In historical periods prior to the establishment of actual folkloristic fieldwork, Dorson believes that printed sources supply historical antecedents for current examples of oral and material folklore. Dorson discusses the types of printed sources that include folklore—such as collections of stories, chapbooks, songsters, almanacs, broadsheets, magazines, newspapers, local histories, and travel literature—and the unique way in which each type utilizes folklore. Dorson considers artistic, literary creations an important source of folklore, but he warns that folklore found in such sources may be transformed from its original oral form (Dorson 1972, 465-471).

A creative writer may introduce and develop characters and motivation, scenes and tensions, that change the structure and nature of the tradition. Consequently we cannot offer any easy generalizations about the relation of folklore to literature, except to say that literature is indeed an invaluable, if ambiguous, source for the folklorist (Dorson 1972, 471).

Dorson distinguishes between the types of printed sources that include folklore on the basis of their relation to oral tradition: nearly exact reproductions of oral texts; elaborate transformations of oral texts; literary creations based on oral lore; and literary creations based on literary folklore (Dorson 1972, 473-475).

Alan Dundes, in "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation," proposes
another method for studying folklore and literature. According to Dundes, the two basic steps in the study of folklore and literature are identification and interpretation. Dundes defines identification as the search for similarities—showing how a folkloric item resembles previously documented items. He defines interpretation as the discussion of differences—showing how a folkloric item differs from previously documented items (Dundes 1965, 136). Dundes labels identification without interpretation and interpretation without identification as empty endeavors:

If it is true that folklorists too often identify without going on to interpret whereas literary critics and anthropologists interpret without first properly identifying folklore, then it seems obvious some changes are needed. Either folklorists are going to have to educate their literary and anthropological colleagues in the mechanics of identifying folklore or they will have to undertake some of the problems of interpretation themselves (Dundes 1965, 141).

In "Folklore and Literature as Performance," Roger Abrahams delineates the deficiencies of the folklore-in-literature approach to the study of folklore and literature. According to Abrahams, the main goal of the folklore-in-literature approach is basically using folkloric expertise to illuminate the content or the formal features of an artistic creation (Abrahams 1973, 82). Abrahams argues against such a superficial approach to folklore and literature inquiry, and he suggests that an understanding of both folklore and literature
resides in the way in which specific items are created, constructed, or how they establish their effect. The change in perspective here is a focusing away from surface features to deeper patterns of organization (Abrahams 1973, 82).

As one example of more substantial folklore and literature scholarship, Abrahams cites the approach of Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales*, where the critical focus is on the processes which underlie the creative performances of epic poetry (Abrahams 1973, 83). The import of identifying folkloric elements in literature, Abrahams asserts, occurs only when

one understands . . . there is something within such a work which has excited the reader into investing some of his own energy in the reading of the work. If this is so, the writer has done more than simply presenting some item of traditional performance; he has placed that item in an environment in which he has been able to invest it with vitality (Abrahams 1973, 84).

Jones avers that literary artistry depends upon oral tradition to such a degree that almost every author is indebted to folklore. He suggests that folklore appears in literature through two main influences: the contemporary folklore of the communities in which the author actively participates and the historical folklore recorded in documents with which the author may be familiar. Jones identifies three main uses of folklore in literature: authenticity, vitality, and resonance. Authenticity refers to how the incorporation of folkloric items in a literary text provides verisimilitude, enabling the reader to more closely identify with the text. Vitality refers
to the way in which folklore enhances the appeal of the
text by enlivening the writer's style, helping the author
pique the interest of the reader. Resonance refers to how
folklore often invests a literary text with larger,
symbolic meanings, providing a cultural context for the
reader (Jones 1984, xix-xxi). Jones concludes:

The appeal of literature is essentially predicated
upon the expression and reworking in literary texts of
traditional folk ideas, conventions, plots, motifs,
and language. . . . It is our cultural make-up that
allows us or encourages us to respond to certain works
in certain ways. What we like and what we understand
in literature is inevitably the product of our
cultural heritage, both oral and literate. . . .
Folklore, as it turns out, is the very stuff of which
we and the literature that we like are made (Jones
1984, xii-xiii).

Frank De Caro's recent analysis of the function of
folklore in Jay McInerney's postmodern novel *Story of My
Life* provides an example of effective contextually-
oriented folklore and literature scholarship, not dissimi-
lar from this examination of the use of gay folklore in
Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series. While older
folklore and literature studies often examined items of
folklore in the literary offerings of regional and ethnic
writers, De Caro's essay explicates the folklore of
contemporary urban characters as it occurs in the context
of their everyday lives— their cultural backgrounds— one
means of communication among many others. De Caro suggests
that folklore is basic to an appreciation of the novel,
since it is employed in fictional performance contexts to
express the characters' desires and values (De Caro 1991, 235-237). He adds:

The literary meaning here obviously goes beyond the folklore but it is also inextricably bound up with folklore use, the context--though a fictional one--amplifying text and vice versa, the novel using folklore to render meaning but also working to give the folklore a certain life within the fictional frame (De Caro 1991, 252).

In his analysis of McInerney's novel, De Caro examines the repeated use of a rhyme, a joke, and a game. He suggests that the relationship of the protagonist, Allison Poole, to folklore most fully reveals her personal problems and her efforts to surmount those difficulties. Allison's inability to recall both the text of a children's rhyme and the punch line of a joke symbolizes her disconnection from society; her participation in an adult version of the children's game Truth or Dare often ends with her feeling alienated from her friends rather than closer to them. Throughout the novel, Allison refuses to relent in her quest to complete the fragmented rhyme and joke and to locate answers to the riddles posed in the gaming sessions. Ultimately, Allison continues to seek a more positive relationship in the social world in which she so tenuously exists (De Caro 1991, 235-252).

Unlike McInerney's Allison, Maupin's characters in the Tales of the City novels successfully manipulate folklore to mediate their experience. For instance, from the moment of his first introduction, Michael reveals his
mastery of gay folklore. Like Michael, Mona Ramsey and Anna Madrigal prove conversant, from the beginning, with gay folk-cultural traditions. Unlike the other three central characters, Mary Ann Singleton and Brian Hawkins initially exhibit the least amount of sophistication concerning gay folklore; however, with Michael serving as their mentor, they soon become familiar with the subculture and immersed in its folkways. To a large degree, Maupin's novels are as much documents of Mary Ann's and Brian's indoctrination into the gay subculture as they are chronicles of Michael's life as a gay man. Just as Allison Poole's need to connect the folklore of her childhood to her adult experience motivates her resocialization, so Maupin's depiction of gay folklore in the *Tales of the City* novels joins Michael to the individuals in his world—and they to him.

In conclusion, Jones asserts that much of the appeal of literature rests on the author's expression of folk concerns with which the reader can readily relate (Jones 1984, xiv), and Abrahams concurs with that observation when he suggests that the folkloric elements of literature often entice the reader into pursuing a literary offering (Abrahams 1973, 84). While Dorson concedes that literary sources are often an important source for folklore (Dorson 1972, 471), he expresses concern that the discussion of folkloric items located in literature often ends with their
identification and enumeration, with no effort being made to interpret the import of those traditional items (Dorson 1957, 5-7). Dundes believes that too often folklorists only examine how folkloric phenomena found in literature resembles earlier documented items, while neglecting how items of folklore located in literature differ from previously documented phenomena (Dundes 1965, 141). De Caro proposes that folklore is fundamental to understanding of the novel, since the novel utilizes folklore in fictive performance contexts to convey meaning while giving the folklore existence within the fictive frame (De Caro 1991, 252). Much of the appeal of the Maupin novels resides in their accurate and insightful recreation of contemporary gay male folklife. Gay readers locate reflections of their own experience in the novels, and straight readers are afforded an esoteric glimpse of a folk culture they might never have observed in their actual existence. The intent of this thesis is to not only identify and enumerate some contemporary gay male folk-cultural traditions but to analyze and explain the function of those traditions within the subculture and how the traditions vary in reaction to events of life. Understanding gay male folklore is fundamental to comprehending Maupin's Tales of the City series; were Maupin to have attempted to depict the life of contemporary gay men without addressing their folklore, there would be no "tales of the city" to be told.
CHAPTER III
ORAL FOLKLORE

Under the heading of oral folklore, this analysis of the use of gay folklore in Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City series will examine folk speech, proverbial expression, and folk narrative. First, in relation to folk speech, the areas of speech variation, vocabulary, naming, and what might be termed "gay repartee" will be addressed. Second, the presence of proverbial expression in gay conversational tradition will be examined. Finally, folk narrative in gay oral culture—including rumors, urban legends, personal experience stories, and jokes—will be explored. Since the primary purpose of this examination of Maupin's manipulation of gay folklore in his novels is to explicate the function and the variation of gay folk traditions, this analysis will address the text of the oral folklore items, as well as the context of the oral folklore event.

Folk Speech

Brunvand defines folk speech as the most basic form of verbal folklore, including traditional words, expressions, usages, and names which are current in a partic-
ular folk group. He defines dialect as the traditional variation from standard speech, including deviations in grammar (morphology and syntax), pronunciation, and vocabulary (Brunvand 1986, 58). Goodwin identifies three communicative strategies which are common in gay folk speech: humor, ambiguity, and inversion. Humor fosters communication between individuals and aids in establishing group solidarity; humor also provides psychological insights into the persons involved in the traditional joking experience. Ambiguity in gay folk speech permits an avenue out for the narrator should the listener be offended by the intended message. Finally, inversion affords covert communication; it provides a means of secretly insulting individuals outside the esoteric group, and it suggests a direct defiance of heterosexual norms. Gay folk speech provides a method of preserving and disseminating the cultural heritage of the group. While much of the argot has been adopted or adapted from the vocabularies of other groups, many of the words and expressions have been created by the group members, who share and learn the language by example (Goodwin 1989a, 14-19). An analysis of gay folk speech in Maupin's Tales of the City novels--particularly dialect, vocabulary, naming, and gay repartee--allows for some evocative examples of the power of spoken language in contemporary gay folklife.
Goodwin asserts that variation in gay folk speech is primarily a matter of intonation, or rising and falling inflection. In gay folk speech, as in standard English, intonation is often employed to express sarcasm, a type of inversion which stresses the connotative meanings of words through sound rather than the denotative meanings of words. Variations in pitch and stress, Goodwin adds, are fundamental to gay folk speech (Goodwin 1989a, 15-16). Examples of this exaggerated tonality in the dialogue of characters in Maupin's novels are omnipresent; in fact, Maupin identifies such verbal intonation by placing such words and phrases in italics within the text, a signal to the reader that coded communication is being conveyed. One typical example will suffice. In the first novel, Tales of the City, Michael attempts to cheer Mona, who is depressed over the loss of her job, by reading aloud from the personal classifieds in The Advocate, a gay periodical:

"God! Listen to this one! 'Clean-cut, straight-looking court reporter, 32, sick to death of bars, baths and bitchiness, seeks a permanent relationship with a real man who's into white-water rafting, classical music and gardening. No fats, fems or dopers, please. I'm sincere. Ron.'" Mona laughed. "Are you sincere?" "Who the hell isn't" (Maupin 1978, 71)?

Michael's verbal exaggeration of the phrase "real man" and the word "sincere" discloses his humorous contempt for the author of the ad, for the mentality of the individual who would reduce prospective partners to such
stereotypical, generic categories and would assume that sincerity could only characterize his own search for companionship. Mona's rhetorical reply reveals her understanding of Michael's covert message and her proficiency in the verbal tradition. Here, as in many other instances in Maupin's novels, exaggerated intonation of specific words and phrases functions to convey connotative cultural meanings which can only be understood if the participants are cognizant of the verbal traditional form.

As Goodwin suggests, the gay argot provides a method of secret communication within the subculture and a means of excluding, and sometimes insulting, those outside the esoteric group. Two important aspects of the gay argot are ambiguity—messages with several possible meanings—and inversion—the reversal of generally accepted meanings in language (Goodwin 1989a, 14-15). A revealing example of ambiguity in gay folk speech can be observed in the first novel, Tales of the City, when Michael and Brian meet for the first time while sunbathing in Mrs. Madrigal's courtyard. Michael, unsure of Brian's receptiveness to gays, employs coded, ambiguous language to ascertain his new acquaintance's point of view:

"Think it's worth it?" asked Brian.
"Probably not, but what the hell? Who are we to disappoint all those other pink bodies in the bars?"
Brian laughed, obviously catching the irony of the remark. O.K., thought Michael, he knows we're not heading for the same bars. Much less the same
bodies. Still . . . he knows, and he knows that I know he knows. It's O.K. (Maupin 1978, 139-140).

Examples of verbal inversion abound in the folk speech of the characters in Maupin's novels. Two brief illustrations of the phenomenon will serve to explicate the verbal tradition in the series. In the fourth novel, Babycakes, Michael vacations with friends, some single and some couples, on a Death Valley camping trip. After a long day of hiking in the rugged terrain, the group gathers in the community tent before retiring to their respective sleeping bags:

Ned looked up from his labors on Scotty's feet. "You got some sun, bubba."
"Did I?" He pressed a finger to his biceps. "I think it's the lighting."
"No," Gary assured him. "It looks real good."
"Thanks." He entered and stretched out on the empty spot next to Ned and Scotty. Scotty grinned at him blissfully. "There's some trail mix and cheese, if you're still hungry."
"No way," he replied.

After a brief exchange of eye signals, Roger and Gary rose, dusting off the seats of their pants. "Well, guys," said Roger, "it's been a long day . . . ."
"Uh-oh," piped Scotty. "We just lost the newlyweds" (Maupin 1984, 33).

Later in the same novel, Michael prepares for a trip to England, a vacation financed by Mrs. Madrigal to hopefully help Michael come to terms with Jon's recent death from AIDS. While Michael is packing at his apartment, Mary Ann arrives to wish him a pleasant trip:

"Are those jeans new?" she asked.
"These?" He held up the pair he was packing.
"I got them today."
"They look black."
"They are black. All the rage. See?" He pretended to model them. "The Widow Fielding Goes to London."
She giggled. "You are the worst" (Maupin 1984, 61).

In both instances, the gay argot has co-opted, through verbal inversion, heterosexual language, here references to matrimony, widowhood, and folk costume, revealing how gay culture uses strategies of language to adapt to the same verities of life that any individual might experience.

Naming practices are a pervasive part of the gay argot, and gay men employ a wide variety of words and phrases through which to refer to themselves, the activities in which they engage, the institutions they patronize, and the people around them outside the esoteric group. Depending on the individual and conversational context, those words and phrases can be employed humorously or critically, with affection or with denigration. The characters in Maupin's novels actively participate in gay folk naming practices, and a few examples from the series will serve to illuminate the tradition. For instance, in the pre-AIDS environment of the early novels, Michael refers to his numerous, casual sexual partners as "tricks" (Maupin 1978, 47), a term probably adopted into the gay argot from the folk speech of prostitutes, who often refer to their customers as such; however, in the post-AIDS world of the later novels, the names Michael uses to designate sexual partners, such
as "jack-off buddy" (Maupin 1984, 22), are more descriptive of the limited sexual contact occurring between gay men, here a reference to partners with whom one only masturbates. As illustrated in the novels, gay men also employ a variety of names for activities in which they engage: to "dish" (Maupin 1978, 93) means to gossip, and "cruising" (Maupin 1978, 201) describes seeking out prospective sexual partners. Too, gay men employ coded, esoteric language to identify places in which sexual activity can occur: "tearoom" (Maupin 1984, 105) refers to a public restroom, and "glory holes" (Maupin 1980, 2) are cubicles in adult video theatres, bookstores, or public restrooms where one can experience a sexual encounter with another individual through strategically located holes in the partition walls. Finally, to describe the people around them outside the esoteric group, some gay men employ such derogatory terms as "fag hag" (Maupin 1978, 65) to identify heterosexual women who seem to befriend only gay men and "breeder" (Maupin 1982, 105) to refer to heterosexual men and women in general; in these two examples, the gay argot has reduced heterosexual individuals to a solitary, functional identity--the former as simply an adjunct to the gay man and the latter as solely a creature of biological reproduction--much in the same way that gay men have been reduced to only their sexual identity by
heterosexual naming practices with words such as "queer," "fairy," and "faggot." Many other examples of individual words and phrases used by gay men to identify themselves, their actions, the places in which they meet, and the people around them outside the esoteric group can be found in Maupin's novels. Again, depending on the individual context, the usage can be employed for humor or for criticism. Like slang, too, words and phrases in the gay argot can move from the fashionable to the passe, from the politically correct to the politically incorrect, as the following excerpt from the sixth novel, *Sure of You*, clearly illustrates:

When Charlie Rubin died in early 1987, Michael Tolliver and Thack Sweeney had inherited his dog. They had known Harry a good deal longer than that, of course, caring for him intermittently during Charlie's third bout with pneumocystis and later boarding him at their house when it became apparent that Charlie wouldn't leave the hospital again. While Charlie was still alive, Harry had been addressed as K-Y, but Michael had found it more and more humiliating to walk through the Castro calling out the name of a well-known lubricant.

The name change, however, was only partially effective, since he couldn't go to the bank or mail a package at P.O. Plus without discovering someone who had known Harry in his former life. With no warning at all, the dog would pounce ecstatically on a perfect stranger—strange to Michael, at any rate—and this person would invariably exclaim "K-Y!" in a voice that could be heard halfway to Daly City (Maupin 1990, 22).

In this instance, the naming practices of the pre-AIDS period in gay culture seem inappropriate in the post-AIDS environment, reflecting, perhaps, a change in worldview from the hedonism of an earlier decade to a more moderate
philosophy of sexual behavior.

Goodwin observes that in gay verbal tradition "a sharp wit and a sharp tongue are prized possessions (Goodwin 1989a, 13). Perhaps nowhere in gay oral culture is this observation more true than in a discussion of what might be termed "gay repartee." Bridging the areas of folk speech and lengthier traditional narrative forms, gay repartee exists as an intriguing oral phenomenon in gay conversational tradition. Such word play is highly reminiscent of the fast-paced, pithy dialogue in Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s; one might even conjecture, given the powerful influence of popular culture on gay folk culture, a direct correlation between the film genre and the conversational tradition. Whatever the origins, gay repartee remains an important aspect of gay oral culture; while such banter is often employed for humorous purposes, it also exhibits a serious side. For example, in the first novel, Tales of the City, Mona covertly expresses her fear that Michael will abandon their friendship when he falls in love with Jon; she attempts to veil her concern behind the comic banter:

"You're gonna wanna move out, aren't you?"
"Mona!"
"Well?"
"You're my friend, Mona. We'll always be together in one way or another."
"Oh, yeah? What are you gonna do? Adopt me?"

She walked to the door and opened it, addressing an invisible guest. "Oh, hi, Mrs. Plushbottom! May I present my father, Michael Tolliver, the famous
raconteur and bon vivant, and my mother, the gynecologist" (Maupin 1978, 88)!

Also in the first novel, Mona declines to spend an evening out on the town with Michael; her parting words are playful, and Michael’s rejoinder is an acceptance of the verbal gauntlet she has tossed:

"Just be careful . . . and cheer up. Someday your prince will come."
Michael blew her a kiss from the door. "Same to you, fella" (Maupin 1978, 72).

Finally, in the fifth novel, Significant Others, Michael and his friend Charlie tour Alcatraz island, where they meet Thack; Charlie encourages Michael to enter a prison cell with Thack, after which the tour guide closes the door to give the tourists an impression of what solitary confinement must have been like for the inmates:

Their mock ordeal lasted only a second or two; then the door swung open again, spilling light into the cell. The strawberry blond was no longer smiling, but he seemed a little closer than before. "Pretty creepy," he said.
"Isn't it?" said Michael . . .
"Um . . . Charlie," Michael fumbled, "this is Thad."
"Thack," said the man, correcting him. "It was great. Didn't you try it? . . ."
Charlie shook his head. "I can't handle a crowded cocktail party" (Maupin 1987, 56).

In each of these instances, gay repartee can be viewed, on the surface, as comic banter; however, often such word play, as with humor in general, conveys a more serious, covert message. In essence, gay repartee can be seen as another verbal communicative strategy through which gay men—and other individuals who are conversant with the
tradition and who possess the required verbal agility—
can charge communication with connotative cultural
meaning.

In conclusion, the folk speech of gay men is vivid
and varied, encompassing dialectal variations, traditional
words and expressions, naming practices, and gay repartee.
As Goodwin has suggested, gay folk speech is characterized
by humor, ambiguity, and inversion. Humor encourages
communication and group cohesion, along with allowing
psychological insights into the personalities of the
individuals taking part in the joking tradition. Ambiguity
allows for an avenue of denial for the speaker should the
listener be offended by the intended message. Lastly,
inversion affords covert communication, providing a method
of secretly insulting individuals outside the esoteric
group and suggesting a direct defiance of heterosexual
norms. While much of the gay argot has been borrowed from
the folk speech of other groups, many of the words and
expressions are intrinsic to the esoteric group; members
share and learn the language much by example. Variations
in gay folk speech are primarily a matter of intonation,
often employed to express sarcasm and convey connotative
cultural meanings (Goodwin 1989a, 15-16).

Naming practices in the gay argot are pervasive.
Gay men employ a wide variety of words and phrases
through which to refer to themselves, to the activities in
which they engage, to the places they patronize, and to the people outside the esoteric group. Depending on the single, conversational context, those words and phrases can be employed for humorous purposes or for critical reasons. Often naming practices respond to the tenor of the times: words and phrases which were once politically acceptable can become politically uncomfortable. Finally, gay repartee bridges the areas of folk speech and longer traditional narrative forms; such comic banter often appears on the surface to be simple word play, but in many instances, as with the argot itself, the repartee reveals a somber, covert message. Gay folk speech operates on many levels; the literal message is often charged with a hidden meaning. While the gay argot functions to foster in-group cohesion, it can also serve to exclude individuals outside the esoteric group. Whether used to entertain or to criticize, with affection or with contempt, gay folk speech remains a vital and integral part of the oral culture, a genre which both characterizes the group and consciously comments upon it.

**Proverbial Expression**

According to Brunvand, proverbial expression is the most common and the most well-known form of conversational folklore. Brunvand distinguishes between the true proverb and the proverbial phrase, both metaphorical descriptions: true proverbs are always expressed as a complete sentence,
vary negligibly in form, and usually espouse some general wisdom; however, proverbial phrases are almost never expressed as a complete sentence, often alter in form with use, and do not express a generalized truth. In terms of function, people utilize proverbial expression to pass judgment on occurrences, to impart advice, to validate behavior, or to denigrate or laud others (Brunvand 1986, 74-76). For the most part, the proverbial expression most characteristic of the gay oral folklore Maupin documents in the Tales of the City novels is the proverbial phrase, including traditional metaphors, traditional similes, and other miscellaneous proverbial sayings such as the sarcastic interrogative. To discover the actual meaning and function of those oral items requires examining those verbal expressions within the context in which they occur in the novels.

In the first book, Tales of the City, evocative examples of both the proverbial phrase (traditional metaphor) and the proverbial comparison (traditional simile) can be found in a single episode. Michael and Jon meet on gay night at a local skating rink; the following morning, their conversation addresses Michael's total lack of sexual experience with women:

"You've never . . .?"
Michael shook his head. "Never."
"Why not?"
"Why not? Well . . . let's see now. How about . . . I'm queer as a three-dollar bill."
"So?"

"So I'm a virgin with women. A perfect Kinsey six" (Maupin 1978, 87).

With the proverbial phrase, Michael metaphorically alludes to the well-known human sexuality scholarship of the Kinsey researchers, who devised a scale to rank people's sexual orientation on a continuum between totally heterosexual (zero) to totally homosexual (six). With the proverbial comparison, Michael asserts that his gayness is irrefutable; the possibility of Michael having a sexual relationship with a woman is as futile as the possibility of finding that non-existent currency. In both instances, Michael humorously employs proverbial expression as self-criticism and as a method through which to inform Jon that his sexual orientation is entirely same sex.

Numerous other examples of gay proverbial expression occur throughout the Tales of the City series. For example, when Michael is stricken with a mysterious, life-threatening physical paralysis, Jon arrives at the hospital for a visit; Michael evaluates his guest and his gifts:

When Michael woke at St. Sebastian's Hospital, Jon was at his side, armed with a pot of mums, three back issues of Playgirl and something in a brown paper bag. "Look at you," smiled Michael. "A queen's wet dream" (Maupin 1980, 146).

"Queen" refers to an effeminate gay man, and a "wet dream," of course, symbolizes the ultimate, nocturnal sexual fantasy. In effect, Michael uses this particular gay proverbial phrase to express his delight not only with
Jon's culturally significant gift but with Jon himself as well. In another episode, Jon visits Michael after the couple has been estranged for a long period of time. Michael offers Jon a marijuana cigarette, but Jon declines, having already indulged in the drug with Mrs. Madrigal. Jon describes himself as being "ripped to the tits" (Maupin 1982, 197), a common proverbial phrase in gay parlance, signifying that his state of being has already been pleasurably altered to an extreme degree. An example of the sarcastic interrogative can be found after Michael experiences a sexual encounter with a famous, unidentified movie star:

"Uh ... Michael?"
"Mmm?"
"You O.K.""
"Does Nancy have a red dress?"
"What?"
"Sorry. Just a little post-coital campy"
(Maupin 1982, 75).

In this instance, Michael's topical allusion refers to ex-First Lady Nancy Reagan's penchant for wearing only red clothing; Michael's ironic suggestion is that he could never feel as romantically fulfilled as he does at this moment in time, just as Nancy Reagan would never consider wearing any other color than red. Finally, after Mary Ann introduces Michael to Russell Rand—a famous, but closeted, fashion designer—and his wife, Chloe, Michael's lover, Thack, employs a proverbial phrase to inquire about the designer's behavior:
"Well, how was it?" asked Thack.  
"Fine. They were nice. She's really an extra-ordinary-looking woman."
"I'm sure."
This could have been snide, but Michael decided that it wasn't.
Thack poked at his cereal for a while, then asked: "Did he drop any hairpins?"
"What do you mean?"
"C'mon. You know what that means" (Maupin 1990, 109).

Thack's use of this particular gay proverbial expression suggests that some gay men hide their true sexual identity much in the way that some women secrete hairpins in their hair to secure an elaborate coiffure; just as the hairstyle can be undone by the loss of a hairpin, so can an individual's true sexual nature be disclosed by volunteering esoteric knowledge or unintentionally exhibiting esoteric behavior—by purposely or accidentally discontinuing the charade of heterosexuality and, in effect, "letting one's hair down." Each of these four examples illustrates how gay proverbial expression is used for self-assessment or for criticism of others, to disclose an individual mental or emotional state of being or to pass judgment on another individual's actions. The first three examples are used with humorous intent to mediate a strained situation, while the fourth example is employed as an interrogative in serious conversation. Also, each of these examples—with key, coded words such as "queen," "tits," "Nancy's dress," and "hairpins"—illustrates the important role of sexual inversion in gay oral culture, the tendency to flout the
heterosexual verbal norm by characterizing one's self or others in language by use of the feminine gender or by references to behavior associated primarily with women.

The proverbial expression that Maupin documents in gay oral tradition in his Tales of the City novels is characterized by the proverbial phrase, such as the traditional metaphor, the traditional simile, and the sarcastic interrogative, rather than the true proverb. Brunvand's assertions about the function of proverbial expression—to pass judgment on events, to offer advice, to rationalize behavior, or to criticize or praise others—are supported by the examples of proverbial phrases found in the novels (Brunvand 1986, 74-75). Michael and Jon use proverbial phrases as humorous expressions of self-evaluation, while Thack employs the traditional metaphor to denigrate another individual's political cowardice. Gay proverbial expression is characterized, to a large degree, by its comic, or ironic, tone and intent and by its verbal, sexual inversion. Whether it functions as comic commentary or serious social criticism, gay proverbial expression serves to subvert the dominant, heterosexual verbal norm through coded, esoteric communication.

Folk Narrative

A third important area in gay oral culture is folk narrative, which Linda Dégh describes as "an art creation
shaped and carried by different groups of people" (Dégh 1972, 53). According to Dégh, narrative is timeless:

The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization. Stories are able to adapt themselves to any local and social climate. They are old and venerable, but they are also new and up to date (Dégh 1972, 53).

In the Tales of the City novels, Maupin documents four narrative forms in gay oral culture: rumor and urban legend, personal experience narratives, and jokes. Maupin employs rumor as a literary structural device, and he incorporates urban legends to address some of the anxieties which exist in contemporary gay folklife. Personal experience narratives in Maupin's books function to encourage communication between individuals and to express concerns which reveal the worldview of many gay men. Finally, gay humor in the novels serves to promote group solidarity and to reveal insights into the minds of the characters. Like the gay argot and gay proverbial expression, gay folk narrative remains another integral verbal genre which characterizes and binds the esoteric group.

Two important types of folk narrative found in Maupin's Tales of the City novels are rumor and urban legend. Brunvand defines rumor as unsubstantiated accounts of supposed occurrences (Brunvand 1986, 158). He interprets urban legend as stories set in the contemporary world which are related as the true experience of an
actual individual but which reveal their legendary nature through different re-tellings, or variants. Brunvand suggests that the overwhelming appeal of the urban legend is due to the suspenseful quality of the narrative, the factor of folk belief the legend embraces, and the cautionary message or moral expressed implicitly or explicitly in the story. Urban legends, he postulates, evolve in reaction to the anxieties experienced in contemporary life (Brunvand 1986, 165-169). In the Tales of the City series, Maupin manipulates rumor as a literary structural device, and he appropriates urban legends into the experience of his fictional characters to address anxieties which characterize contemporary gay folk life.

Maupin employs rumor as an important literary structural device in three of the six novels in the Tales of the City series. The rumors he appropriates prove more akin to tabloid journalism--such as mysterious medical methods, weird religious cults, and sightings of deceased celebrities--rather than the urban legend, which has been validated by oral rather than written circulation. Maupin's use of rumor in the novels provides topical verisimilitude and creates a tone of suspense in the books which propels the reader to pursue the plot relentlessly. In the first novel, Tales of the City, Mona Ramsey's lesbian lover, D'orothea Wilson, a famous black fashion model, is introduced. Largely due to Mona's
pursuit of her lover's secrets, D'orothea's real identity is revealed: she is actually white, having darkened the color of her skin through drugs and ultraviolet treatments so that she might further her career. In the second novel, More Tales of the City, Mary Ann meets the enigmatic Burke Andrew, who is suffering from amnesia induced by his horrific discovery of a body-snatching, cannibal cult operating in San Francisco's Grace Episcopal Cathedral. Unraveling the mystery of Burke's memory loss occupies almost all of Mary Ann's energies in the novel; before the secret has been solved, nearly every character in the novel has participated in some way in its resolution. Finally, in the third book, Further Tales of the City, Maupin again casts Mary Ann in the role of detective when she is recruited by socialite DeDe Halcyon, a survivor of the Jonestown massacre, to assist in finding DeDe's twins, Anna and Edgar, who have been kidnapped by a Reverend Jim Jones-like character. The novel suggests that Jones survived the Guyana tragedy by placing an imposter in his position while he was receiving medical treatment out of the country. Again, before the close of the novel, almost all of the major characters in the book play important parts in resolving the mystery and the crime. In short, Maupin employs rumor in three of the Tales of the City novels as an integral literary structural device. More the fodder of tabloid journalism than urban legend, the
rumors he appropriates recall folk narrative and contribute significantly to the suspenseful tone of the novels, thus enhancing their relevance and their readability.

Maupin appropriates urban legends into the experience of his fictional characters to address some of the anxieties which characterize contemporary gay folklife. In the pre-AIDS environment of the earliest novels, for instance, one great area of concern for gay men was the threat of mortal danger from the strangers one might encounter in some social situations. For example, in the first novel, Tales of the City, Michael decides to spend a night out on the town alone; Mona expresses her concern for his well-being:

"Where are you going?"
"Here and there."
"Trashing, huh?"
"Maybe."
"Be careful, will you?"
"What?"
"Don't do anything risky."
"You read the papers too much" (Maupin 1978, 72).

While attempting to enjoy his evening out, Michael, too, ponders the frightening fates urban legend proposes:

Actually, there were lots of murky legends . . . among gay people in San Francisco. God only knew where they originated!

There was the Doodler, a sinister black man who sat at the bar and sketched your face . . . before taking you home to murder you.

Not to mention the Man in the White Van, a faceless fiend whose unwitting passengers never found their way home again.

And the Dempster Dumpster Killer, whose S&M fantasies knew no limit.
It was almost enough to make you stick with Mary Tyler Moore (Maupin 1978, 73). Without even knowing the origins of the narratives or the actual details of the events described in the stories, Michael accepts them as truth on the basis of their oral validity and their circumstantial realism. Since the legend-telling event, here recorded in an interior monologue, occurs immediately after Mona's advice about safe behavior in social situations, the cautionary nature of those urban legends is clearly understood. Another example of urban legend, also in the first novel, expresses the concern of gay men with the threat of unwitting exposure of their gay identity. Michael, who is trying to explain the function of a cockring (a device for prolonging an erection) to Brian, gleefully recalls this narrative, and he relates it to his audience as the actual experience of someone he knew:

He laughed suddenly, thinking of something. "I used to know this guy . . . a very proper stockbroker, in fact . . . who wore one all the time. But he soon got cured of that."
"What happened?"
"He had to fly to Denver for a conference, and they caught him when he passed through the metal detector at the airport."
"God! What did they do?"
"They opened his suitcase and found his black leather chaps" (Maupin 1978, 205)!

Again, as in the first example, this urban legend can be viewed as a cautionary tale with an implicit moral message—one's passions may be one's undoing if not held in check. Maupin's incorporation of urban legends in the
lives of his characters in the *Tales of the City* novels evokes some of the anxieties contemporary gay men experience: concerns about sex, concerns about personal safety, and concerns about the accidental revelation of their true sexual identity.

In three of the *Tales of the City* novels, Maupin employs rumor as an important literary structural device, to provide topical verisimilitude and to create a suspenseful tone which encourages the reader to peruse the novels passionately. Maupin appropriates urban legends into the life experiences of his fictional characters to acknowledge some of the anxieties which characterize contemporary gay folklife, such as worries about sexual behavior, uneasiness about personal safety, and fear of the unintentional exposure of one's true sexual identity. The gay urban legends Maupin relates in his novels are textbook examples of Brunvand's interpretation of the nature and the function of that folk narrative genre. Because of their oral validity and their circumstantial realism, gay urban legends are often accepted as truth; whether or not that belief is ultimately sustained, the implicit or explicit cautionary message or moral which informs the narrative is often heeded, providing a basis for important ethical and moral decisions in the lives of many group members.

Another noteworthy genre in gay oral tradition
documented in Maupin's *Tales of the City* novels is the personal experience narrative. In an article entitled "The Personal Narrative as Folklore," Sandra K.D. Stahl defines the personal narrative as folklore "through a discussion of such stories as examples of folkloric performance, as representatives of an established storytelling tradition, as narrative embodiments of traditional attitudes, and as recognizable items in their tellers' repertoires" (Stahl 1977, 6). As examples of folkloric performance, Stahl believes that personal narratives exhibit more traditional characteristics (continuity and collectivity) than innovative characteristics (change and individuality); while personal narratives depend on some individual resources, most of those resources are affected by collective models. As representatives of an established storytelling tradition, Stahl suggests that personal narratives reveal how the act, or process, of storytelling, not just the content or texts of the stories told, can signify traditional behavior in a group. As narrative embodiments of traditional attitudes, Stahl asserts that personal narratives, when meaningful and complete, contain at their core some significant worldview which is shared, to one extent or another, by the teller and his or her audiences. Finally, as recognizable items in their tellers' repertoires, Stahl concludes that personal narratives, informed as they are by
important traditional attitudes, often remain a permanent part (albeit sometimes active and sometimes inactive) of the narrator's canon of stories (Stahl 1977, 9-26).

Three evocative examples of the personal experience narrative from Maupin's series serve to illustrate some of Stahl's assertions about the nature of the genre and help to illuminate the function of that folk narrative form in gay oral tradition.

The first two examples of the personal experience narrative occur in the first novel, Tales of the City, when Michael returns to the apartment he and Mona share after having spent an evening out alone in the city:

He wriggled onto the sofa next to her. "Guess who was there?"
"The Mormon Tabernacle Choir."
"O.K., if you don't wanna dish, we won't dish."
"No. Go ahead. I want to."
"No. First I have to tell you about Hamburger Mary's."
"I hate it when you punish me."
"I'm setting the stage, Mona. Relax. Pretend I'm your guru. Maharishi Mahesh Mouse. I bring you the Keys to the Kingdom of Folsom Street. The Holy Red Bandanna That Sitteth on the Left hand of the Levi's. The . . ."
"Michael, you fucker!"
"All right, all right. There I was at Hamburger Mary's, eating a bean sprout salad and wondering if my new Sears work boots looked too new, when this couple waltzed in and took a seat in the middle of a heavy biker contingent."
"A couple of guys?"
"Hell, no. A guy and his wife, slumming. Radical chic, vintage 1976. She was wearing a David Bowie T-shirt to show where her sympathies lay, and he was looking grossly uncomfortable in a Grodins sports ensemble. I mean, five years ago you could have caught these turkeys down in the Fillmore, chowing down on chitlins and black-eyed peas with the Brothers and Sisters. Now they're into faggots.
They want desperately to relate to perverts."
"It's nothing but heartbreak, I can tell 'em!"
"C.K., so the scene gets more rough-trade by the
minute. And then this dude sits down next to them
and he's wearing a ring in his nose and a Future
Farmers of America jacket and Mr. Grodins Ensemble is
freaking out so badly that he may have to split for
El Cerrito any minute."
"What about his wife?"
"Oh, God . . . extremely PC'ed that hubby's not
getting off on the decadent ambience. Finally, she
looks at him intently and says, in a voice fraught
with meaning: 'Which do you think you'd prefer,
Rich? S or M?'"
"And?"
"He thought it was something to put on the
hamburger" (Maupin 1978, 93-94).

As the highly-contexted conversation preceding the
relation of the narrative reveals, a storytelling tradition
has already been established between Mona and Michael.
Michael employs a standard storytelling frame—his setting
the stage—through which to key the narrative event.
Finally, an aspect of gay worldview—contempt for
individuals who attempt to embrace gay folk culture for
the sake of social fashion—emerges from the storytelling
event, implicitly but clearly understood by both Michael
(narrator) and Mona (audience). Immediately following
his tale about the ineffectual liberals, Michael relates
the following narrative about his encounter with celebrity,
one story which would surely remain a part of his
repertoire for many years to come:

"So who did you meet at the tubs, Mouse?"
"Well . . . I met him after I'd been there a couple
of hours. I was walking down the hall, looking into
rooms, and this gray-haired guy motioned me to come
into his room. He seemed pretty old, but he had a
nice body. So I went in and sat down on the edge of his bed, and he said, 'Had a busy night?' and I immediately knew who it was by his accent. I also recognized him from his album covers."

"Who?"
"Nigel Huxtable."
"The conductor?"
"Yep. Nora Cunningham's husband, no less."
"Did you two ...?"
"Are you kidding?"
"Well, I didn't ..."
"I got out of there as soon as I saw what he had in his bag."
"Go on, go on ..."
"A cassette recorder ... a tape of his lovely wife singing the 'Casta Diva' ... a piece of gold brocade cord which he said came from the curtain at La Scala ... and six rubber batons!"
"Jesus Christ!"
"I didn't do anything, Mona. With anybody."
"Tell that to your gynecologist" (Maupin 1978, 94)!

The third memorable personal experience narrative in the series can be found in the fifth novel, Significant Others; Michael, Thack, and Brian have retreated to a cabin in the country while they await the results of Brian's medical test which will determine whether or not he has been exposed to the AIDS virus. After preparing a meal over an open flame outside the cabin, the trio gather around the fire—a storytelling context so pervasively understood as to almost be clichéd—and begin to recall their boyhood experiences in scouting. Michael's tale reveals another aspect of not only gay worldview but the whole human condition, the desire to feel safe and loved in an uncertain world:

"I liked camping trips," said Brian. "I liked that part."
Thack nodded. "Same here."

"I went to Philmont," said Michael. "You know . . . that Explorer camp in New Mexico?"

Both Thack and Brian shook their heads.

"Well . . . anyway, it was a big deal. Guys went there from all over. It was a big deal for me, anyway. I found out about love."

"Oh, God," groaned Brian.

Thack chuckled.

"I was fourteen," Michael said, "and my Explorer troop went on this two-week trip to Philmont. We went by bus, and we stayed at army bases along the way. . . ."

"What did I tell ya?" said Brian. "Fascist."

Thack laughed, then turned back to Michael, waiting for him to continue.

"They fed us army food, and we bunked in barracks buildings, and went to movies at base theaters, and . . . God, I'll never forget those soldiers as long as I live. Most of them were just four or five years older than I was, but . . . vive la difference."

Thack said: "Vive la similitude."

Brian laughed.

"It was total fantasy," Michael continued. "I wouldn't have had the slightest idea what to do. But . . . it got my engine going. I was hornier than a two-peckered goat by the time I got to Philmont."

"Isn't he quaint?" said Brian, turning to Thack.

"One night," said Michael, ignoring them, "we were camped in this canyon, and there was this hellacious hailstorm, which knocked down our tents and got everything wet, so we were more or less adopted by this group of older scouts--"

"Wait a minute," said Thack, grinning. "Didn't I read this in First Hand?"

"First what?" said Brian.

Michael ignored them. "So . . . we went over to the other camp, and dried off in front of the fire, and this older scout shared his poncho with me. He put his arm across my shoulders, and I sort of . . . leaned against him." He stared into the firelight, remembering this.

"And?" said Brian.

"And . . . I just leaned against him. It was the most comfortable, wonderful, amazing thing. . . ."

"That's it?" said Thack, joining in the torment.

Brian looked at Thack. "Pretty scorching stuff."

Michael scowled at them both. "You had to be there." He picked up a stick and used it to rearrange the embers. "That's all anybody wants, isn't it? That feeling of being safe with somebody." Hideously
embarrassed, he looked at Brian, then at Thack, and dropped the stick into the fire (Maupin 1987, 107-108).

The incident Michael relates in this final personal experience narrative has made a lasting impression on him; after many years have passed, Michael can recall the event with clarity and in detail, and the narrative can be clearly understood as a permanent and emotionally potent part of his storytelling canon.

In the Tales of the City novels, personal experience narratives exist and function much as Stahl has suggested. The narratives emerge in contexts where the narrator (Michael) and the audience (Mona, Thack, and Brian) have come to expect them to occur, whether relaxing on a sofa at the end of a long evening or gathering around the campfire. Michael's narrative about the heterosexual couple who wish to experience gay culture reveals an important aspect of gay worldview: gay culture is a life, not a fashionable social movement to be embraced until another more timely minority surfaces in the consciousness of liberal do-gooders' minds. The second narrative about his encounter at the bathhouse with the world-famous conductor would surely become a permanent part of Michael's narrative canon, his standard encounter-with-celebrity story. Lastly, Michael's detailed and emotional narrative about his childhood experience on a scouting trip, one which would seem to have been a part of his repertoire for many years, also reveals another important aspect of
the worldview of many gay men and the human condition in general: the moments in which one feels safe and loved are the most memorable incidents in life, and most individuals spend their lives searching for someone with whom to realize such serenity. In essence, personal experience narratives function in Maupin's series to engender communication between individuals and to express concerns which characterize the worldview of many gay men.

A third major form of folk narrative found in Maupin's novels is the joke. According to Goodwin, humor is an important form of communication in gay culture, partly due to the highly oral orientation of the subculture; he characterizes gay humor by its use of puns and double entendres (Goodwin 1989a, 13-15). Goodwin suggests that humor functions in gay oral tradition not only to facilitate communication but to encourage group cohesion (Goodwin 1989a, 34). Humor is often employed to glean information from others about themselves, while revealing much about the mind of the narrator, too (Goodwin 1989a, 19). In Maupin's Tales of the City series, the joking traditions of gay humor are documented much as Goodwin has described. Puns and double entendres abound, along with, in the first novel, a classic shaggy dog story. All in all, gay humor in the novels functions to foster communication, to promote group solidarity, and to reveal insights into the minds of the characters.
A pun is understood as a play on a word or a group of words which emphasizes different meanings of the same word or words that sound alike. Closely related to the pun, a double entendre is a word or an expression with two meanings, one of which is usually ribald. Two illuminating examples of the pun/double entendre form of folk narrative occur in the first novel, Tales of the City. In the first example, Michael and Mona decide to spend a leisurely afternoon at the beach; upon their arrival, they find the area overcrowded with a throng of water worshippers and sunbathers. Michael mediates the stressful situation with humor, here an obvious sexual double entendre referring, through a historical allusion to an infamous incident of cannibalism on the American frontier, to oral intercourse:

They trekked along the dirt road with dozens of other wayfarers headed for the beach. "This reminds me of the Donner Party," said Mona.

Michael grinned. "Yeah. Drop by the wayside and you get eaten" (Maupin 1978, 64).

In the second example, Michael meets a man in a bar to whom he is attracted. He uses humor, again, in an attempt to communicate his interest to the stranger, here an oblique allusion to anal intercourse:

"Crowded, huh?" The man at the bar was wearing Levi's, a rugby shirt and red-white-and-blue Tigers. He had a pleasant, square-jawed face that reminded Michael of people he had once known in the Campus Crusade for Christ.

"What is it?" Michael asked. "A full moon or something?"

"Got me. I don't keep up with that crap."
Faint One in his favor. Despite Mona's proselytizing, Michael was not big on astrology freaks. He grinned. "Don't tell anybody, but the moon's in Uranus."

The man stared dumbly, then got it. "The moon's in your anus. That's a riot!"

Go ahead, Michael told himself. Fly him with cheap jokes. Have no shame (Maupin 1978, 73-74).

In both instances, Michael employs humor as a communicative strategy, an attempt to mediate stressful moments. In the first example, Michael's implicit message to Mona—one thematically of cohesion—is that together they can make an anxious experience enjoyable. In the second example, Michael admittedly uses humor to learn more about an individual he has just encountered and to ingratiate himself into that person's good graces. Finally, in both cases, Michael's jokes reveal much about his own psychological profile (and, by implication, that of many gay men), a mindset in which human sexuality is a primary concern.

Related to the pun and the double entendre, the shaggy dog story, as defined by Brunvand, is "a nonsensical joke that employs in the punchline a psychological non sequitur, a punning variation of a familiar saying, or a hoax, to trick the listener who expects conventional wit or humor" (Brunvand 1986, 200). Such stories, he adds, often "describe ridiculous characters and actions, and are often told (to heighten the effect of the final letdown) in a long drawn-out style with minute details, repetitions, and elaborations" (Brunvand 1986, 200). The shaggy dog
story Michael relates also occurs in the first novel, after he and Jon have attended a movie and decide to walk along a nearby pier; Michael couches the story in the guise of a personal experience narrative about a chimpanzee, named Andrew, that he and a former lover, named Christopher, had reared. The humor of the story arises from Michael's skillful manipulation of both the narrative genre itself and of the popular fallacies concerning causes of male homosexuality:

"I never told you about my chimp, did I?"
"As in monkey?"
"Uh huh. Do you wanna hear it?"
"By all means."
"Well . . . ever since I was a kid I've always wanted a chimp. I used to fantasize about training a chimp to burst into my fifth-grade classroom and throw water balloons at my teacher, Miss Watson." He laughed. "She was probably a dyke, come to think of it. I should've been nicer to her . . . . Anyway, I never outgrew it . . . the desire to own one . . . and last year I happened to mention this to my ex-lover. . . . I mean, he's my ex-lover now. . . . He was my lover at the time."
"Stick to the chimp."
"O.K. . . . The big coincidence was that Christopher had had this exact same fantasy ever since he was a kid. Sooo . . . we talked about it for a while and decided we were two responsible adults and there was no reason in the world why we shouldn't have one. Anyway, Christopher contacted this friend of his at Marine World who knew how to handle all the red tape and everything and eventually . . . we ended up the proud parents of a teenaged chimp named Andrew."

Jon smiled. "Andrew, Michael and Christopher. Very nice."

"We thought so. And it worked out beautifully, after we got past the toilet-training part and all. We took him everywhere . . . Golden Gate Park, the Renaissance Faire . . . and the zoo. Christ, he adored the zoo! Then one day our friend at Marine World asked if we would . . . like . . . mate him with a lady chimp that belonged to a friend of his.
Naturally, we were pretty excited about this, since it would make us grandparents, in effect."
"In effect."
"So the big day came . . . but Andrew didn't."
"Oh, no!"
"Hell, he wouldn't even go in the same room with her."
"O.K., let me guess."
Michael nodded soberly. "Queer as a goddam three-dollar bill!"
"Now wait a minute!"
"I could handle it O.K., because I really loved Andrew, but Christopher took it personally. He was convinced that if he had played more ball with Andrew . . ."
Jon began to laugh. "You're too much!"
"It was awful, I tell you! Christopher accused me of mollycoddling Andrew and taking him to too many Busby Berkeley movies and . . . letting him see the men's underwear section of the Sears catalogue!"
"Stop it" (Maupin 1978, 102-103)!

Michael's shaggy dog story exemplifies Brunvand's description of the form. Michael's hoax is to convey the joke in the form of an actual experience, to convince Jon from the beginning that the story is true because it happened. The psychological non sequitur involved—the conclusion which does not follow the premises—is that if an animal could exhibit homosexual tendencies at all, would it be for the same reasons that many gay men are believed to have been rendered "mentally aberrant?" Too, Michael's unlikely story is very lengthy, full of specific details about Andrew, Christopher, and himself and containing such asides, or elaborations, as Michael's belief that his grade school teacher may have been a lesbian. Finally, like the pun and the double entendre, Michael's narrative ultimately reveals much about the mind of the
teller; the poignancy of this tale is best shown in the
dialogue between the two men which follows Michael's
narration. Michael, alluding to gay playwright Tennessee
Williams' most famous female dramatic character, earnestly
expresses his almost overwhelming need to be loved, before,
again, reverting to a humorous verbal ploy:

Michael grinned finally, forsaking the game
altogether. "You like that one, do you?"
"Do you always make things up?"
"Always."
"Why?"
Michael shrugged. "'I want to deceive him just
enough to make him want me.'"
"What's that from?"
"Blanche DuBois. In Streetcar."
Jon threw an arm around Michael's neck. "Come over
here, Blanche." They kissed for a long time, pressed
against the cold concrete.
When they separated, Michael said, "Would it sound
better if the lover was named Andrew and the chimp
Christopher?"
"You made up the lover too?"
"Oh... especially the lover" (Maupin 1978,
103-104).

In addition to the comic verbal wit displayed in gay
repartee, gay humor in Maupin's novels can be characterized
largely by folk narrative forms which emphasize verbal
agility, such as the pun and the double entendre. While
the shaggy dog story Michael relates in the first novel
exists specifically as a part of the novel's fictional
realm, Maupin's manipulation of the folk narrative form
itself reveals his recognition of the traditional joke
genre and his ability to adapt the form for his own
ideological aims. Goodwin's suggestion that humor functions
in gay oral tradition to facilitate communication and to
encourage group cohesion is validated by examples from Maupin's novels (Goodwin 1989a, 34), along with his idea that humor can reveal significant insights into the minds of the narrator and the audience (Goodwin 1989a, 19). Essentially, gay humor in Maupin's Tales of the City series serves, as in actual gay folklife, to foster communication, to promote group solidarity, and to disclose psychological truths about the characters.

In Maupin's novels, four types of gay folk narrative are documented: rumor and urban legend, personal experience narratives, and jokes. Maupin employs rumor as an integral literary structural device in three of the novels; the rumors he appropriates contribute significantly to the suspenseful tone of the novels, thus enhancing their relevance and their readability. Maupin's incorporation of urban legends in the novels evokes some of the anxieties contemporary gay men experience, including concerns about sex, concerns about personal safety, and concerns about the accidental revelation of their true sexual identity. Personal experience narratives in the novels function to engender communication between individuals and to express thoughts which describe the worldview of many gay men, such as the human need to find love and security in an uncertain world. Finally, gay humor in the series serves to foster communication, to encourage group solidarity, and to reveal insights into
the minds of the characters. Like gay folk speech and gay proverbial expression, gay folk narrative exists as another important genre in gay oral culture which describes and defines the esoteric subculture.

In *The White Album*, Joan Didion writes that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live" (Didion 1979, 11). While the impulse to make narrative sense in life motivates much of human existence, the act of verbalizing justifies human endeavor, too. Considering the formidable function of oral folklore in gay folk culture, as revealed in this analysis of verbal lore in Maupin's novels, one might add to Didion's observation that we talk to live, too. Gay folk speech, for instance, fosters cohesion within the subculture, defining and delimiting the group by excluding those who cannot comprehend the argot's covert meanings. Gay proverbial expression often serves as an evaluative strategy, whether the commentary describes oneself or another individual. Gay folk narratives express concerns and anxieties which characterize contemporary gay folklife. To a large degree, oral folklore functions in gay folk culture to encourage communication. In many instances, oral folklore reveals significant psychological insights into the minds of the members of the group. Much of the verbal lore—be it a single word or phrase or an extended narrative—can be characterized as humorous, existing solely to entertain, fun for the sake of itself; however,
more serious covert meanings often underlie the expression. Gay oral folklore is coded communication. Breaking the code requires awareness of the traditional behavior and verbal agility.
CHAPTER IV
CUSTOMARY FOLKLORE

Brunvand defines a custom as "a traditional practice—a mode of individual behavior or a habit of social life—that is transmitted by word of mouth or imitation, then ingrained by social pressure, common usage, and parental or other authority" (Brunvand 1986, 329). Under the rubric of customary folklore, this examination of the use of gay folklore in Maupin's series will consider rite-of-passage customs, created family, calendar customs, social customs, and gay proxemics. First, in relation to rite-of-passage customs, coming out as a significant gay life-cycle event will be addressed. Second, created family as an integral part of gay kinship relationships will be considered. Third, the observance of calendar customs in gay folk culture, particularly Halloween and Christmas, will be examined. Fourth, variation in gay social customs due to the impact of the AIDS epidemic will be explored. Finally, the function of gay proxemics as an important gay gestural communicative strategy will be investigated.

In short, this analysis of Maupin's manipulation of customary folklore in the Tales of the City series will assist in explaining the function of folklore in gay culture and how gay folklore accommodates the events of history.

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Rite-of-Passage Customs

One important form of customary folklore in Maupin's novels is rite-of-passage customs. According to Brunvand, most true customs in American folk culture are related to special occasions, particularly those associated with rites of passage, such as birth, maturation, mating and matrimony, and death (Brunvand 1986, 331). Goodwin asserts that the public revelation of one's gayness, commonly called coming out, is the most momentous rite-of-passage in gay folk culture:

Coming out is an experience all openly gay people share, and ... it is a continuing process. ... This experience is potentially quite traumatic, and thus is imbued with fear and apprehension. ... To have come out is an accomplishment; it is to have met a challenge; it is probably the most significant rite of passage of the gay experience (Goodwin 1989a, 43).

In the Tales of the City series, through Michael's quest to affirm his own identity, coming out as a rite-of-passage in gay folk culture comprises a complex, consequential theme.

In the first and second novels, Michael, like many gay men, lives a double life concerning his sexuality. In his adopted hometown, San Francisco, he is entirely open about his gayness; in his birthplace, Orlando, Florida, where his parents still reside, he continues to conceal his true, gay nature, no doubt largely from fear of ostracism, both familial and social. Michael's precarious, sexually segregated existence is unexpectedly
threatened in the first novel when he receives a surprise telephone call from his mother announcing that she and his father would be visiting their son on their upcoming vacation. Michael's foremost concern for their visit is to continue to conceal his secret identity:

If he was careful, very careful, he could ease them through it, protect their fragile, Reader's Digest sensibilities from the horror of The Love That Dares Not Speak Its Name.

Maybe.

In this town, he thought, The Love That Dares Not Speak Its Name almost never shuts up (Maupin 1978, 169).

While Michael succeeds in secreting his gayness from his parents during their holiday, he finds the deceit increasingly more difficult to sustain psychologically; in the second novel, he confides his qualms about the charade to Mary Ann, as he considers divulging the truth about his sexual identity to his parents:

"You've told them."
"No, but I think I'm going to."
"Mouse . . . do you think they're ready?"
"No. They'll never be ready. They're past changing now. They just get more the same."
"Then why?"
"I love them, Mary Ann. They don't even know who I am."
"Yes they do. They know that you're kind and gentle and . . . funny. They know that you love them. Why is it necessary for you to . . . ?"
"They know a twelve-year-old" (Maupin 1980, 127).

Later in the second novel, two incidents occur concurrently which constitute the catalyst that motivates Michael's confession of his gayness to his parents. While hospital-
ized with an undiagnosed illness, Michael receives a letter from his mother chronicling her involvement with Anita Bryant's anti-homosexual Save Our Children campaign. At this pivotal point in his life, Michael is no longer able to rationalize or to justify his silence, and he dictates the following letter for his parents to Mary Ann:

Dear Mama,

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to write. Every time I try to write to you and Papa I realize I'm not saying the things that are in my heart. That would be O.K., if I loved you any less than I do, but you are still my parents and I am still your child.

I have friends who think I'm foolish to write this letter. I hope they're wrong. I hope their doubts are based on parents who loved and trusted them less than mine do. I hope especially that you'll see this as an act of love on my part, a sign of my continuing need to share my life with you.

I wouldn't have written, I guess, if you hadn't told me about your involvement in the Save Our Children campaign. That, more than anything, made it clear that my responsibility was to tell you the truth, that your own child is homosexual, and that I never needed saving from anything except the cruel and ignorant piety of people like Anita Bryant (Maupin, 1980, 159).

While gay folk culture, like heterosexual folk culture, embraces many rite-of-passage customs, including those associated with a multitude of significant life-cycle events, coming out remains one of the most momentous rites of passage in gay folklife. The revelation of one's gayness to important persons in one's life enables the individual to achieve a fuller sense of self-actualization. Feelings of guilt engendered by living a lie are ended. Feelings of anxiety about the accidental discovery of one's secret identity are eradicated. Energies once expended on
maintaining an elaborate fiction can be redirected to more positive life pursuits. Once one has come out, he or she can more readily accept himself or herself; even if family members or friends react negatively to the revelation, they at least have been apprised of a more accurate rendering of the gay individual's identity. Michael's coming out experience in the *Tales of the City* novels, a mirror of the experience of many gay men, aptly illustrates the verity of one maxim in folk wisdom: the truth will truly set one free.

**Created Family**

A second significant form of customary folklore in Maupin's series is kinship relationships. Because many gay men are often alienated from their natal families as a result of their sexual preference, acquired family groups assume an important role in gay folk culture. Goodwin suggests that families are defined as much by emotional ties as they are by biological bonds. Gay families, like other families, function to support and educate the members of the group. Gay families can consist of as few as two persons, such as lovers or good friends, or they may include lovers, other good friends, and, many times, former lovers. If an individual's biological family proves unsympathetic, the gay family may serve as a surrogate family; in many cases, the gay family functions as a supplemental group to the natal family. Not all members of
the gay family are gay men, and sex and age are usually irrelevant factors in family membership. The structure of the gay family is based on levels of intimacy--more distant relationships are often the more short-lived. Goodwin identifies the same types of traditional behaviors in gay families that can be located in more conventional family groups: the use of nicknames; joking relationships and permitted disrespect; family narratives; esoteric references and in-jokes; and traditional celebrations. He asserts:

In gay families, as in others, folklore defines the closeness of relationships, underscores that closeness, and gives us a sense of history, of heritage, and of who we are, as well as a sense of pride and understanding of how we fit (or do not fit) into the larger culture (Goodwin 1989b).

Estranged from the family into which he was born, Maupin's Michael Tolliver creates his own family, along with the other disenfranchised residents of 28 Barbary Lane, which weathers the storms of life for two turbulent decades.

The nucleus of Michael's created family in San Francisco consists of his friends and neighbors at 28 Barbary Lane, each of whom has become estranged from his or her own families for various reasons, some of which Maupin explains and some of which remain a mystery. For instance, transsexual Anna Madrigal, the owner of the apartment house and the matriarch of the family, was once Andy Ramsey, son of Nevada madam Mother Mucca and legal, if not biological, father to tenant Mona Ramsey; following
the operation which realigned his gender, Andy relocated to San Francisco and began life anew as Anna, severing all prior family ties, until Mona appeared in the city. Maupin describes Mona's biological mother, Betty Ramsey, as tyrannical and narrow-minded. Upon Mona's arrival in San Francisco, following an ill-fated love affair with fashion model D'orothea Wilson in New York City, Mona meets Anna in a local bistro, and the two women establish an immediate and intimate rapport. Mona rents an apartment from Anna, unaware initially of the true nature of the relationship between them. Much like Mona, Michael Tolliver and Mary Ann Singleton move to San Francisco to escape manipulative, provincial parents; both of them are seeking personal freedom and fulfillment, Michael as an openly avowed gay man and Mary Ann as, to echo the era, a "liberated" woman. Of all the central characters, Brian Hawkins' past remains the most obscure; before his appearance in San Francisco, Maupin describes Brian as an idealistic young attorney who became disenchanted with his fight for lost legal causes and opted for a less complicated life of waiting tables and womanizing. Brian's biological family history is entirely unaddressed. In effect, each of the residents of 28 Barbary Lane sojourns to a city perched precariously on the edge of the continent---hoping to unencumber themselves from the baggage of a disappointing past---where they discover, in each other, the true ties.
which bind individuals together as a family.

Throughout the entire Tales of the City series, references abound to indicate that the residents of 28 Barbary Lane consider themselves as a part of a created family. From the first novel to the final novel—when Anna remains the only one of the five family members living in the house—Mrs. Madrigal repeatedly refers to herself as "mother" to Mona, Michael, Mary Ann, and Brian, her "children" and her "brood." All five characters describe one another, in various instances, as "family." Mona nicknames Michael "Mouse," and the other characters, upon becoming more well-acquainted with him, adopt the sobriquet, too. Michael affectionately refers to Mona as "Babycakes;" when Mona moves to Seattle and discontinues all contact with the group, Michael transfers this pet name to Mary Ann. On many occasions, Michael and Brian allude to the "brotherly" nature of their friendship, and eventually Michael becomes Brian's most trusted confidant. While some of the characters continue to maintain a tenuous relationship with their natal families, it is explicit from the context of the novels—from the self-conscious choices of the characters—that they have acquired a new family, one which, in some cases, supplements the natal families and, in other instances, supplants them.

In addition to the use of nicknames, Michael's created
family exhibits other types of traditional behaviors often associated with more conventional family groups. Because of Michael's particular verbal agility, for example, a large part of the communicative encounters between him and other family members can be described as humorous or witty, a characteristic examined at length in the oral folklore section of this analysis. Also, the residents celebrate holidays, such as Christmas, together, and they acknowledge important rites of passage— including birthdays, weddings, and deaths—as a group. Like many matriarchs, Mrs. Madrigal attempts matchmaking, first unsuccessfully pairing Mona and Brian and later, with more productive results, uniting Mary Ann and Brian; Mrs. Madrigal also helps Michael and Jon reconcile their differences, and, after Jon's death, she warmly welcomes Thack into the household. Time, experience, and changes in personality ultimately fragment the family, and members move away from 28 Barbary Lane to establish their own households; however, each character, in his or her own way, finds the emotional bonds that have been established more resilient than anticipated and impossible to sever entirely.

Created family enacts a significant role in the lives of the characters in Maupin's novels and, by implication, in the lives of many gay men. Michael's created family at 28 Barbary Lane forms the central core around which the action of the novels revolves, and it provides him, and
the other four central characters, with a caring family framework from which to discover themselves and their places in the world. Maupin's depiction of created family in the series allows the reader to understand that family bonds are not solely based on biology, that emotional ties can prove more meaningful and longer lasting than natal kinship. Many gay men, who are often spurned by their biological families because of their sexual preference, create new families from which to learn about life, to receive nurture, and to reciprocate love and support. Like more conventional families, gay families exhibit traditional behaviors which define the group and the group members, providing a sense of belonging and a sense of self to individuals who have often been deprived of both by prejudice and misunderstanding.

**Calendar Customs**

A third major form of customary folklore in Maupin's novels is calendar customs. Brunvand defines calendar customs as those traditional practices which are connected to specific holidays celebrated by a particular group (Brunvand 1986, 329). In American culture, the most common calendar customs are associated with such annual events as St. Patrick's Day, April Fool's Day, Easter, May Day, Independence Day, Halloween, Christmas, and New Years' Day, among many others (Brunvand 1986, 339).
Brunvand suggests that calendar customs and true folk festivals are differentiated only by the level of community participation and the extent of ceremony (Brunvand 1986, 341). In the *Tales of the City* series, the two most notable holidays in gay folk culture around which customary behavior clusters are Halloween and Christmas.

In the first novel, Michael learns that his parents plan to visit him on their upcoming vacation, and he worries that they may inadvertently learn that he is gay while they are in San Francisco. His anxiety is compounded when he realizes that their visit will coincide with a significant annual celebration in gay folk culture, Halloween:

The reservation, it turned out, was at the Holiday Inn on Van Ness. October 29 through November 1. The horrible significance of those dates didn't hit Michael until he checked a calendar. Mr. and Mrs. Herbert L. Tolliver were forsaking their orange groves, their Sizzlers and their Shakey's and their *Saturday Evening Posts*, to spend four fun-filled days in *Everybody's Favorite City*. On Halloween weekend.


In general, celebration and festival, like play, exist as experience apart from ordinary time, where unconventional behaviors are not only permitted but often sanctioned (Abrahams 1978, 119-122). In American culture, one licensed traditional practice at Halloween is to disguise oneself through the garb of a costume. In gay folk culture, men often dress as women at Halloween; Michael's
concern that his parents will take notice of such unorthodox behavior, among others, during the festive atmosphere of their holiday visit is awfully realized when the trio embark for dinner at a local restaurant:

The Aspen was parked up on Leavenworth, near Green. Michael's mother was out of breath by the time they reached Union. "I've never seen a street like that in my life, Mikey!"
He squeezed her arm, taking sudden pleasure in her innocence. "It's an amazing city, Mama."
Almost on cue, the nuns appeared.
"Herb, look!"
"Goddammit, Alice! Don't point!"
"Herb . . . they're on roller skates!"
"Goddamn if they aren't! Mike, what the hell . . . ?"
Before their son could answer, the six white-coiffed figures had rounded the corner as a unit, rocketing in the direction of the revelry on Polk Street.
One of them bellowed at Michael.
"Hey, Tolliver!"
Michael waved half-heartedly.
The nun gave a high sign, blew a kiss, then shouted: "Loved your jockey shorts" (Maupin 1978, 170-171)!

Michael fears that his parents will associate his lifestyle in San Francisco with the gay customary behavior they have observed during their visit in the city, although he is ultimately able to explain that he is not involved with the men he and his parents encounter on the street. In this instance, gay calendar customs associated with Halloween, such as dressing in drag, engender great anxiety for Michael, in his attempt to continue to hide his gay identity from his parents.

A second holiday, with all its attendant customs, which plays an evocative role in Maupin's novels is
Christmas. Through Michael's response to that particular holiday, the attitudes and experience of many gay men can be examined more closely. Near the close of the first novel, after Michael and Mary Ann's friendship has developed more fully and more intimately, Mary Ann seizes an opportunity to cheer an uncharacteristically despondent Michael, who is dreading the imminent arrival of the Christmas holidays. Mrs. Madrigal asks Mary Ann for her help in preparing a Christmas party for the residents, and Michael comments incisively and bitterly on Mary Ann's almost obsessive behavior:

"You're not into this at all, are you?"
"Well, you certainly are. You've been running around for three days acting like Gale Storm organizing a shuffleboard tournament."
"Don't you like Christmas?"
He shrugged. "That isn't the point. Christmas doesn't like me."
"Well . . . I know it's gotten commercial and all, but that's not . . . ."
"Oh, that part's O.K. I like all the tacky lights and the mob scenes and the plastic reindeer. It's the . . . gooey part that drives me up the wall."
"The gooey part?"
"It's a conspiracy. Christmas is a conspiracy to make single people feel lonely" (Maupin 1978, 210).

Michael, like many people, gay and straight, locates in familial holidays a sore source of emotional anguish; in many instances, because they are often estranged from their families due specifically to their sexual identity, this emotional distress may be even more marked for gay men, as the following exchange illustrates:

"I have friends, Mouse. You have friends."
"Friends go home. And Christmas Eve is the most horrible night of the year to go to bed alone... because when you wake up it's not going to be one of those Kodak commercials with kids in bunny slippers... It's going to be just like any other goddamned day of the year!"

She slid closer to him on the sofa... He took her hand. "I'm sorry. I just... I get so sick of the We People."

"The what?"

"The We People. They never say I. They say, 'We're going to Hawaii after Christmas' or 'We're taking the dog to get his shots.' They wallow in the first person plural, because they remember how shitty it was to be a first person singular" (Maupin 1978, 211).

Mary Ann, an undaunted student, now sophisticated in the gay vernacular and the tradition of gay humor, her mentor Michael's forte, commands the situation and sways Michael to her more festive, positive point of view through her new verbal agility:

Mary Ann stood up, tugging on his hand. "C'mon, Ebenezer."

"What for?"

"We're buying Christmas trees. Two of 'em."

"Mary Ann..."

"C'mon. Don your gay apparel." She giggled at the inadvertent pun. "That's funny, isn't it?"

He smiled in spite of himself. "We are not amused" (Maupin 1978, 211).

Calendar customs are an important form of gay folk customary behavior which Maupin chronicles in his novels. Interpreting Michael's responses to holiday traditional practices as representative of many gay men, the attitudes and experiences which characterize gay male folklife can be more closely examined. When his parents visit him in San Francisco on Halloween weekend, Michael's primary concern is that the traditional gay practices
associated with that holiday, such as dressing in drag, will reveal his covert gay identity to his parents. In the Christmas holidays, Michael, like many gay men, locates another source of anxiety, the emotional apprehension engendered in individuals estranged from their relatives by a celebration in which family unity functions so formidably. In Michael’s experience in the Tales of the City series, calendar customs prove a source of stress and anguish, a reaction not uncharacteristic of many gay men in situations similar to Michael’s, yet typical of only a portion, not the entirety, of gay customary behavior.

Social Customs

A fourth significant form of customary folklore in Maupin’s novels is social customs. According to Brunvand, outside of calendar practices and rite-of-passage practices, customary behavior often centers on occupational, recreational, or social activities (Brunvand 1986, 337). In the Tales of the City series, social customs, particularly those associated with recreational and social events, provide important insights into gay folklife, specifically the variation in gay customary practices due to the impact of the AIDS epidemic. The first three novels delineate gay folklife in San Francisco prior to an awareness of the AIDS epidemic, while the final three novels describe gay folk culture after the disease has
become a deadly, daily reality in the lives of gay men. An examination of the repercussions of the AIDS epidemic on gay social customs evidences both the dynamic nature of gay folklore and the formidable function of folklore in gay culture.

In the pre-AIDS realm of the first three novels, gay social life, with all its accompanying customs, can best be described as a hedonistic world embracing one-night stands; short-term relationships; bars, bathhouses, and discotheques; orgies; singles' night at the local supermarket; gay night at the local skating rink; and jockey shorts dance contests. While Michael's keenest quest, throughout the entire series, is to discover true romantic love, his earliest sojourns often end, many times by his own choice, in casual sexual encounters, which fleetingly fulfill his physical desire but ultimately leave him emotionally and spiritually devastated. In the first novel, for instance, Michael prepares to attend a costume party at a local bar; his last-minute rumination reveals an outlook not uncommon in many gay men of the era—a narcissistic concern with physical appearance, particularly with one's sexual attractiveness to prospective partners:

Michael uncapped a tube of Dance Arts clown white and repaired his Pan face in the foyer of 28 Barbary Lane. . . . He gave himself a thorough inspection and smiled in approval. He looked damned good.
His horns were outrageously realistic. His mock-chinchilla Home Yardage goat haunches jutted out from his waist with comic eroticism. His belly was flat, and his pecs... well his pecs were the pecs of a man who hardly ever cheated on a bench press at the Y. You're hot, he told himself. Remember that (Maupin 1978, 112).

By the beginning of the third novel, gay social life has begun to exhibit a larger degree of self-conscious, esoteric organization, outside the social/sexual sphere. For example, Michael joins the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, and he tours the country performing with the group. He attends the Reno National Gay Rodeo in Nevada. Yet, even with social activities which stress group solidarity through events not related to bars and discotheques, Michael questions aspects of the social culture in which he exists as a gay man, as the following dialogue between him and his business partner, Ned Lockwood, illustrates:

They remained there in the dappled light, finishing their lunches in silence. Then Michael said: "Do you ever get tired of all this?"

"The nursery, you mean?"
"No. Being gay."
Ned smiled. "What do you think?"
"I don't mean being homosexual," said Michael. "I wouldn't change that for anything. I love men."
"I've noticed."
"I guess I'm talking about the culture," Michael continued. "The Galleria parties. The T-shirts with the come-fuck-me slogans. The fourteen different shades of jock straps and those goddamn mirrored sunglasses that toss your own face back at you when you walk into a bar. Phony soldiers and phony policemen and phony jocks. Hot this, hot that. I'm sick of it, Ned. There's gotta be another way to be queer."
Ned grinned, tossing his yogurt cup into the trash. "You could become a lesbian..."
"It's just so fucking packaged," said Michael. "A kid comes here from Sioux Falls or wherever, and he buys his uniform at All-American Boy, and he teaches himself how to stand just so in a dark corner at Badlands, and his life is all posturing and attitude and fast-food sex. It's too easy. The mystery is gone (Maupin 1982, 89-90).

In the post-AIDS world of the final three novels, gay social customs differ dramatically from those traditional social practices delineated in the first three novels. Casual sexual encounters with multiple partners have given way to safer and more limited forms of sexual contact. Short-term relationships have been supplanted by fraternal bonding and nesting. Orgies are "out," and Tupperware parties are "in." For example, in the fourth novel, Babycakes, Michael mentally surveys some of the many changes which have occurred in the social culture around him:

He crossed the intersection and walked along Eighteenth Street. In the days before the epidemic, the house next door to the Jaguar Store had been called the Check 'n Cruise. People had gone there to check their less-than-butch outer garments (not to mention their Gump's and Wilkes Bashford bags) prior to prowling the streets of the ghetto.

The Check 'n Cruise was gone now, and in its place had blossomed the Castro Country Club, a reading room and juice bar for men who wanted company without the alcohol and attitude of the bars (Maupin 1984, 54).

Also, new and safer forms of sexual customary behavior have begun to emerge in reaction to the AIDS epidemic. For instance, in the fifth novel, Significant Others, Michael reluctantly accepts an invitation from his friend
Teddy Roughton to attend a party where self-stimulation is the sexual operative, and he finds the experience unique if personally disappointing:

After a while, he got into it. There were some hot guys there—including that number from Muscle System—and the porn video suited his tastes perfectly. Once his self-consciousness had passed, he began to savor the sensation he had missed so dearly, the lost tribalism of years gone by. It wasn’t the way it used to be, but it stirred a few memories just the same.

He was on the verge of coming when two men next to Teddy’s La-Z-Boy rose and left the room. They were followed, moments later, by three others. Presently a small din was emanating from the foyer, where the dressing ceremonies had begun.

The guttural commands and primal grunts of the video were no match at all for the brunch being planned beyond the bedspread. "Don’t do pasta salad," someone said quite audibly. "You did that last time and everybody hated it."

The fantasy collapsed like a house of dirty playing cards. As Teddy exited through a sliding door to the dining room, Michael caught his eye with a rueful smile. Teddy leaned over and whispered in his ear: "There’s no such thing as being fashionably late for a JO party" (Maupin 1987, 29).

Finally, in the sixth novel, Sure of You, Michael and his lover, Thack Sweeney, decide to spend a rare evening out on the town. The subdued mood of the bar they visit stands in stark contrast to the profligate atmosphere of the nightclubs and discotheques of only a decade earlier, and emerging social customs stress caring and conversation rather than cruising and copulation—humor and survival, as beepers signal time for anti-viral medication, rather than attitude, or posturing, and sex:

When they arrived at Rawhide II, a dance class was in progress. The participants were in street
clothes, pleasant looking but unextraordinary, as if the commuters on a BART train had acted on a sudden urge to waltz with one another. Fat and skinny, short and tall, couples of every configuration swirled around the room in a counterclockwise tide to the music of Randy Travis.

Grinning uncontrollably, Michael found a stool at the bar and sat down.

As providence would have it, his beeper went off just as his Calistoga arrived. The bartender smiled at him. "Another bionic man."

Michael mugged ruefully. "It usually goes off on a coatrack somewhere." He dug out his pillbox and popped two, chasing them with the Calistoga. When he was done, the man on the stool next to him gave him a knowing look, then tapped the pocket of his Pendleton. "I'm set to go off any second."

Michael smiled. "Last night at Big Business, there were enough to start a symphony" (Maupin 1990, 62).

In the Tales of the City series, Maupin's descriptions of social customs illuminate important aspects of gay folklife, particularly the changes in gay customary behavior due to the impact of the AIDS epidemic. In the first three novels, he characterizes gay folk culture in San Francisco before the onset of the epidemic. In the final three novels he delineates gay folklife after the disease has become a tragic given in the lives of gay men. The social customs which are chronicled in the first three novels disclose a world of casual sexual encounters uncomplicated by the threat of disease and death, while those traditional social practices detailed in the three final books depict a culture in catastrophe attempting to cope with a revolutionary reality. In short, an analysis of the effects of the AIDS epidemic on social customs in
Maupin's *Tales of the City* novels illustrates both the vital essence of gay folklore and the remarkable role folklore represents in gay culture.

**Gay Proxemics**

A fifth and final form of customary folklore found in Maupin's novels is gay proxemics. Brunvand defines gesture as nonverbal communication of emotions or ideas achieved through movement of part or all of the body (Brunvand 1986, 367). Folk gesture, he adds, is nonverbal communication maintained through traditional practice, often displaying changes in form and meaning (Brunvand 1986, 371). Goodwin elaborates upon the important role of proxemics in gay culture, particularly how gesture assists in mutual identification and communication between gay men:

One of the first rules a gay man learns is not to move away when touched by another man; the corollary to this rule is, when touched by a man, touch him back in response. (This rule is generally phrased, "Don't move, or move back.") This process is used to help determine whether the other man is gay (Goodwin 1989a, 8).

If folk gestural communication between gay men can be characterized by the intentional invasion of another's personal space, then, conversely, gestural communication between gay men and straight men—the reluctance to violate personal space—reveals a wariness typical of the general attitudes some gay men and some straight men often initially
hold for each other. Two examples from Maupin's fourth and first novels aptly illustrate both perspectives.

In the fourth novel, Babycakes, Michael and a few friends camp out in Death Valley during a weekend hiking trip. At the end of the second day, the fatigued explorers gather in the large community tent before retiring for the evening. The physical closeness exhibited by the men in this instance underscores how some gay men often voluntarily surrender barriers of personal space to other members of the esoteric group:

Gary sat against the ice chest, Roger's head resting in his lap. Douglas and Paul, the other pair of lovers, were idly rummaging through a pile of cassette tapes in the far corner of the tent. Ned was giving the hard-working Scotty a foot massage with Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion.

It was a charming tableau, sweet-spirited and oddly old-fashioned, like a turn-of-the-century photograph of a college football team, shoulder to shoulder, hand to thigh, lost in the first blush of male bonding (Maupin 1984, 33).

The image of the men relaxing together illustrates the openness and intimacy which characterize the politics of personal space for many gay men.

In the first novel, Tales of the City, Michael and Brian meet for the first time in Mrs. Madrigal's courtyard where they are both sunbathing; their first encounter reveals much about personal proxemics and about each of their respective sexual politics:

"Hi," said a voice somewhere between him and the sun.

He looked up, shielding his eyes. It was the guy
from the third floor. Brian something. He was carrying a towel imprinted with a Coors label.
"Hi. Come on in. The water's fine."

Brian nodded and tossed his towel on the ground. Five feet away, Michael noted. Close, but not too close. A perfect HBU. Hunky But Uptight . . .
"You're Brian, and I'm Michael. Right?"
"Right."
They shook hands, still on their bellies, reaching out over the void in order to touch.
Michael laughed. "We look like something off the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel" (Maupin 1978, 137-140)!

Even though Michael and Brian have been aware of each other's presence in Mrs. Madrigal's house, they have never met until this encounter. Until their first meeting, each man is unsure of the other's sexual orientation. Brian's reluctance to violate Michael's personal space—his positioning of his towel at a discrete distance from Michael—conveys his uncertainty about Michael's sexual identity. Michael immediately perceives Brian's hesitancy to locate himself too close to him as an explicit message of Brian's heterosexuality. Without words, the two men have disclosed fundamental facets of their identities entirely through gestural expression.

As the preceding examples from Maupin's novels illustrate, Brunvand's definition of gesture as nonverbal communication conveyed through body movement might be reinterpreted to embrace the concept of nonverbal communication expressed through body positioning, also (Brunvand 1986, 367). Too, given his assertion that folk gesture is maintained by traditional practice and can display changes in form and meaning (Brunvand 1986, 371),
Michael and Brian's first exchange can be understood as a traditional transformation of the phenomenon in gay gestural communication which Goodwin explicates: while gay men often voluntarily and purposely invade each other's personal space to ascertain information about sexual orientation (Goodwin 1989a, 8), the reluctance of gay men and straight men to impose upon each other's personal space evidences a cautiousness characteristic of the typical attitudes some gay men and some straight men often initially hold for each other. At any rate, gay gestural communication—that which occurs between gay men and between gay men and straight men—functions to divulge important information about the identities of the individuals involved in the nonverbal communicative event.

In the introductory essay to *Folklore and Folklife*, Richard Dorson offers his definition of customary folklore: "In between oral literature and material culture lie areas of traditional life facing in both directions. One such area we may call social folk custom. Here the emphasis is on group interaction rather than on individual skills and performances" (Dorson 1972, 3). Under the heading of customary folklore, this analysis of the use of gay folklore in Maupin's novels has examined rite-of-passage customs, kinship relationships, calendar customs, social customs, and gay proxemics. The most momentous rite-of-passage in gay folk culture is coming out, which ultimately should empower the gay individual to achieve a fuller
measure of self-actualization. Many gay men are often estranged from their natal families because of their sexual orientation, and created gay families serve to supplement or supplant biological families, allowing gay men to achieve a fuller sense of belonging and self-esteem. The calendar customs which gay men observe help reveal attitudes and experience which characterize gay male folklife, allowing for a greater understanding of gay worldview. The description of gay social customs illuminates important aspects of gay folklife, too, particularly the variation in some gay customary behavior due to the impact of the AIDS epidemic. Finally, gay proxemics serves to divulge information about the individuals involved in the communicative event. In conclusion, customary folklore functions in gay folk culture, much like oral folklore, to foster communication (both esoteric and exoteric) and to reveal significant insights into the minds of the members of the group--both individually and cumulatively.
CHAPTER V
MATERIAL FOLKLORE

Under the heading of material folklore, this analysis of the use of gay folklore in Maupin’s Tales of the City series will consider folk costume, folk environments, and traditional food practices. First, folk costume can reveal how members of a subculture often conform to a group clothing aesthetic and how they sometimes employ apparel to communicate information about themselves and their relation to the group. Second, folk environments often indicate group affiliation by signaling a decorating aesthetic favored by members of the subculture and by expressing a political viewpoint which characterizes the concerns of many members of the group. Finally, traditional food practices often serve to support social customs of the group and can sometimes disclose aspects of worldview shared by many members of the subculture. In essence, this examination of Maupin’s use of material folklore in his novels will help illuminate how folklore binds members of the group together and how it encourages the expression of group identity.

Folk Costume

Folk costume comprises a significant form of material
folklore in Maupin's novels. In many instances, the manner in which an individual dresses can indicate group affiliation. Don Yoder defines folk costume as the visible, outward badge of folk-group identity, worn consciously to express that identity. . . . It identifies the wearer to the outside world as well as to his own community; it is prescribed by the community and its form is dictated by the community’s tradition (Yoder 1972, 295).

In gay folk culture in particular, Goodwin suggests that some aspects of folk costume function as covert, non-verbal signals of an individual’s gayness, providing coded communication between gays which maintains their secret identity from persons outside the esoteric group (Goodwin 1989a, 25). In the Tales of the City series, certain facets of Michael’s apparel suggest his understanding of and participation in gay traditional dress. Like many gay men, Michael employs costume to communicate information about himself to other members of the sub-culture and to the world at large.

Throughout the entire series of novels, examples abound of how Michael’s apparel and the clothing of other gay men in the novels can often be determined by group traditions in dress. For instance, in the first novel, Michael prepares to attend Gay Night at a local skating rink; his readying confounds Mona, until he explains the unorthodox—yet obviously traditional—procedure through which he hopes to pique the sexual interest of other roller-skating revelers:
"Uh . . . Michael, dearheart?"
"Huh?"
"Why are you doing that?"
"Doing what?"
"Wearing your Levi's in the shower."
"Oh . . ." He laughed, hopping back into the stall. "I'm wire-brushing my basket. See?" He picked up a wire brush from the floor of the stall. "Just the right thing for achieving that well-worn shading in just the right places." Scraping the brush gingerly across the crotch of his jeans, he screwed his face into an expression of mock pain. "Arrrgggh!"

Mona was bland. "Do-it-yourself S & M?"
Michael flicked water at her. "They'll be devastating when they're dry" (Maupin 1978, 80).

In the third novel, Further Tales of the City, Michael and Bill Rivera attend the National Gay Rodeo in Reno, Nevada; upon their arrival, the dictates of gay fashion spark an immediate dialectic concerning costume and persona:

A back-lighted plastic sign proclaimed the event to passersby on the highway: RENO NATIONAL GAY RODEO. As Bill swung his Trans Am into the dusty parking lot, Michael began to speculate out loud.

"Now, how many of these dudes do you think are real cowboys?" He related to this issue personally. His week-old Danner boots felt leaden on his feet; his teal-and-cream cowboy shirt seemed as fraudulent as a sport shirt worn by a sailor on leave.

"For starters," said Bill, "that one isn't." He pointed to a wiry brunette wearing a T-shirt that said: MUSTACHE RIDES-5.

There were similar signs of clone encroachment, Michael noted. Too many sherbet-colored tank tops. Too many straw hats that looked suspiciously like the ones at All-American Boy. Too many Nautilus-shaped bodies poured into too many T-shirts brazenly announcing: IF YOU CAN ROPE ME, YOU CAN RIDE ME.

One obvious city slicker, in deference to the occasion, had traded his nipple ring for a tiny silver spur, but Michael found the gesture unconvincing (Maupin 1982, 131).

In essence, facets of Michael's wardrobe and aspects
of the apparel of many other gay men in Maupin's novels reveal how the clothing gay men wear is often dictated by group costume traditions.

In the second novel, *More Tales of the City*, Michael's use of costume to communicate his identity as a gay man prompts an amusing misunderstanding based on the misinterpretation of information being conveyed. Michael and Mary Ann have embarked on an ocean cruise of Mexico; when he arrives in the dining room for breakfast with Mary Ann and their table partners, Michael's attire is cause for comment:

She was downing her orange juice when Michael appeared, looking spirited and squeaky clean. He was wearing Adidas, Levi's and a white T-shirt emblazoned with a can of Crisco. . . .

"... Say, Mike, how long you been with Crisco?"

"What?" Michael had been cruising a waiter at the next table.

"Your shirt. You affiliated with Crisco?"

Mary Ann thought of crawling into her oatmeal.

"Yeah," Michael answered soberly. "I've been . . . in Crisco--oh, I don't know--four, five years."

"Sales?"

"No. Public relations" (Maupin 1980, 42).

In some forms of gay male sexual practice, Crisco is employed as a sexual lubricant. To other members of the subculture, Michael's imprinted shirt would be understood as an expression of his awareness of those sexual activities; however, Michael's tablemate, Arnold Littlefield, who is not privy to the esoteric allusion, interprets the emblem on the shirt as a reference to Michael's
occupational affiliation. In effect, Michael's costume, as Goodwin has suggested, serves to signal his identity as a gay man to others who are aware of its covert message, while excluding those individuals who are not aware of the tradition from grasping the actual information being imparted (Goodwin 1989a, 25).

In Maupin's novels, folk costume constitutes an important genre of material folklore in gay culture. Gay folk costume reveals how individual members of the subculture conform to a group clothing aesthetic; while many items of apparel which are found in the wardrobes of many gay men are also a part of the dress of many heterosexual men, it is the prevalence of those particular items of apparel within the subculture which illustrates the import of tradition. Gay men employ costume to communicate information about themselves, such as sexual preference, to one another and to individuals outside the esoteric group; conversely, in some instances, costume also serves to secrete sexual identity from persons outside the subculture. In a general discussion of American folk costume, Brunvand offers:

Despite the pervasive influence of international fashion and the easy accessibility of ready-made mass-produced clothing, some traditional influences continue to be apparent both in what Americans wear and how they wear it. . . . Folk group differentiation is effected as much by costume choices as by folk speech, customs, beliefs, or other forms (Brunvand 1986, 444-445).
Folk Environments

A second important form of material folklore in Maupin's series is folk environments. The objects with which and the manner in which an individual adorns his or her personal living space can often serve as markers of group affiliation. In Visual Anthropology, John Collier, Jr. and Malcolm Collier assert that personal environments not only provide insight into the present character of people's lives but can also describe acculturation and track cultural continuity and change. . . . The "look" of a home reflects who people are and the way they cope with the problems of life (Collier and Collier 1986, 45).

In the Tales of the City novels, certain elements in Michael's personal living space signal his identity as a gay man. Such aspects of ornamentation, as the following examples illustrate, can serve to suggest an appreciation of a decorating aesthetic favored by many members of the group or to express a political viewpoint characteristic of some members of the group.

Two examples of how personal decor can indicate an individual's involvement with a group decorating aesthetic can be observed in Maupin's novels. In the first example, from the second novel, Michael, who is recuperating in the hospital from a debilitating paralysis, and Jon discuss repainting Michael's apartment; Michael's reaction to Jon's suggestion reveals his awareness of traditional aspects of gay decor:
Jon pulled up a chair next to the bed. "I had a
great idea today."
"What?"
"We're gonna paint your apartment!"
"Swell. I'll be the stepladder."
Jon smiled. "Look: I brought you some paint
samples from Hoot Judkins." He held one of the
cardboard strips in front of Michael's eyes. "I kind
of like this putty color."
"Mmm. Faggot fawn."
"Cut it out."
"Well, it is the color of the year. Three years
ago it was chocolate brown, then forest green. It
was handy, anyway. If you woke up in a strange
bedroom, at least you knew what year it was (Maupin 1980, 172).

In the second example, from the fourth novel, Mary Ann
arranges a romantic rendezvous with British seaman Simon
Bardill in Michael's apartment. The lovers find their
fervor frustrated under the watchful eyes of two icons of
gay folk culture—entertainer Bette Midler and gay
novelist Christopher Isherwood—whose images adorn the
walls of Michael's home:

"Are you all right?" she asked.
"I'm fine."
"Good. So am I." She polished off the brandy
and set down the glass. "Could we... uh... go
to the bedroom?"
He shrugged. "What's wrong with here?"
"I don't know." She cast a quick glance at the
chrome-framed poster across the room. "Bette Midler
is watching."
Simon smiled at her. "Christopher Isherwood is
watching in the bedroom" (Maupin 1984, 163-164).

Elements of decor in an individual's personal
environment can also be employed to express a political
statement which may be associated with the folk group
with which one is allied. In Nazi Germany, admitted gays
were required to wear an inverted pink triangle (with one
tip pointing down) on their clothing so that their sexual orientation could be publicly known. In the 1970s, gay activists adopted this symbol as a means of identifying themselves and as a method of garnering attention to the atrocities of another era (The Alyson Almanac 1989, 100).

In the sixth novel, Sure of You, Michael and Thack decide to construct a triangular-shaped trellis in their yard, largely to show their support of and pride in the gay community:

"You know what?" said Thack.
"What?" asked Michael.
"I've got a great idea for a trellis."
"O.K."
"We build it," said Thack, "in the shape of a triangle. And we grow pink flowers on it."
"Cute."
"I like it."
"You would," said Michael.
"Really," said Thack. "We wanted a trellis, and it would... you know, deliver a political message."
"Do you think our neighbors really need the message?"
"Sure. Some of them. Anyway, it's celebratory" (Maupin 1990, 69).

As the preceding paragraphs prove, Michael is cognizant of and participates in a gay aesthetic concerning the decoration of personal living space. He is aware that certain facets of ornamentation, here particular hues of paint, enjoy periodic popularity with many members of the subculture. His decorative use of artifacts which depict individuals who are revered by many members of the folk group reveals an enthusiasm he shares with many other gay men. Also, the trellis he and Thack construct in their
yard symbolizes their sense of solidarity with other gays. To a large degree, the way in which an individual ornaments his or her personal environment can suggest group affiliation by signaling an art aesthetic common to the subculture in which he or she belongs and by registering an overt political statement which voices the concerns of the group.

**Foodways**

Traditional foods and traditional practices in preparing, serving, and consuming foods comprise a third notable form of material folklore in Maupin's novels. As with folk costume and folk environments, the food traditions in which an individual engages can also often evince group alliance. In _Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States_, Linda Brown and Kay Mussell offer the following insights into the function of food and food practices in group traditional life:

Foodways in subcultural groups are rooted in tradition but express dynamic aspects of in-group culture through a process that is highly charged with meaning. Foodways bind individuals together, define the limits of the group's outreach and identity, distinguish in-group from out-group, serve as a medium of inter-group communication, celebrate cultural cohesion, and provide a context for performance of group rituals (Brown and Mussell 1984, 5).

Three examples from the _Tales of the City_ series illustrate the important role of foodways in gay folk culture, particularly the method in which traditional food practices serve to support the social customs of the group and the
manner in which they reveal a worldview common to many members of the subculture.

In the first novel, an example of the role foodways enact in defining group boundaries and in maintaining group social customs can be examined. Michael and Mary Ann meet, for the first time, before either of them have moved into 28 Barbary Lane, on singles night--both a gay and a straight folk tradition in San Francisco--at a local supermarket. Mary Ann's high-school friend, stewardess Connie Bradshaw, with whom Mary Ann lives briefly upon her arrival in San Francisco, explains the social phenomenon:

"Hey ... what's on for tonight, hon?"
"Let's see. Oh, yeah. Robert Redford is picking me up at seven, and we're going to Ernie's for dinner."
"Ditch him. He's got warts."
"For what?"
"The hottest spot in town. Social Safeway."
"Social what?"
"Safeway, dink. As in supermarket."
"That's what I thought you said. You sure know how to show a girl a good time."
"For your information, dink, Social Safeway just happens to be ... well, it's just the ... big thing, that's all."
"For those who get off on groceries."
"For those who get off on men, hon. And you don't even have to look like you're on the make."
"I don't believe it."
"There's only one way to prove it to you."
Mary Ann giggled. "What am I supposed to do? Lurk behind the artichokes until some unsuspecting stockbroker comes along?"
"Meet me here at eight, dink. You'll see" (Maupin 1978, 10).

After an extremely unpleasant encounter at the supermarket with a less than charming man, Mary Ann is comforted by Michael's lover, Robert, with whom she shares her recipe for hollandaise, until Michael returns
to Robert's side; Mary Ann is puzzled by the obvious intimacy of the two men:

She was watching Robert's eyes respond to her hollandaise recipe when a young man with a mustache approached with his cart. "Can't leave you alone for a minute." He was talking to Robert.

Robert chuckled. "Michael ... this is Mary Ann."

"Singleton," said Mary Ann. "This is my roommate Michael. She's been helping me with hollandaise, Michael."

"Good," said Michael, smiling at Mary Ann. "He's awful at hollandaise."

Robert shrugged. "Michael's the master chef in the house. That entitles him to make life miserable for me." He grinned at his roommate.

Mary Ann's palms were sweating. "I'm not much of a cook, either," she said. Why in the world was she siding with Robert? Robert didn't need her help. Robert didn't know she was there" (Maupin 1978, 12).

Further into their friendship, Michael and Mary Ann recall their awkward initial introduction; Mary Ann acknowledges her embarrassment about misunderstanding Robert and Michael's relationship, and Michael consoles her with a narrative from his own personal experience:

"Mmm. Next time we'll have asparagus and you can show me your hollandaise recipe."

"How did you know I ... oh ..."

Michael nodded. "Robert. I lost the recipe in the divorce settlement."

Mary Ann reddened. "It's easy."

"I shouldn't have brought up ancient history."

I'm sorry."

"It's O.K. I've always felt a little dumb about that."

"Why? Robert's a hot number. I would have done it. Hell, I did do it. Where do you think I met him?"

"The Safeway?"

"Not that one, actually. The one on Upper Market. From my standpoint, it's a lot cruisier." He slapped his own cheek. "Stop that. You're embarrassing the girl" (Maupin 1978, 96).
Another example of the function foodways assume in social customs—here a rite-of-passage practice—can be observed in the fifth novel, Significant Others. Michael and his friend Charlie Rubin attend a wake in honor of a mutual acquaintance who has died. In this instance, a food-related traditional social event provides an opportunity for the participants to enact an important group ritual, to pass judgment on other members of the group, and to communicate meaningful information about their attitudes toward life and death:

"No one's eating my pie," said Charlie, frowning. "Here." Michael held out his plate. "I'll take a slice."

"No. Not unless you mean it." Michael laughed. "Give me a goddamn slice."

Charlie gave him one. "That key lime pie is half gone, and look at the color of it. It's practically Day-Glo."

"Well," said Michael, "it's sort of a postmodern crowd." He took a mouthful of Charlie's gooey-rich pecan pie, enjoying its slow descent. "I never know how to act at these things," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Whether to laugh or not."

Charlie shrugged. "It's a celebration. That's what they called it."

"I know, but some of these people feel awful right now."

"You better laugh at mine," said Charlie.

"Right."

"I've fixed it so you will, actually. I drew up the plans while you were gone. I won't spoil it for you, but it involves several hundred yards of mock leopardskin and an Ann-Margret impersonator."

Michael licked the sweetness off his fingers. "Why not just plain Ann-Margret?"

"Well, she's optional, of course. Use your discretion" (Maupin 1987, 266-267).

Finally, the foodways of a subculture often reveal aspects of worldview shared by many members of the group.
In the fourth novel, *Babycakes*, Michael sojourns to Death Valley with a group of friends for a weekend camping trip, and the elaborate preparations they undertake for dining in the desert characterize the formal attitude with which many gay men approach the experience of eating:

Turtle-like, Michael inched out of his sleeping bag, found the air decidedly nippy, and popped back in again. There was no point in being rash about this. His absence from the banter had not yet been observed. He could still grab some sleep.

Wrong. Scotty's smiling face was now framed in the window of his tent. "Good morning, bright eyes." Michael emerged part of the way and gave him a sleepy salute.

"Are you heading for the bathroom?" the chef asked.

"Eventually."

"Good. Find me some garni, would you?"

"Uh . . . garni?"

"For the grapefruit," explained Scotty. "There's lots of nice stuff along the road."

"Right."

"Just something pretty. It doesn't have to be edible, of course."

"Of course."

Garni in Death Valley. There was bound to be a message there somewhere—about life and irony and the gay sensibility—but it eluded him completely as he stood at the sink in the middle of nowhere and brushed his teeth next to a fat man in Bermuda shorts and flip-flops" (Maupin 1984, 30-31).

In Maupin's *Tales of the City* series, foodways prove a notable genre of material folklore in gay culture. Just as folk costume and folk environments can indicate subculture affiliation, the food traditions in which an individual participates can also suggest group alliance. As Maupin's novels depict, traditional foodways enact an integral role in encouraging inter-group communication, in defining group boundaries, and, in general, maintaining
the social fabric of gay folklife, in public situations as
diverse as mating practices and rite-of-passage rituals
associated with death. Also, foodways often disclose
information about the worldview of many members of the
group, specifically the formal, artistic attitude with
which many gay men approach the preparation and consumption
of food. In her essay "Deciphering A Meal," Mary Douglas
asserts:

If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes
will be found in the pattern of social relations
being expressed. The message is about different
degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion,
boundaries and transactions across the boundaries.
Like sex, the taking of food has a social component,
as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore
encode social events (Douglas 1971, 61).

In relation to material folklore, this analysis of the
use of gay folklore in Maupin's novels has examined folk
costume, folk environments, and traditional food practices.
Gay folk costume illustrates how many members of the sub-
culture conform to a group clothing code; gay men also
employ costume to both communicate and secrete information
about themselves and their relation to the group. Elements
of the personal living space of many gay men—their folk
environments—also often reveal group affiliation; too,
aspects of ornamentation can serve to suggest a decorating
aesthetic shared by many group members and to voice overt
political viewpoints characteristic of some members of the
subculture. Finally, the traditional food practices of
many gay men function to foster social customs of the subculture; foodways often divulge information about the worldview of many members of the group, particularly the artistic attitude with which many gay men approach the preparation and consumption of food. In much the same manner as gay oral folklore and gay customary folklore, gay material folklore serves to unify the group, to allow insights into the minds of the members of the subculture, and to encourage the expression of group identity. In his essay "Toward a Philosophy of Folk Objects: A Praxic Perspective," Simon Bronner asserts:

Customary ways of doing, making, and using things suggests that people directly reveal themselves and their social, psychological and physical realms in their encounters with the material world along the path of life and experience (Bronner 1984, 176).
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Steven Jones suggests that folklore functions in literature to root the work in reality, to invigorate that recreation of reality, and to invest the literary offering with a richer resonance (Jones 1984, xxi). Frank De Caro proposes that the novel provides a realistic if fictional social context for folklore; by providing a model for the transmission of folklore, the novel illuminates how folklore serves to provide meaning for the fictional characters, for the author, and for the reader (De Caro, 1991, 239). In his series of six novels depicting gay life in San Francisco during the last twenty years, Maupin has created a Gay Everyman in the character of Michael Tolliver. By relating Michael's experience, Maupin delineates the life-concerns of many gay men in one time and place. Michael's relationships with his created family, his biological family, and his lovers divulge important psychological, social, and cultural truths about contemporary gay life. Inasmuch as Michael mediates his experience largely through gay-folk cultural traditions, the novels are as much documents of some of those traditions as they are
an accounting of one fictional gay man's existence.

A great deal of the appeal and effectiveness of Maupin's novels resides in this evocative rendering of contemporary gay folklife. Gay men read his books and nod their heads in approval while thinking, "This is the story of my life." Straight readers peruse his novels and glean a better understanding of the life experiences of others who are less unlike themselves than they may have heretofore thought. Of all the new gay novelists, Maupin remains the ultimate assimilationist, seeking to reveal the intricacies and intimacies of the gay world to an audience who will appreciate both the similarities and differences which identify us all as human beings.

Under the rubric of oral folklore, this examination of the use of gay folklore in Maupin's novels has addressed folk speech, proverbial expression, and folk narrative. In relation to folk speech, the areas of dialectal variation, vocabulary, naming, and gay repartee have been considered. The occurrence of proverbial expression in gay conversational tradition also has been investigated. Finally, folk narrative in gay oral culture -- particularly rumor, urban legend, personal experience narratives, and jokes -- has been explored.

Gay folk speech functions on many communicative levels. Messages are often charged with covert meanings. While the gay argot serves to promote in-group solidarity,
it also often proves to exclude individuals outside the esoteric group. Whether employed to entertain or to criticize, gay folk speech exists as a dynamic genre in gay oral culture, one which both defines the group and comments upon it.

Gay proverbial expression is characterized by the proverbial phrase, including the traditional metaphor, the traditional simile, and the sarcastic interrogative. Gay proverbial expression can be described as comic, or ironic, in tone and intent; often it displays elements of verbal sexual inversion. Whether it functions as comic commentary or serious social criticism, gay proverbial expression sometimes subverts the dominant, heterosexual verbal norms through coded, esoteric communication.

Maupin documents four narrative forms in gay oral culture: rumor, urban legend, personal experience stories, and jokes. Urban legends are appropriated into the life experiences of the characters to reveal some of the anxieties which characterize contemporary gay life. Personal experience narratives function to encourage communication between individuals and to express ideas which describe the worldview of many gay men. Gay humor serves to foster communication, to encourage group cohesion, and to reveal insights into the minds of the characters.

To a large degree, oral folklore operates in gay folk culture to encourage communication. In many cases, oral
folklore divulges important psychological insights into the minds of the group members. A large part of the verbal lore—from single word or phrase to lengthy narrative—can be described as comic, existing primarily to entertain; however, often more somber hidden meanings underlie the expression. Gay oral folklore remains coded communication, unlocked only by those, like Maupin, who possess an understanding of the traditional behavior and verbal agility.

Many of the oral folklore forms and contexts which characterize both gay folk expression in the novels and actual gay folk-cultural traditions can be discerned in Maupin's own authorial voice—his role as a performer of gay male oral lore. For instance, while Maupin addresses both humorous and serious issues in the lives of his fictional characters, the overall tone of the novels—partly due to the predominance of dialogue, which approximates such gay conversational and narrative traditions as "dishing," gay repartee, and joking—is comic, and, as such, reflects the important role humor enacts in gay oral lore. Second, Maupin's novels represent a literary genre labelled roman à clef—where actual events and real persons are depicted under a fictive guise—and the literary form embodies the ambiguity which informs much of gay oral lore, as well as the legal realities which affected the journalistic origins of the novels. Too, many
of the esoteric references in the novels—gay vocabulary, for instance—are not always explicitly explained by the author; the meaning remains ambiguous, understood best by examining the contexts in which they occur. Third, as already noted in chapter three of this thesis, Maupin scriptively identifies variations in the intonation of his characters' speech by italicizing those expressions, a signal to the reader that coded gay communication is occurring. Fourth, Maupin employs rumor as an important literary structural device in three of the novels—to provide topical verisimilitude and to create a suspenseful tone which encourages the reader to peruse the novels. Finally, since Maupin's actual life experience mirrors that of his protagonist, Michael, readers who are familiar with Maupin's biography—which obviously has informed much of the content and style of the novels—might equate the two as one, although the novels are never narrated from Michael's point-of-view; in this reader-associated context, the series could be interpreted partly as an extended, fictionalized personal experience narrative. To a large degree, gay oral folklore forms inform not only the content of Maupin's novels but the voice of the author as well.

Maupin's narrative point-of-view remains third-person omniscient throughout the series, and his voice is elusive, with little authorial intrusion and lacking interjection of authorial judgment. Like the ethnography,
the novels can be characterized by their visual and aural surface observations—Maupin's realistic recreation of time, place, and dialogue, rather than an extensive detailing of individual character's mindsets. This perspective can be accounted for in part by considering the original form from which the novels emerged, as journalistic sketches appearing in installments in newspapers. Maupin's charge was to create fictional characters and events within the context of recreating an accurate depiction of the city, its environs, and its citizens. Like the cliffhanger serials in motion pictures, Maupin's intent was to pique and prolong the interest of his readers through dramatic action and dialogue, which also helps explain the flirtatious tone of the author's voice—again another manifestation of the ambiguity in gay folk speech. The presence of Maupin's voice in the novels is largely understood in terms of the forms and contexts of gay oral lore which his literary style reflects.

In addition to an examination of gay oral folklore in the novels—including how gay oral tradition informs both the content of the novels and Maupin's authorial voice—this thesis has also considered aspects of gay customary folklore and gay material culture, including how the content of the novels chronicles some of those folkloric forms and how the novels themselves have become
a significant part of gay customary and material tradition. Under the heading of customary folklore, this review has considered rite-of-passage customs, created family, calendar customs, social customs, and gay proxemics. The most significant rite-of-passage in gay folklife is coming out, which should enable the gay individual to achieve a fuller sense of self-actualization. Because many gay men are often alienated from their biological families as a result of their sexual preference, created gay families function to supplement or supplant natal families, providing gay men with a sense of belonging and self-worth. The calendar customs which gay men observe help illuminate attitudes and experience which characterize gay male folklife, allowing for a greater appreciation of gay worldview. The description of gay social customs reveals important aspects of gay folk culture, too, specifically the variation in some gay customary behavior in reaction to the impact of the AIDS epidemic. Gay proxemics serves to divulge information about the persons involved in the communicative event. Like oral folklore, customary folklore functions in gay folklife to foster communication (both esoteric and exoteric) and to reveal important insights into the minds of the group members, both individually and cumulatively. Maupin's exacting evocation of gay customary folklore in the novels reveals to the reader the traditional manner in which many gay men
approach both everyday social interactions and the significant social events of their lives.

In relation to material folklore, this analysis has addressed folk costume, folk environments, and foodways. Gay folk costume can disclose how many members of the subculture conform to a group clothing code and how they sometimes use apparel to communicate information about themselves and their relation to the group. Folk environments—elements of personal living space—often reveal group alliance by signaling a decorating aesthetic favored by members of the folk group; aspects of ornamentation can serve to voice overt political viewpoints characteristic of some members of the subculture.

Traditional food practices function to foster social customs of the group; foodways often reveal information about the worldview of many members of the subculture, specifically the artistic attitude with which many gay men approach the preparation and consumption of food.

In much the same manner as gay oral folklore and gay customary folklore, gay material culture serves to bind the group, to provide insights into the minds of the members of the subculture, and to encourage the expression of group alliance. Maupin's manipulation of material folklore in the series enables the reader to more fully appreciate domestic facets of gay folklife, aspects of existence most often associated with home and family
(or in-group performance) rather than public display.

In a very real sense, the Maupin novels have become artifacts of gay customary and material folk culture, in addition to the particular manner in which the content of the novels documents many aspects of gay folklife. When a gay man gives one of Maupin's novels to a friend, he is sharing a part of himself—his cultural heritage; I offer a narrative from my own personal experience with the Maupin books to document this tradition. In 1983, a friend from Massachusetts returned to Western Kentucky University to complete a master's degree in folk studies which he had begun in 1979, when we first met. One present he gave me—among many other tangible and intangible gifts—was Maupin's first novel, Tales of the City. (I believe my friend thought that since I had spent my entire life in rural Kentucky I was naive about gay urban life. By giving me Maupin's book, he hoped to show me a gay world I had never experienced firsthand. In effect, the novel was a tool through which to further indoctrinate me into the gay subculture; reading the book would be a rite-of-passage for me—and many other gay men in the process of coming out—just as members of social organizations, for instance, must acquaint themselves with rule books and guideline manuals.) My friend finished his academic program and returned to his parents' home near Boston. Unknown to both of us, when he departed from
Bowling Green he was seriously ill; less than one year later he died. The legacy my friend left me—in addition to the wonderful memories of our times together and a love of folklore—was a passion for the Maupin novels, which I pursued over the last decade. Upon the publication of each subsequent novel, I hurried to my local bookstore. I would devour each installment from cover to cover in one evening. During the intervening years, I would reread the novels, sometimes singly and sometimes the entire series in sequence. Maupin's characters were as real to me as my own closest friends; their travails and triumphs were mine, too. Like Alice, I had stumbled into my own wonderland.

In 1988, I learned that another dear friend who I had known for over a decade was dying from AIDS. We had first met at Western Kentucky University as undergraduates. During our early friendship, my friend, with great compassion, had helped ease me out of my closeted existence. Although he relocated in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1978 and I remained in Bowling Green, Kentucky, his illness ultimately brought us as close together as long-distance telephone calls and occasional visits can bring two people. As his physical condition worsened, my friend became homebound. During one of our many telephone conversations, I casually inquired if he were familiar with Maupin's novels; much to my surprise—he had been,
after all, my mentor, certainly the more urbane of the two of us, I thought—he confessed that he had never read any of the books. I immediately sent him my copy of the first novel, and he adored it. He purchased the remaining books in the series, and, after reading them all, our talks thereafter would often include discussion of characters and incidents in the books. When he died in 1989, I was comforted in the knowledge that I had given him a gift, too, one which had provided him with a great deal of pleasure during a difficult time in his all too brief life.

Much to my joy, I recently learned that my experience with the Maupin novels as tokens of friendship and as a communicative strategy is not unique. Just as the series delineates Michael's indoctrination of Mary Ann and Brian into the gay subculture, so the novels are often employed by gay men to introduce and explain the esoteric life of the group to individuals outside the subculture. Another friend and mentor mentioned to me that she had received the series as a gift from a longtime gay acquaintance, who, she believed, wanted her to know more about his life as a gay man. Should some pollster conduct a survey to document this phenomenon, the numbers would probably prove astounding. Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City novels exist not only as a testimonial to the unerring eye of an individual author but as a testament to the power of the novel as a
fictional rendering of ethnographic detail. Good books are read, enjoyed, and, many times, placed on a shelf where they collect dust, the pages turning yellow and brittle with age and neglect. Great books are read and reread, revered and cherished, and, in many instances, shared with other people who we hope will appreciate and treasure them. Like folklore, great books bind us all together for the fleeting time we occupy this imperfect, impermanent, irresistible realm.


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