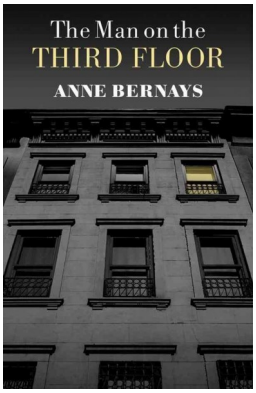
The Man on the Third Floor



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I journeyed back into the 1950s with this novel about a closeted gay editor. It's all here: the strong prejudice against homosexuality, the gender stereotyping, the cold war, the loyalty oaths, friend turning against friend and colleague against colleague. Some accused Communists leap out high-rise windows when their livelihoods are destroyed.

But McCarthyism is just a side issue in this intriguing novel - *The Man on the Third Floor* centers on a very successful editor who has a secret domestic life. When he and his wife, Phyllis, and their two young children move back to New York after the World War II years in Washington, Phyllis decides they can afford a house of their own. They finds a nice brownstone with three floors, the top of which was originally servant quarters. But Phyllis is a modern woman, college-educated who worked in radio and journalism until she had children, and she's not keen on having servants live with them.

But one day, a very handsome man comes to measure Walter's office for new carpeting. Although Walter has had only one sexual experience with another male in his life--he was raped at camp as a teenager--he immediately finds himself inviting Barry, the carpet man, to a bar. Almost immediately, he offers him a job as a driver despite the fact the family owns no car, and soon gives him a room on their third floor. For some reason, Phyllis agrees to both ideas.

So begins Walter's secret life that may not be as secret as he thinks. Bernays writes her narrative at a fast clip with lots of humor. Faulkner, Mailer and other literary greats have walk-ons in the book. The author obviously knows a good deal about publishing - the good, the bad and the ugly. A subplot involves a friendship between Walter and another editor named Charlie McCann who is a competitor for the editor-in-chief job--Walter must choose between being loyal to him and keeping a very important client.

I really loved the character of Phyllis. She's smart and intelligent and refuses to be the quiet wife in the background. She talks politics at parties loudly and soon informs her husband that she will return to her career.

Samson spends a lot of time in his study reading manuscripts but occasionally sneaks up to the third floor to visit Barry. The manuscripts seem to be very time-authentic. At one point Barry drives Walter to meet an important cardiologist who is writing a book about transplanting hearts from the dead to the living. Walter can't believe that such a thing is possible but if it is, he wants to sign that author on before a competing publishing house snags him

The story reaches a crisis point when the Samson daughter gets meningitis and almost dies.

And though Walter has proven himself to be very selfish throughout the novel, where his daughter is concerned he is kind and loving.

For another novel that explores gay life in the 1950s, but this time in Paris rather than New York City, try James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* [1].

For the Love of Reading [2] Information, Answers & Reviews [3] Family Relationships [4] Fiction [5] GLBTQ [6] The Man on the Third Floor [7]

Posted by Dory L. on Dec 27, 2012

- [8]
- [9]
- [10]

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