

Sheehy, Erin, "Straight to Hell: On Boyd McDonald," *n+1*, Issue 25, Spring 2016

Reviews

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# Straight to Hell

On Boyd McDonald

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*Straight to Hell* Issue 49. Image courtesy the author.

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William E. Jones. *True Homosexual Experiences: Boyd McDonald and "Straight to Hell."* We Heard You Like Books, 2016.

Boyd McDonald. *Cruising the Movies: A Sexual Guide to Oldies on TV.* Semiotext(e), 2015.

**SUPPOSE THAT IN THE WHITE HOUSE** there is a glory hole. That in the Supreme Court, in the New York Times Building, in the headquarters of the Motion Picture Association of America—in every place in the United States where decency is defined and defended—there is a special bathroom where people suck cock. If these cruising spots were ever made public, scandal would follow. They would be condemned, converted into sites of shame. In reality, though, they just might be the only sources of compassion and truth on the premises: a thousand points of light spread like stars throughout the nation.

"Contrary to their reputations," Boyd McDonald once said, "the real hot homosexuals who have sex in toilets and so forth are simply nicer people and more concerned, more caring, more loving, more affectionate, and friendlier than the prudes. The prudes pretend that they are the ones who are decent, and the ones in the toilet are indecent, but it's just the other way around." McDonald devoted much of his life to chronicling what the truly decent people—the ones in the toilets—were doing. A Harvard graduate and World War II vet, McDonald spent his first two decades of adult life as a "drunk and hack writer" working for corporations like Time Inc. and IBM. He found his calling in the early 1970s after he got sober, dropped out of straight life, holed up in a New York City SRO, and began publishing the zine *Straight to Hell*, a compendium of real-life gay-sex stories that is still being published today, more than twenty years after his death. Though

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*Straight to Hell* was mainly composed of stories sent in by anonymous contributors, it was always inflected with McDonald's own dexterous wit, radical politics, and unashamed obsession with the details of sex. *Straight to Hell* painted a world full of glory holes, where around every corner men were having every kind of sex. A reader once called it both "fantastic jerk-off material & consciousness-raising stuff."

For some readers in the '70s, *Straight to Hell* was a revelation: men were having sex with one another everywhere, all the time. It wasn't just happening in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles; it was happening in Pennsylvania shopping centers, Ohio taverns, and South Carolina Sears bathrooms. Vietnam vets, produce haulers, cops, "family men," octogenarians, high schoolers, priests—all were having sex with one another. They were eating shit, drinking piss, licking boots, groping each other on the subway, making out on the beach, cruising each other in broad daylight, sucking each other off.

*Straight to Hell* was an immensely popular underground publication. John Waters, William S. Burroughs, and Robert Mapplethorpe were fans; Gore Vidal called it "one of the best radical papers in the country." McDonald published thirteen book-length anthologies (*Meat, Flesh, Sex, Cum, Smut, Juice, Wads, Cream, Filth, Skin, Raunch, Lewd, and Scum*), the first of which, published in 1981 by Gay Sunshine Press, sold more than 50,000 copies. At the height of its popularity, *Straight to Hell* had a circulation of 20,000.

But for all his influence, McDonald has remained an enigmatic figure. It's easy to understand why: he was a reclusive man with a patchy history and a low social status. His work, even by today's standards, was shockingly filthy. The sex in *Straight to Hell* was neither justified nor justifiable. It was only, in McDonald's words, "the simple truth." McDonald's refusal to assimilate still feels radical in today's age of queer gentrification; at a time when people are searching for more uncompromising visions of queerness, his work is ripe for rediscovery.

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**IN A NEW BIOGRAPHY**, *True Homosexual Experiences: Boyd McDonald and "Straight to Hell,"* the writer, artist, and filmmaker William E. Jones fills gaps in Boyd McDonald's backstory and attempts to give him a place in history. It's not easy to reconstruct the story of a gay man of McDonald's era, especially one who lived such a marginal life: his contemporaries are mostly dead, he wrote surprisingly little about his personal life, and while there is an archive of his papers at Cornell University, it consists mainly of business correspondence. Jones constructs a full and fascinating biography by pulling together the little that remains, re-creating periods of McDonald's early life through local newspaper items and reminiscences from his few surviving friends and family members. Still, he sometimes comes up empty-handed: he calls one whole period of McDonald's early life—from 1958, when he left his last staff magazine job, to 1968, when he sobered up—a "lost decade." When McDonald died, in 1993, his sister and nieces knew nothing of his life as an underground porn publisher. "They say Boyd was a homosexual," his sister said to Billy Miller, the then and current editor of *Straight to Hell*, "is that true?" Overwhelmed by the volume of papers McDonald left behind, she threw everything away—the books, the magazines, the journals, the letters.

McDonald was born in South Dakota in 1925. He was drafted into the Army at age 18, and after discharge he went to Harvard. For twenty years following his graduation, he had one foot in the world of "straight" corporate media and the other in the subterranean world of gay sex in postwar America. McDonald's "introduction to homosexuality," as he put it, occurred while he was touring with a dance band right after high school, but his most formative sexual experiences were in Manhattan in the 1950s—he called it a "wildly promiscuous" time and place, and said he had sex with up to three strangers a night. It was a world of men's rooms, bathhouses, and martini bars where men had sex with each other after a long, closeted day at the office.

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After graduating from Harvard in 1949, McDonald got a job working for *Time*, which was run by Henry Luce, the pro-big-business, anti-labor, and fervently anticommunist magazine magnate who'd founded *Time* with the underwhelming motto "Curt, Clear, and Complete." Jones writes that Luce looked for staffers who were "men of affirmation" rather than "men of protest"—a stifling environment for any writer, and certainly no place for McDonald. Still, many would use *Time* as a stepping-stone on the way to a respectable literary career—John McPhee and Calvin Trillin got their start there—and McDonald's long-form articles indicate that, had he wanted, he could have been a "serious" man of letters.

During this time, McDonald also contributed vivid essays and fiction to the *Southwest Review*. Though fussier than his later writing, these pieces hint at the voice and concerns that would emerge in *Straight to Hell*. In an essay about Dallas, he criticized the city's "middle-class insistence on the clean and the 'nice.'" A review of the children's book *The Book of Mother Goose* reveals his long-standing suspicion of elitist critics. "The authentic reader of the comics," he writes, conceding that a review of a children's book may seem disingenuous, "resents the pseudo intellectual who goes to Dick Tracy to achieve a comforting sense of superiority denied him in his unsuccessful reading of *Moby Dick*." But he treats *Mother Goose* seriously. "It does the two things that books must do if they are to startle many or last long," he writes. "They must offer a grotesquely unique world of their authors' own . . . and for the benefit of the readers in other worlds, they must make credible their special fictional worlds by holding them in focus with concrete detail." McDonald's own work did the same.

Though *Time* was a nightmare for McDonald, the middlebrow aesthetics, regressive politics, and clipped news-speak of the magazine later gave fodder to his satire in *Straight to Hell*. At *Time*, McDonald started out on the Miscellany column, a compilation of silly news clips with punning titles. This culled-news format later became a staple of *Straight to Hell*. In an early issue, McDonald captions a photo of a corrupt member of Jimmy Carter's administration holding his infant grandson: "Grandfather Exploits Baby."

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"It was such a trauma for me, going to work," McDonald once said, "that I started drinking that very day. And I drank constantly afterward." McDonald left *Time* in 1957 and briefly worked for the IBM-sponsored magazine *Think*, after which he floated through corporate writing gigs for about a decade, sinking deeper into alcoholism. By 1968, at the age of 43, McDonald had lost his job, his apartment, and most of his possessions. Finding himself drunk and alone on Long Island, he checked into a psychiatric hospital, sobered up, applied for welfare, and moved into a single-room-occupancy hotel on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He liked to tell the story of when he pawned all his business suits. "I remember the feeling of exhilaration," he recalled, "when I realized I couldn't have gone back into an office as a writer even if I'd wanted to."

**ACCORDING TO HIS FRIEND** Jim Tamulis, McDonald was first inspired to pursue erotic self-publishing after reading Gore Vidal's 1968 novel *Myra Breckinridge* and noting the titular character's interest in foreskin. McDonald placed an ad in the *Advocate*—the first mainstream American LGBT publication with national distribution—looking for men who shared his passion, and began circulating his own mimeographed newsletter, *Skinheads*, which ran letters from readers about their foreskin-related desires and their real-life sex tales. The sex stories were apparently unsolicited; it turned out that men were itching to share.

*Straight to Hell* was a more ambitious expansion of *Skinheads*. Approximately eight by five inches in size, the zine was packed with a diversity of reader-penned sex stories; beefcake photos; interviews, criticism and political commentary by McDonald; and clippings of "news from the straight world," such as undergraduates attacking women, priests masturbating, and police chiefs groping their deputies. This particular

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section was sometimes titled in German—"Nachrichten aus der Straight-welt." In early issues, Jones notes, "a swastika dots the letter 'I' in most titles containing the word 'straight.'"

It's difficult to find early issues today, and due to changes in publishing laws since the 1970s, they would also be hard to reproduce. McDonald had no proof of age on file for many of the young men who appeared naked in the pages of *Straight to Hell*, and readers sent in photos of former lovers who may not have known they were being featured in a pornographic magazine. Photos of naked men with hard-ons (or "hards on," as McDonald would say) ran on the cover.

In the beginning, *Straight to Hell* was scrappy, with handwritten titles, poorly copied photographs, and profane tirades against the establishment. Jones calls *Straight to Hell* the "first queer zine," but it also prefigures hardcore punk zines: the hand-drawn elements and layout recall the art Raymond Pettibon made for Black Flag and SST Records in the late '70s and early '80s (Pettibon's work would later be featured in *Straight to Hell*). McDonald paid for printing costs with his welfare checks—he joked that it was the only gay-sex magazine funded by the US government. The zine was available via subscription and could also be found at adult and gay bookstores, but it was shunned by some of the more mainstream gay establishments—the owner of Greenwich Village's oldest gay bookstore refused to carry it.

Over the years, the aesthetic and tone of the zine softened and became more professional: photo quality improved, tirades mellowed, swastikas disappeared, offset printing and staples were introduced. But the essential elements remained the same. The zine had a recurring string of subtitles—including "The Manhattan Review of Unnatural Acts" and "The New York Review of Cocksucking"—and taglines like "The Paper That Made New York Famous" and "Always coarse, never common." Each contributor letter had a tabloid-style headline: "10 Hawaiian Dongs Unload on Tourist," "Adultery in the Men's Room," "Mechanic's Asshole Is Clean; Has Fragrance of Gasoline." Sardonic commentary on the straight world and straight press was

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scattered throughout; McDonald liked to run errors he found in the *New York Times*, which he considered his main competitor. Every issue featured explicit photos, sometimes in collage form. Some shots were run with permission by photographers like the beefcake pioneer Bob Mizer of the Athletic Model Guild and David Hurles of Old Reliable. Hurles photographed ex-cons and rough trade—"the state's most gorgeous goons, hoods, and whores"—which suited the aesthetic of a magazine that celebrated the working class and maintained a fascination with the straight male sex object. Other photos were sent in anonymously: a sports photographer contributed a shot of Pete Rose grabbing his dick through his baseball pants but asked to not be credited so that he wouldn't lose dugout and locker-room access. McDonald also ran interviews with marines, strippers, smut photographers, hustlers, luminaries like Mapplethorpe, and regular joes. His wit and attention to detail were such that even an interview with one particularly terse man was illuminating:

*Are your nipples the same color as your asshole? Yes.*

*Is your asshole like a rosebud? Yes.*

Letters composed the bulk of the magazine. They're hard to sum up; each writer had a different style and story, and McDonald took pains to preserve their individual voices. Letters were edited for length, but never paraphrased or fictionalized. McDonald left intact their misspellings, unusual grammar, and digressions. On the whole, they were candid, unrepentant, and detailed. A two-page spread in issue forty-seven features a British man with a 75/8" cock getting "impaled" by a local on a trip to Puerto Rico, a guard in Missouri receiving a surprise blow job on the night shift, a professor having sex with two truckers in the back of a van at a rest stop, and a list of transcontinental exploits from a road-tripper who'd "balled in some of the most beautiful places in the country with some of the hottest and humpiest strangers," including a Canadian Mountie in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, a Navajo ex-con at the Four Corners Monument, and a husband and wife on the lip of the Grand Canyon. Some letters were erudite. While taking Amtrak to a disarmament conference, a reader receives a hand job beneath an open copy of the *New Yorker*: "I withdrew



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his hand and pulled my blazer over the conspicuous blotch, the damp stigma of my delight." Other letters were barely literate: "He dropped his jean. His C was not too thick but sure was nice."

McDonald was strict about adherence to the facts. For him, the truth was more valuable than an enhanced story. It was also more erotic; that these things had really happened and could happen again was what made them a turn-on. "Any hack writer can be coherent," he said, "but these are amateur writers and they put a lot of incoherent things in. . . . The letters I like are the ones that are pretty ragged. A lot of fears and flaws, failures." The letters rarely followed pornographic convention, and many stories continued long after the climax, trailing off into the uncertain endings so common to casual sex. "We agreed to do it again but so far we've never connected," wrote one letter writer. "We went on like this for a while and then he said he had to get back to work," wrote another. "I hoped he might give me a few more moments with him but I knew that those were silly thoughts. The fact that I couldn't touch him again made me realize that we'd only had a momentary business deal and nothing more."

In McDonald's writing, gayness is goodness and all men who aren't in some way deformed enjoy sex with other men.

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Some thought McDonald wrote all the letters himself. Once, the writer Stephen Greco interviewed McDonald at home and voiced doubts that the letters were real. "It was like a vaudeville routine," he recalled. "He went to a closet, opened the door, and literally out of it fell Santa Claus bags full of correspondence." If the letter writers sounded like McDonald, it was partly due to mimicry—they were, after all, devoted readers. They were also

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responding to McDonald's probing questionnaires, which he sent as follow-ups to letter writers whose stories lacked sufficient detail. In the 1980s, as the conventions of pornography became more widely known, men needed more instruction—not less—on what to send. "I don't want porn," he said, "but anti-porn." He wanted vivid description of "how men look, act, walk, talk, dress, undress, taste and smell," and his own personal obsessions—like the smell, taste, and general cleanliness of a man's jockey shorts—were revisited frequently.

Many letters began with compliments to a particular story or issue that the reader enjoyed, or overall praise for the magazine: "I was totally turned on by the article about the landlord & the self-abusing students," writes one reader. "If there is any justice, you are thriving and have won the Pulitzer Prize," writes another. The dialogue between readers and editor gave the magazine the feel of an intimate club. (One early issue contained the notice: "Private Newsletter. For Us Only. No 'Straights.'") It was an odd club—a cross-class, transracial effort that was unusually honest, if far from utopian. Letters like "Sucks Italian on Train" and "Cantabrigian Gets Big Surprise in Puerto Rico" featured neither the gross stereotyping of mainstream pornography nor the caution and sensitivity of today's sex-positive discourse. McDonald maintained a sharp class-consciousness in his commentary and his choice of letters. "I write for the lower and upper classes," he once wrote in a screed against bourgeois gays and their pursuit of respectability, "not the Rising Middle Class." Writers like Samuel Delany have suggested that public cruising offers a meaningful—and rare—opportunity for cross-class contact (more so than today's algorithmic cruising via app), and the pages of *Straight to Hell* support this argument. *Straight to Hell* was made for a select group of people united by their desire, but at the same time, it was a rare example of sophisticated criticism and political commentary for the masses.

McDonald saw himself as continuing the work of Kinsey. He viewed *Straight to Hell* as an important historical document: a chronicle of homosexuality in the 20th century. But he didn't strive for objectivity or expertise. He was an amateur sociologist, a private citizen exchanging

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correspondence with his peers—a position that offers certain advantages and partly explains *Straight to Hell's* uniqueness. McDonald was not interested in theorizing or analyzing the stories he received. His interest was in description. His correspondence with his readers was nothing less than a massive collaborative endeavor to define homosexuality, in the sense not of fixing its limits, but of giving shape, texture, and detail to a thing so often addressed dishonestly, with condescension or euphemism.

"Gay is abstract," McDonald said. "Homosexuality is very specific, like in my books." He'd come of age in a time before "gay pride," when homosexuality was what you did in certain men's rooms, and to him the declaration of gay identity was much less interesting than what men actually did together. He said in his last interview, with the gay Boston magazine the *Guide*:

My work is an alternative to the gay liberation movement and to the gay press. The gay press has to be sexless because they are public. And in order to be publicly gay they have to be closet homosexuals. My books are all about homosexuality rather than gayness. In other words, gay is what they are in public, and homosexual is what they are in private. My books are all about their private lives. It has nothing to do with gay liberation, gay rights, gays in the military, civil rights, fundraising, political candidates, and all that stuff.

McDonald was not on the side of the gay-liberation movement, and it was not on his. He was antiauthoritarian across the board—any public figure was necessarily a hypocrite, because respectability obfuscated the truth.

**MAINSTREAM OPPOSITION** to McDonald's way of life became increasingly organized—and increasingly virulent—in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was elected to the White House. The Meese Report pushed for lawmakers

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and prosecutors to crack down on pornography; the United States Supreme Court, with what dissenter Harry Blackmun called "an almost obsessive focus on homosexual activity," upheld Georgia's anti-sodomy law; and anti-porn activists on both the right and the left fought to expand definitions of obscenity. Sex began to change too, with the AIDS crisis ending much of the promiscuous public sex that had been the focus of McDonald's work. Around this time, McDonald passed editorial duties of *Straight to Hell* on to Victor Weaver, who more readily embraced the zine's popularity within the art world, throwing *Straight to Hell* parties at the Pyramid Club and Danceteria with guests like Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, and Fran Lebowitz. Though he had many fans, McDonald was not and never would be a part of this scene. He turned his attention to editing book-length anthologies of *Straight to Hell* (which actually brought in money, unlike the zine) and to writing more of his own criticism.

From 1983 to 1985, McDonald wrote a weekly column about movies for the gay literary journal *Christopher Street*. He claimed he hadn't seen a movie in the theaters since 1969, but he wrote about the old black-and-white films he watched on TV. His articles, published in 1985 by the Gay Presses of New York as *Cruising the Movies: A Sexual Guide to Oldies on TV*—now in a new, expanded edition from Semiotext(e)—are primarily concerned with the sexy parts of otherwise virginal films, from David Nelson's white trapeze tights in *The Big Circus* to Bomba the Jungle Boy's "chaste but occasionally fickle loin clothes."

These films, broadcast at all hours of the day on many channels (a person would need to be unemployed, and maybe an insomniac, to catch them all), were made in the era of the Motion Picture Production Code, which from 1930 to 1968 delineated what was appropriate to show in films. At various times the code forbade, among other things, the depiction of "sex perversion," miscegenation, indecent exposure, the drug trade, brothels, dancing with "excessive body movements while the feet are stationary," and terms including "nuts (except when meaning crazy)," "hot (applied to a woman)," and, inexplicably, "hold your hat." With regard to sex, the code made a distinction between "pure love" and "impure love" and was partly

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enforced to prevent any stimulation of the "lower and baser element." But when you need to stimulate your baser element, you'll find stimulation anywhere. Just as one might cruise the street looking for hints about where to find sex, McDonald cruises the movies for their suggestive moments, the places where, either intentionally or accidentally, the stall door has been left ajar.

Respectability is, after all, a shield,  
and "serious criticism" is a good  
mask for insecurity or plain stupidity.

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In McDonald's reviews, plots often go unsummarized; the commonly accepted "point" of movies is missed. Some articles focus solely on a single scene or shot, the fertile moment that feeds McDonald's fantasies. At times McDonald mimics the high-flown style of a serious critic, or parodies the usefulness of a *TV Guide* entry ("Paul Newman appears in boxer shorts in *Harper* [1966], seen at 4:30 p.m., September 25, 1983 on channel 1"), all the while describing men's bodies and what one might like to do to them.

Often, the articles were based on film stills and promotional photos, many provided by the now-defunct MoMA Film Stills Archive: a shot of Michael Callan's "unnerving groin" in yet another trapeze outfit, or of Gary Cooper wearing lipstick. A painted ad for *Fraternity Row* is compared favorably to an El Greco or Delacroix: the ad features a line of muscular collegians in underpants, bent over with their thumbs hooked under their waistbands as though they're about to moon a crowd. ("By excruciating use of shadow on the underpants, the artist managed to limn vividly the butt cheek and crack values inside the pants; the sensitive art lover can almost taste and smell them.")

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In *Cruising the Movies*, small details open up worlds of fantasy and playful speculation. McDonald ends his essay on *The Big Circus* with twenty-four questions about David Nelson's tights: "Where did he toss his tights after a day's shooting? . . . Did he get a hard-on while dressing or undressing? . . . Did anyone in the crew whistle when he walked onto the set in his tights?" He also suggests scenes that should've been made but weren't, imagines offscreen escapades that were for some reason never recorded, and poses questions that the oblivious journalists failed to ask at the time. When David Nelson is drafted into the army in *Peyton Place*, why don't they show him getting his physical exam? In *Love Me Tender*, when Elvis Presley's big brother comes back from four years away at war, why doesn't he check out "the progress Elvis had made in growing a man-sized dick and pubic hairs"? When Elvis took David's brother Ricky aside at a party to give him advice about show business, might they have unzipped each other's pants and had a feel? *Cruising the Movies* deals with fantasy rather than fact, but it's as devoted to the specifics as *Straight to Hell*—like the imagined smell of an extra's hair tonic, or the condition of a star's underpants after a day's work.

McDonald was especially attentive to the male "suck object": he writes that Gary Cooper has the "immense dignity which comes only from being well sucked," while David Nelson "could, had he wanted, have spent his life being licked." About an extra in *Stage Door Canteen*, he writes: "even the veins of his left hand suggest that he is well wired and capable of squirting a mouthful of cream when properly aroused out of his alluring complacency." He has a special love for the actor Richard Widmark and his devastating leer: "You can say or do anything to a man who looks like that; you can feel of his fly and, a little later, unzip it. In fact he wants you to (he thinks it's good for you)."

If the letters in *Straight to Hell* were one long study of homosexuality, McDonald's own writing was often a deconstruction of straightness. (One of *Straight to Hell's* taglines was "Love and Hate for the American Straight.") In the introduction to *Meat*, an anthology of writing from *Straight to Hell*, Charley Shively writes that McDonald's works "do not just invert middle-class values; more profoundly, they enunciate cocksucker values." In

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McDonald's writing, gayness is goodness and all men who aren't in some way deformed enjoy sex with other men. Inverting the sexual paradigm, he writes of heterosexuality as an aberration, an unnatural thing that must be learned, "a duty more than a desire." War, sports, and crime are the three "secondary heterosexual activities," by which men can learn and assert "straightness," which is more of a power status than a sexual one. You do not have to fuck your wife to be "straight"; a man can just as easily assert his heterosexuality through violence, which McDonald calls "a Reagan Era kind of heterosexuality, expressed through relentless boasts of masculinity and through the discharge of bullets, not sperm." If a man has sex with a male hustler but goes home to his wife, spews homophobia, and climbs on the necks of others as he ascends the ladder of respectability, who is to say he's not straight? "Straightness" does not just signify vanilla sexual interests but an alliance with the ruling elite, and a willingness to throw outsiders under the bus.

Given the bleak backdrop of the 1980s, the humor in *Cruising the Movies* can feel both dark and necessary. In a decade when homosexuality was considered synonymous with pedophilia and gay childcare workers were persecuted in the moral panic about satanic ritual abuse, McDonald calls an 8-year-old Johnny Sheffield (Bomba the Jungle Boy), who wore a loincloth and bedroom slippers to an interview, a "precocious little tease" and a "child molester's dream." At a time when the Reagan Administration was stubbornly refusing to address AIDS, McDonald suggests the President's anti-homosexual statements are just compensation for the fact he'd grown a pair of "big fat tits." Elsewhere, he calls William F. Buckley—who suggested that gay people with AIDS be branded with tattoos on their butts—one of "the nelliest men in the nation."

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AT ONE POINT in *Cruising the Movies*, McDonald suggests that the reason he receives "a barrage of butt brochures" in the mail is because the *New York Review of Books* has sold its subscription list. He calls David Nelson's buttocks his "vital center," citing Arthur Schlesinger Jr. On the one hand, it doesn't matter that McDonald was a Harvard man; he himself writes that education has nothing to do with intelligence and that graduating from a prestigious university is "an economic classification and not . . . an intellectual and moral one." But McDonald's credentials help position his SRO-dwelling, pornography-publishing life as a choice, an active repudiation of respectability.

Respectability is, after all, a shield, and "serious criticism" is a good mask for insecurity or plain stupidity. McDonald praises the "confident intellectual," one who can simply enjoy Bomba the Jungle Boy instead of avoiding him on principle or pummeling him with theory. McDonald paints other reviewers as a little sad and dumb in their steadfast repression of desire, such as a *Times* reviewer who, completely ignoring a leading man's butt, "sought gratification in the picture's plot but failed," thus getting no gratification at all. *Cruising the Movies* is a corrective to all the "plot-crazed" film critics who deny one of the main roles of film: to inspire fantasy, both about the stars on the screen and about ourselves in the world.

McDonald's confidence in seeking his own pleasure in movies, as in life, was in many ways the mark of a sophisticated critic. On the other hand, his obsessions were just that—obsessive—and McDonald could be as inflexible in his worldview as he was radical. John Waters aligns McDonald's work with Valerie Solanas's, calling *Straight to Hell*, along with Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*, "the most radical (and hilarious) filth classics in modern literature," and the coupling is telling. Though less didactic in his militarism than Solanas was in hers, McDonald was, like Solanas, an embarrassment to leftist strivers and a comic genius who, by reading society on a slant, revealed truths too damning for respectable discourse to digest.



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Jones suggests that to call *Straight to Hell* the product of an obsessive crank is to dismiss the work, but the figure of the crank is a valuable one. The crank lives on the margins and sacrifices respectability in order to tell his truth. The crank doesn't chart his ideas along preexisting theories or schools of thought, but on his own experience of the world; he is driven not by the values and opinions of others, but by his own pleasures, fetishes, manias. Because the crank stays true to his own singular logic, contradictions become the texture of personality and thought, rather than signs of hypocrisy. Returning over and over to his obsessions, the crank intellectual approaches criticism as a work of art, bringing forth his own fully realized version of the world.

At the end of *True Homosexual Experiences*, Jones looks to historical precedents for Boyd McDonald's way of thinking, writing, and living. He points to the fourth-century Greek philosopher Diogenes, who is considered one of the founders of Cynicism, and who showed utter contempt for authority, pretense, social climbing, and self-deception. He lived in a tub, "debased the currency" by counterfeiting money, and when caught masturbating in the marketplace said he wished "it were as easy to relieve hunger by rubbing an empty stomach." McDonald was a New York ascetic: according to *Straight to Hell's* current editor, Billy Miller, he subsisted on coffee, doughnuts, cigarettes, "and maybe the occasional glass of water." Friends referred to his single room, with its tobacco-stained walls, metal cot, hot plate, typewriter, and shopping bags full of readers' letters, as monastic. Like the Cynics, McDonald was against dogma and convention, and believed in a virtue found through practice rather than theory. He preferred the honest kindness of a good blow job to any political platitudes. He held a lamp up to society, looking for an honest man—and, of course, he found him in the toilet.

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**THE MARKETS FOR SEX** and porn have changed drastically since McDonald's day. The dirty bookstores where *Straight to Hell* was once sold have all but disappeared, and cruising has mostly moved to the internet. In recent issues, older letter writers mourn the demise of public sex. "Glory holes and O-holes between stalls were such a common thing that people just got used to it," writes a reader in San Francisco. "Now they go out of their way to plug them up. . . . It's so crazy, who's doing this and why? What's the logic? Why do they care so much about a damned hole?"

These days, new issues of *Straight to Hell* come out only once every few years. Its print run has dwindled to about 4,000 from a peak of 20,000 in the 1980s under Victor Weaver, and Billy Miller, who took over as editor in the '90s, embraces its position as a "couture object." The art and fashion worlds have become the zine's bread and butter: Miller runs special editions with limited artists' prints, takes *Straight to Hell* to art-book fairs, and is working on expanding related ventures, like film screenings, events, and merchandising. But, he says, some things aren't appropriate, and he doesn't ever want to do something that McDonald would disapprove of. "*Straight to Hell* perfume would not make any sense," he says, "unless it smelled like piss."

*Straight to Hell* was McDonald's obsession, and few could devote their lives to a project with such fanaticism. It now takes five people to do what McDonald once did on his own: the zine has an editor, a handful of designers, a proofreader, and volunteers to help solicit stories. Those stories are vivid as ever, though the specifics have changed: "His place smells like pot," wrote one recent contributor, "and his widescreen TV is on and a reality TV show is playing." In the latest issue, one man gets picked up in the plant section at Kmart; another reader cruises a guy in an Ed Hardy shirt at the airport. Letters continue to come in from older men, like the former marine who recalled having sex in a navy brig right after World War II, and Miller has a few men who write to him regularly from prison.

Sheehy, Erin, "Straight to Hell: On Boyd McDonald," *n+1*, Issue 25, Spring 2016

Recently, he says, he sent a copy of *Straight to Hell* to a Swiss "fashion expert." "Thank you for sending me your publication," the expert responded, "although I did not find anything in the texts or photos sexy or erotic. It's basically what my friend called 'a jerk off magazine for the poor and working class.'" Miller ran the letter in the latest issue, and says he couldn't think of a better endorsement. +