

# A life marked by sex and tattoos

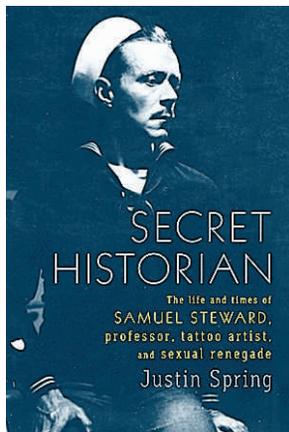
**SECRET HISTORIAN: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade**, by Justin Spring. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 478 pages, \$32.50.

BY MELISSA ANDERSON  
Special to Newsday

**T**o his English students at Loyola and DePaul universities in Chicago in the 1940s and '50s, he was Dr. Steward. To the legions of sailors who made appointments at his tattoo parlor, he was Phil Sparrow. To those who read his gay pornographic novels, such as "\$TUD" (1966) and "My Brother, the Hustler" (1970), he was Phil Andros. To his adoring friends Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, he was Sammy. To Alfred Kinsey, whom he met in 1949, he was an invaluable resource in studying the sex lives of gay men, particularly those drawn to sadomasochism.

Though his names and pro-

fessions changed, Samuel Morris Steward (1909-1993) remained a consistent, obsessive record-keeper, creating a green-metal card catalog called the "Stud File," with 746 index cards cross-referencing and detailing every sexual experience and partner (including Rudolph Valentino, Thornton Wilder and Rock Hudson) from 1924 to 1974. Poring through Steward's archive — which also includes a 1,000-page diary he kept for Kinsey, XXX-rated drawings and photographs — Justin Spring brings to life a man whose candor and unwavering commitment to sexual pleasure open a window on gay (and intellectual) life in the mid-20th century. Though not as acclaimed as the lavender luminaries he either bedded or



befriended, Steward can now be heralded as one of the most vibrant, infinitely connected men of his time. One imagines "Six Degrees of Sam Steward" being played at gay bars and academic LGBT conferences.

Though Spring, who's written biographies of artists Fairfield Porter and Paul Cadmus, admires his subject's complete honesty about his desires and "his unwillingness to submit to a form of social oppression he knew to be unjust," he doesn't demur from describing Steward's self-destructive side and grim senescence. Steward's literary ambition — he wrote a story collection and a novel in his 20s — was frequently derailed by his alcoholism. (He eventually gave up booze.) His penchant for

rough, dangerous sex landed him in the hospital, or robbed, more than once. In his final years, living in Berkeley, Calif., and inhaling bottled oxygen, he occupied a filthy bungalow that smelled of dog waste (his two dachshunds were never housebroken), nightmarishly crammed, Collyer Brothers-style, with all of his priapic mementos.

A passage from Steward's journal helps explain his predilection for self-sabotage: "Why can't I lead a dull and happy and carefree life? The answer, I suppose, is that I'd rot; I have to have excitement, even at the price of ruin." But Steward also found lifelong guidance in advice Stein gave him in a letter from 1938: to explore "the question of being important inside in one." Immersing himself completely in his obsessions — whether sex and its documentation, tattooing or writing (in both high and low genres) — Steward found his significance in honoring his libidinal and creative impulses.

## this week

Readings & events on LI

### Tuesday

Meet **Suzanne Collins**, author of young adult "Hunger Games"



series on the release day of the final installment, "Mockingjay" (Scholastic). At 7 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 380 Walt Whitman Rd., Huntington Station; 631-421-988

### Wednesday

Novelist **Gabe Rotter** reads from his new book, "The Human Bobby" (Simon & Schuster). At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442, bookrevue.com

### Thursday

**Pamela S.K. Glassner** signs copies of her fantasy novel "Finding Emmaus" (Emerald). At 6 p.m., Borders, 68 Veterans Memorial Hwy., Commack; 631-462-0569

# Finding humor in being female

**BOOK OF DAYS: Personal Essays**, by Emily Fox Gordon. Spiegel & Grau, 300 pp., \$15 paper.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to Newsday

**E**mily Fox Gordon is funny and very, very smart, and this collection of her essays sparkles with both qualities. In a piece called "Faculty Wife," she cleverly categorizes the ladies at an academic party as "Male Women" or "Female Women," depending on whether they boldly socialize, drinks in hand, or demurely hang back in the kitchen, nursing babies and filling cookie sheets. She dissects the home decor and attire of a type of overinvolved, messy, artsy mom she calls a "Kanga" after the dotting marsupial in "Winnie-the-Pooh." She analyzes the origins and prospects of the type of college student she pegs with the acronym "mrg" for "most responsible girl" — in charge of the costumes for the school play rather than

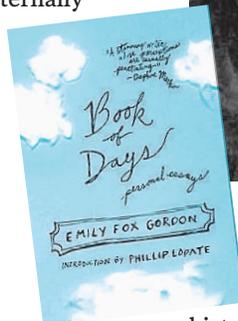
its star, the secretary of the student government rather than its president, the tortoise who will outstrip all the hares.

Throughout the book, Gordon offers interesting insights into the condition of being female. For example: "Pregnancy had reassured me that I, who at times felt myself to be painfully odd and anomalous, perhaps internally malformed in some occult way, was actually quite healthy and even normal. . . . These days I watch myself age with an oddly similar satisfaction." What a good idea, I thought. And how interesting to find this observation in an essay titled "Kafka and Me," which combines sections about the writing of her master's thesis with sections on life as a new mother while she worked on it.

A similar technique is used in "Fantastic Voyage," taking



Emily Fox Gordon



the occasion of her husband's colonoscopy to digress into the history and dynamics of a long marriage, taking us so far from the hospital corridor she is pacing that we, like the author, are both jarred and excited when her husband awakes from anesthesia. Suddenly, "the pager was dancing in my hand, flashing red and green." Oh right, the colonoscopy!

Gordon is 62 now, and this book revives the essays that grew into her memoirs "Mockingbird Years" (2000) and "Are You Happy?" (2006). The originals, she argues, are truer than the chronological narratives they spawned. "The essayist transects the past, slicing through it first from one angle, then from another until — though it can never be captured — some fugitive truth has been definitively cornered." Gordon is an "essayist's essayist" — not only because she manages the form so adeptly, but because her ruminations on creative nonfiction give fans of the form something to talk about besides how many hours or days James Frey really spent in jail.

While I found bizarre the inclusion of an introduction by Phillip Lopate telling us how marvelous Gordon is — as if she had to be sold to us, having been unread and ignored for centuries — that's one of my only complaints about the book. "Book of Days" is full of stimulating ideas and anecdotes, things to think about or better, to discuss. It should keep book clubs busy for years.



Author **Stephen Cohen** talks about "The Victims Return: Survivors of the Gulag After Stalin" (PublishingWorks) with **Katrina vanden Heuvel**, editor of The Nation. At 6 p.m., Canio's Books, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor, 631-725-4926, caniosbooks.com

### Friday

Novelist **Justin Kramon** reads from "Finny" (Random House). At 6 p.m., Canio's Books, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor, 631-725-4926, caniosbooks.com

### Saturday

**Elizabeth Brundage** reads from her thriller, "A Stranger Like You" (Viking). At 6 p.m., Canio's Books, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor, 631-725-4926, caniosbooks.com