

'Pope of Trash' anoints major influences in his life

By Amanda Katz | June 6, 2010

Where on earth did John Waters come from? As a factual matter, of course, the answer is Baltimore. The cult auteur behind the films "Pink Flamingos" and "Hairspray" grew up there in an apparently normal and loving home, with parents who encouraged his creativity. Somewhere along the way, however, Waters developed the exuberantly twisted sensibility that caused no less an authority than William Burroughs to declare him the "Pope of Trash."

Waters's new book, "Role Models," goes far in explaining the human and artistic influences that have shaped his world. With these lively, generous essays, Waters comes across as not just hilarious and perverse but also surprisingly sensible like an infinitely weirder David Sedaris. If Waters occasionally crosses the line into disturbing territory, the bulk of this book is squarely irresistible.

Not for Waters are your generic role models: Martin Luther King, Audrey Hepburn, Jesus Christ. Instead, he finds inspiration in the flawed, the damaged, the obsessed, and the imitative. He is fascinated by people who are smoothly popular (crooner Johnny Mathis, whom he calls "the polar opposite of me" and, on the other hand, people who make him look downright staid (such as militant atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair). "Sorry," he adds, "I also like Alvin and the Chipmunks better than the Beatles."

It's a testament to Waters's charm that you find yourself wondering whether you should give the Chipmunks another listen. He brings contagious enthusiasm to his heroes, be they Little Richard, St. Catherine of Siena, designer Rei Kawakubo, "outsider pornographer" Bobby Garcia, or the Wicked Witch of the West, who "inspired my lifetime obsession with wearing weirdly striped socks." He recalls iconic stars of Baltimore's seamy underground, including a stripper named Lady Zorro, "so butch, so scary, so Johnny Cash," and an unbelievably foul-mouthed dive bar owner named Esther Martin. Since both are deceased, Waters interviews their respective children, in conversations that manage to be both shocking and sweet.

Of course, Waters is not just the Pope of Trash but also, these days, a mover within Hollywood and on Broadway. His outside/inside trajectory means that he knows everyone. But he is less inspired by his famous friends than by Baltimore's scary dive bars, which he faithfully visits each Friday, and by his favorite art, music, fashion, and books. "I've jitterbugged with Richard Serra, eaten Thanksgiving dinner with Lana Turner, had tea with Princess Yasmin Aga Khan, gone out drinking with Clint Eastwood, and spent several New Year's Eve parties in Valentino's chalet in Gstaad, but what I like best is staying home and reading," he writes, believably.

When it comes to books and art, the more challenging, the better. "You should never just read for 'enjoyment,'" Waters instructs. "Read to make yourself smarter! Less judgmental. More apt to understand your friends' insane behavior, or better yet, your own." And he is an enthusiastic critic. Of a 1945 novel by Denton Welch, he writes, "Have the secret yearnings of childhood sexuality and the wild excitement of the first stirrings of perversity ever been so eloquently described . . . ?" Even if that's not what you look for in a book, it's hard not to be won over. His taste in art runs to works by Cy Twombly, the team of Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and Richard Baker: scribbles, photographs of the mundane, painstaking drawings of office supplies ("like the very best visit to Staples").

Waters's delight makes this commentary feel wholesome. How often do you get to hear a cult figure with highly developed taste celebrate what he loves? Things get more sordid when he describes his admiration for amateur pornographers including Garcia, a friendly man who has made thousands of porn

videos starring Marines. He has lost almost everything and now cohabitates with pigs, dogs, and hundreds of rats. Waters's chapter on these "outsiders" is sympathetic but requires a strong stomach.

More troubling is Waters's advocacy for the release of Leslie Van Houten of the Manson "family," who participated in a 1969 double murder at age 19. She seems repentant and lives a quiet life in prison. Waters, who was fascinated by the Manson cult as a young man, now says that, like Leslie, "I am guilty, too. Guilty of using the Manson murders in a jokey, smart-ass way in my earlier films without the slightest feeling for the victims' families or the lives of the brainwashed Manson killer kids who were also victims in this sad and terrible case." But even this apology suggests Waters has work to do; to most of us, the killers are hardly victims on parallel with the people they killed. His questions about the term of a murderer's debt to society are legitimate, but his empathy feels misallocated.

It's a strange disjunction, because in general Waters shows keen judgment. Yes, his world is filthy, profane, and ripe with bodily functions; as a result, this is a book you can't necessarily take home to mother. But if you're willing to sneak out the window for a night at a dive bar, it's hard to imagine a better date.

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