



Becoming a Man

By Paul Monette
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Introduction

In 1988, novelist and poet Paul Monette published the memoir, *Borrowed Time*. The chronicle of the last years in the life of his lover Roger Horwitz, the book was hailed as "tender ... and lyrical" by *The New York Times Book Review* and "[a] searing, shattering, ultimately hope inspiring account of a great love story" by the *San Francisco Examiner*. With *Becoming a Man*, winner of the National Book Award, Monette turned to his own life for to explain what it means to male, gay, and an artist in America.

A child of the 1950s from a small New England town, "perfect Paul" earns straight A's and scholarships and shines in social and literary pursuits, all the while keeping a secret, from himself and the rest of the world. Struggling to be or at least to imitate a straight man, through Ivy League halls of privilege and bohemian travels abroad, loveless intimacy, and unrequited passion, Paul Monette was haunted, and finally saved, by a dream -- "The thing I'd never even seen: two men in love and laughing." This

brutally honest, witty, and humane merging of memoir and manifesto promises to become the definitive coming out story -- and a classic of the coming-of-age genre.

Questions for Discussion

1. The young Paul Monette grows obsessed with collection and creating stories. Where does this impulse lie? Is it connected to his outcast-status, his homosexuality, or something less nameable?
2. When first discovered experimenting with another boy, Paul says of his mother: "I think she just felt helpless, out of her depth." (p. 30) What do you think of Paul's mother's reaction to his budding homosexuality? What sort of role does she play in his boyhood, and what sort of influence does she provide, in absentia, during his adolescence and young adulthood?
3. *Becoming a Man* was originally published in 1992. How has the views of organized religion toward homosexuality changed since then?
4. Discuss the uses of acting, of masks ("I was practically hoarse from ventriloquism already." p. 55), of invisibility in the autobiography.
5. Why does Paul Monette begin writing?
6. How does politics influence Paul's story? Does its involvement (or lack thereof) seem believable to you? Are the pressures of coming out in today's political environment the same?
7. "For when that longing gets its hooks in me, aching for so much lost time, I think I would have gladly given up being a writer if I could've been queer out loud." (p. 158) What longing does Paul speak of? And why is its power as great as art for Paul? Are both a ceding of control, or rather, are both the refuges of power in a world where one is rendered powerless?
8. Furthermore, do you believe that Paul sees art as a way to avoid life?
9. Does Paul's sexual coming-of-age seem outdated in any way?
10. When embroiled with the student Greg at the Sutton Hill School, Paul thinks: "if you hate yourself as I did and think you're a worthless shit, then shit is all you deserve." Do you think Paul really thought of himself in this way? What are your opinions of the Greg affair in general?

About the Author

Paul Monette is the author of six novels, including *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll* and *Afterlife*, three books of poetry, as well as the acclaimed *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*. *Becoming a Man* is the recipient of the 1992 National Book Award. He died of AIDS complications in 1995.