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# Book review

## A Good Mormon Boy Writes About a Good Catholic Boy

by Mandy Q. Racer

Very much like watching the movie *Trainspotting*, one uninitiated in the Hollywood fifties scene must read Val Holley's book, *Mike Connolly and the Manly Art of Hollywood Gossip*, with initial patience, waiting for its thick tongue to sink into one's brain.

Once acclimated, however, the seemingly endless list of Hollywood names, of which at first only a small percentage is recognizable, begins to take on a familiarity that grows with each page. Holley's writing style and structure weave the reader inward to this state of fluency and are heavily informed by his subject.

This biography of Hollywood's vitriolic gay gossip columnist, Mike Connolly, becomes in itself a thick, juicy column that focuses not just on Connolly, but on the lives affected by his spicy writing.

Val Holley was born and raised in Weber County and attended law school at the University of Utah. Holley didn't come out until he was 25; before that experience, he described himself as a "male old maid" to a female date.

"I guess I was terribly, terribly naïve at the time not to realize what I really liked," Holley said in an interview with Salt Lake Metro. This changed at the age of 25, when he "developed quite a friendship with the music director" of a musical presented by his student ward, called, ironically enough, *The Boyfriend*.

Holley, therefore, was primed to read between Connolly's lines — to "see through" him: "I can discern who and what you are," Holley said in an indirect address to the long-dead Connolly, "and I'm going to tell your story."

The research for Holley's 1995 book, *James Dean: the Biography*, acted as the catalyst for his second biography. While slogging through "what every gossip columnist in Hollywood had written about [Dean]," Holley was delighted to come across Connolly's column: "His writing was so incredible, I thought, 'My goodness, this is just a gossip column and look at how he can write.' ... He just had a sparkling quality. I never thought a gossip column could be considered as literature, but if it could then this is it. After I had read only a few [columns] — maybe four or five — I said, 'I think this man is gay,' because there's just this fabulousness to his writing. I started asking around and, in fact, he was."

Mike Connolly's daily gossip column, the "Rambling Reporter," written for the *Hollywood Reporter*, comprised three large paragraphs: "He would give the public, first of all, what it was looking for," said Holley, "and the *Hollywood Reporter* was rather a right-wing paper, so he would throw out a few anticommunist tidbits for them, and then he'd talk about which upcoming actress was showing more of her breasts — he'd give 'em a little cheesecake, in other words. Once he had done that he was free to discuss whatever he wished, or to spread news of whatever he wished, and that was when he could get into the subtle gay stuff."

Those in the know would immediately pick up on Connolly's references, and that faction was large, as Holley explained: "Back then in the fifties, people in Hollywood, whether

gay or straight, were mostly very hip people, so they could read between the lines. And Mike knew they could read between the lines.”

The form of Connolly’s column is somewhat mirrored by Holley’s choice of structure; the episodic chapters stand in contrast to the linear format typically used by biographers. Since Mike Connolly “is, very sadly, mostly forgotten today,” Holley placed all “the juicy stuff ... the best bait ... all the gay gossip” right up front. Indeed, Chapter 1, “Fool for Fellas” (an alliteration that is itself inspired by Connolly), lists Connolly’s sexual exploits with Hollywood notables and introduces Connolly’s “genuine love match,” Joseph Zappia. The book winds its way, zigzag style, through Connolly’s life, the twists and turns never confusing thanks to Holley’s careful research and presentation.

Holley’s writing style also echoes the mode that shaped the “Rambling Reporter” columns, as this excerpt from page 3 displays: “[The column’s] abundance of cheesecake items, often downright bawdy, spewed from the portable Corona of a gay man.” Holley reports that Connolly wolf-whistled, trumpeted and hyperventilated his column items; after all, it wouldn’t be proper to record the raucous Connolly as having simply “said” something. In this manner, Holley remained true to his subject’s tongue.

Holley’s obvious respect for Connolly the writer does not, however, hamper fact, especially when Connolly was at his worst. Initially, Holley believed that Connolly’s anticommunist crusade — one that ruined the lives of former and suspected communists — was actually a cover for his homosexuality. Holley said, “I thought, ‘This is reprehensible, this is terrible, why is he doing this?’ I suspected that he was doing the anticommunist thing to distract the public’s attention from his own homosexuality. And I thought, ‘How awful, what an awful thing to do.’” Holley soon reversed his position, however, upon realizing “that probably was wrong because he wasn’t a closet case. He wasn’t trying to hide who he was.”

Connolly’s consistent attacks on those who did not conform to his conservative notions were, Holley believed, fueled by a rage incited by the proscriptions of normal society. “There were just so many things that he could not do [that] the majority of people could — for example, go out with your significant other in public. Although people realized what the relationship [with Zappia] was, the proprieties of the time would not allow them to show up as a couple at Hollywood functions. It was a difficult time.”


Holley asserts that while Connolly wasn’t trying to cloak his homosexuality by attacking others, the venom behind these attacks was certainly fueled by the rage of an outsider.

That Connolly and Holley share this sense of the outcast, coming, as they both do, from strict religious foundations (Catholic and Mormon, respectively), led to the question of whether or not Holley feels connected in any way to the man he has chosen to resurrect from obscurity. “As a fellow writer, I admire his gift and I certainly tried to learn from him. So there was a connection to him as a writer. I describe his feeling about normal people as a sort of rage. Now I wouldn’t say that I have the same kind of rage — I think I’m a little easier on the human race than he was. But I still identify with him as being an outsider, the kind of boy who tries to be very good, to do everything the adults say, to be a good boy in compensation for not trying to be the rough-and-tumble boy that all the others were. I felt that I had that in common with him. There was also a sense of power on my part as I was writing the book. In fact, there was an interesting thing that happened while I was doing the research. I got into the practice of reading his columns on the anniversary of when they appeared. One day he was talking about the future and he mentioned the date — it was in the year 2000. That was the day I read the column. So suddenly there was that little spark, that little connection like something from another world.”

Holley sums up their authorial connection: “It was, essentially, that I was a good Mormon boy writing about a good Catholic boy.”

Val Holley has managed to not only remind the public of this man after a forty-year absence, but he does so with a style that revives Connolly’s venom and vitality. With the help of Holley’s well-crafted vitae, Mike Connolly’s inventive, daring and uproarious writing lives on in a new era.

*Val Holley is a legislative and reference librarian now residing in Washington, D.C. “Mike Connolly and the Manly Art of Hollywood Gossip” is published by McFarland &*



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