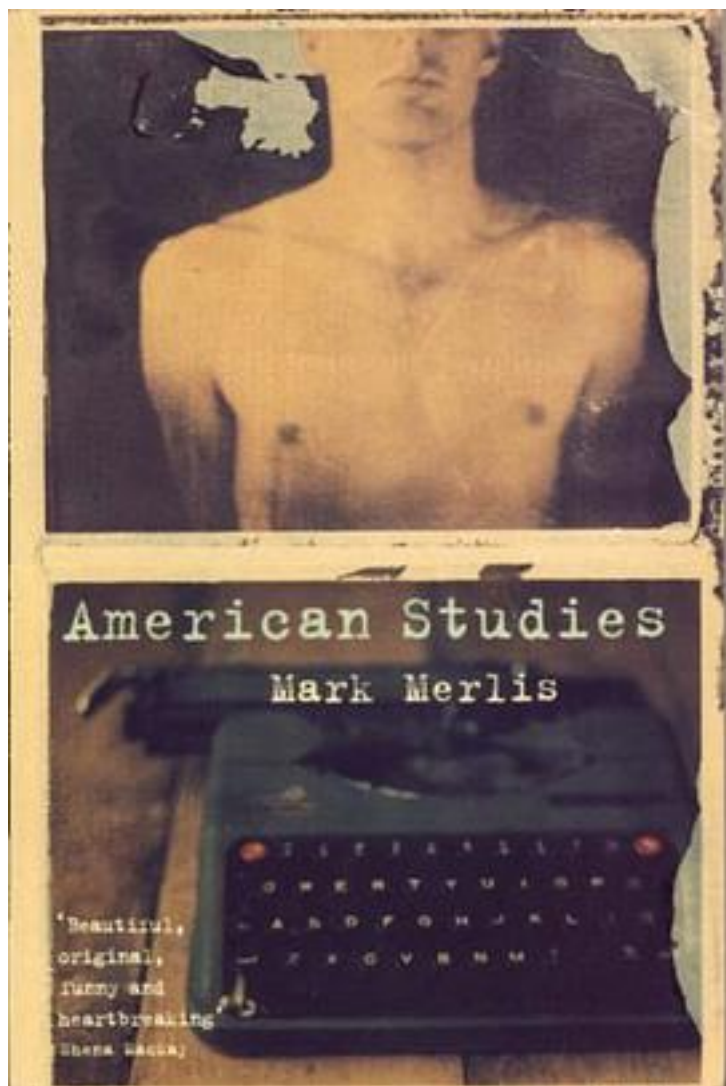


American Studies



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From Publishers Weekly Handsome prose and the erotic undercurrent of pre-Stonewall gay life strengthen this intriguing first novel. While recuperating from a hustler's brutal beating, Reeve, a 62-year-old gay man, finds his attention split between lustful thoughts for his young, straight hospital roommate and memories of his college professor and mentor, Tom Slater (a character based on critic, author and Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen, 1902-1950). Slater, known both for his seminar on American studies and (among the cognoscenti) for his closeted lifestyle, was both a homosexual and a member of the Communist Party. Several scenes reoccur throughout this novel--particularly those of Reeve's beating and a university president's destruction of Slater's career during the McCarthy era--though neither plot nor character is further illuminated after the initial revelations. In fact, the work relies heavily on supposition: Slater's life and downfall is reconstructed as Reeve imagines it to have happened. Though this method reveals Merlis's considerable talent, it fails to raise his main characters, both passive victims, to the historical status they are due. "He was so much a ghost that I couldn't touch him," Reeve says of Slater, who ultimately remains as much of an enigma as Matthiessen himself. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Reeve is laid up in the hospital after being beaten up by a man he picked up in a bar. As he recuperates, he considers his life to date, thus revealing to us the significant details. Reeve contemplates meticulously and mournfully on four levels: his flirtation with the handsome young straight in the next bed; the degradation and eventual suicide of his friend Tom Slater, a martyr to McCarthyism; his own beating by the hustler; and the outline of his life. Reeve is an uncommonly thoughtful and perceptive man; there is a wealth of feeling and literary knowledge in this work, surely one of the finest first novels to appear in many a moon. Its simple, noble, graceful prose refreshes the very language, and its unflinching portrayal of gay men is searing and authentic. Merlis's novel belongs to the best of contemporary literature, gay or other. Recommended for most collections. Brian Geary, West Seneca, N.Y. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. See all Editorial Reviews

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