

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROY RICHARD GRINKER, *In the Arms of Africa: The Life of Colin M. Turnbull*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. \$23.31, xii + 354 p.

This biography of the British, and later American, anthropologist, Colin M. Turnbull, is an extraordinary read. As the author himself has noted, “Despite the popularity and influence of ... [Turnbull’s] books [*The Forest People* (1961) and *The Mountain People* (1973)], which are required reading in many high schools and colleges, even decades after their publication, little is known about how and why... Turnbull wrote them” (Grinker 2000:1). Stirring controversy within the gay and lesbian community as well as among anthropologists and other scholars when it was originally published in 2000, it is now available in paperback.

Turnbull carefully documented his life because he believed that it would be of interest to future generations. Grinker therefore had a wealth of resources from which to draw and carefully details Turnbull’s private and professional lives.

Born into a privileged family in England in 1924, Turnbull attended prestigious boarding schools and then Oxford. After serving in the British Navy during the Second World War he traveled to India to study Hinduism and resided in the ashram of an illustrious woman guru. During his return he traveled through Africa and began the study of the Mbuti in Zaire that marked the beginning of his unusual anthropological career. The Mbuti would eventually become the topic of a doctoral degree at Oxford and of *The Forest People*. In 1959, seeking to escape the “racism... bigotry and ignorance that... [he] had always associated with the British and their colonialism” (p.152), he moved to the US to take a position at the American Museum of Natural History. Almost immediately he met and fell in love with Joseph Towles, an aspiring young African-American actor who under Turnbull’s influence eventually became an anthropologist. This long-term relationship – Turnbull considered it a marriage – is a central focus of the book. In the mid-1960s they travelled together to Uganda where Turnbull worked with the Ik, while Towles studied at Makerere University in Kampala. In 1969 Turnbull left the Museum, dissatisfied with the museum and its relations with African-Americans, including Towles, with whom he had worked closely on the *Hall of Man in Africa* exhibit. He went on to a series of academic posts in the U.S. and in the mid-1970s collaborated on a theatrical work about the Ik. For decades he advocated on behalf of prisoners on death row and contributed to legal challenges of the death penalty. After Towles’ death from AIDS in 1988,

Turnbull spent his final years as a Buddhist until his own death from AIDS in 1994.

The book begins with a depiction of Turnbull's intimate experiences among the Mbuti, and the notions of love, ecstasy, and sexuality that he learned from them. This sets out Grinker's interest in both personal and professional dimensions of his subject's life. But he does not engage in discussions about sexuality and subjectivity, except indirectly. He discusses Turnbull's motivations in writing about the Mbuti and the Ik for a general audience, but not the nuances of his anthropological interpretations. Grinker thus proceeds more as a historian than an anthropologist, devoting most of the book to detailing how Turnbull and Towles lived their relationship, in all its joys, anger, sorrows, and sometimes violence, over 29 years. In the process, he presents a sensitive and thoughtful examination of two men's efforts to develop a meaningful long-term relationship at a time when there was little understanding of, and few established norms for, such a union. The book is therefore also a contribution to U.S. gay history (although neither partner used the term). Strangely, despite their obvious determination to live their mutual devotion as they wished, and their concerns about racism in American society, they appear not to have been interested in the developing struggle for gay rights. They were dismissive of "bitter old queens" as an unfortunate product of past times but in Grinker's account appear not to have considered how the stresses in their own relationship may have been exacerbated by homophobic attitudes of their own times. Both contracted HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, a time when little was known of the disease and social acceptance and understanding of those affected was still limited. Their reactions and means of dealing with the disease and its stigma are interesting reading.

Grinker offers the Pygmalion myth as a means of interpreting Turnbull's obsession with remaking Towles as an anthropologist in his own image but the explanation is not entirely satisfying, especially given the apparently tortured nature of their relationship. Why was Turnbull so drawn to Towles and the notion of their love as deep and everlasting, especially in the face of Towles' violence and despondency later in their relationship? Grinker points to the ironies and contradictions of the relationship, given Turnbull's anti-colonialist commitments, but Towles' motivations are not explored in as much depth.

Finally, despite the great care with which Grinker documents Turnbull's life, he does not provide much evidence to evaluate Turnbull's contribution to anthropology. He depicts Turnbull as a maverick who eschewed many of the norms of academic life (including tenure), but not being an Africanist, we would have liked to have learned if, and in what ways, Turnbull influenced anthropological interpretation of African societies, or if his importance derives from having reached a wider audience through writing compelling ethnography. Turnbull's books are discussed (and listed), but his articles are not.

This book, fascinating as it is, thus falls short of a fully considered intellectual biography. Grinker, however, is effective at the biographer's task of exploring the influence of the times on the individual and of the individual on his or her times, and the book is engagingly written and illustrated with an evocative set of photographs. The discussion it sparked can be reached through links at [www.colinturnbull.com](http://www.colinturnbull.com).

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