



Literature, Identity & Culture

RESEARCH GROUP

SEMINAR SERIES

Session 1 2010: Sexualities

Edmund White's Promiscuous Novel: *The Farewell Symphony*

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The term "promiscuity," as Ben Gove notes, is "perennially vexed" and "notoriously vague." Including notions of mixture, indiscriminateness, and, in relation to its use regarding sexual practice, excessiveness, indiscriminateness and insatiability, the term has a long history of derogatory use. In the gay subculture of the 1970s, however, promiscuity was often positively revalued as a manifestation of shame-free sexual pleasure or as the foundation of new modes of intimacy and affiliation. In this paper, I discuss Edmund White's novel about 1970s gay New York *The Farewell Symphony* (1997) in relation to its representation and exemplification of promiscuous tendencies. The novel's treatment of promiscuity, I argue, enables a richly ambivalent account of key aspects of the gay 1970s, including the formation of gay identity, the commodification of the gay "lifestyle," and the rise of gay fiction. No simple eulogy, White's novel is notable for the retroactive, self-ironising scepticism with which it treats the 1970s culture of promiscuity even as it celebrates the possibilities which that culture put in place.

Tuesday March 23, 12:30pm – 1:30pm

Room 19.1003 Faculty of Arts University of Wollongong

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