

Review by  
PETER O'BRIEN

ON the cover of *Autobiography of a Tattoo* is a photograph of a naked, muscular young man sprawling on his back. His eyes are closed, his head is tilted back and toward the camera. He has an air of nonchalant indulgence, of self-absorption and narcissism.

I'm not sure Stan Persky, philosophy teacher and journalist (and former Globe and Mail books columnist), picked this image, but it matches the book perfectly. Like the image, *Autobiography* is initially arresting and intriguing but finally not as challenging or disruptive of the status quo as the author would have it be.

Persky begins by posing several questions about the biographical variables that lead us to the sexual path we choose. He proposes a sort of personal chaos theory, in which fleeting, perhaps accidental occurrences from our youth end up shaping our lives and urges. He also wants to speak about what he calls the "anthropology of desire," and the relationship between language and passion. Had he fully explored these paths the book would have sustained its own ambitions and been an engaging read.

## Tattoo is not quite indelible

*The jacket calls Stan Persky 'the most important writer about homosexuality in North America today.' But this mixture of erotic and literary musings is finally not as challenging or disruptive of the status quo as the author would have it be.*

### AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A TATTOO

By Stan Persky

New Star Books, 227 pages, \$19

Luc, Jacky, Willy, Tony, Paul . . .

His principal research project while in Berlin is examining pornography. His summing up, after endless hours of viewing porn and interviewing a porn director, includes: "Porn seems to me at least as good as most television," and, "Porn is mainly for the body, while television occupies the mind." Not the most riveting of conclusions.

Woven through these various exploits are Persky's thoughts on various writers and thinkers. At times, his brief, sympathetic insights into such writers as Roland Barthes, Christopher Isherwood and Bill Readings can be absorbing and lead to new perspectives on their work. At other times, Persky quotes interest-

ing passages and then belittles them by being excessively literal or just facile, as is the case with his assessment of Edward Luttwak, Galen Strawson and Iris Murdoch. His grappling with Plato is particularly thin: At one point he provides a six-page synopsis of *The Symposium* and then a two-page set of "objections" and "disappointments" with Socrates.

The strongest parts of the book are the passages that are the most descriptive or the most historical, perhaps because Persky does not feel the need to be as profound or philosophical here. His adventures with various young men makes for provocative reading, especially for those to whom this world is uncharted territory. He is also good on the early years of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer and the White Rabbit poets of San Francisco, with whom he became friends. Spicer, who died in 1965, re-

mains a strong influence on Persky, and was evidently a strong supporter (Persky was listed as the contact person on his next-of-kin form).

The energy of *Autobiography* flags toward the end, where the redundancies start to pile up. There is a repetition of an interesting quotation from Barthes, an unattributed self-quotation from Persky's 1995 book *Then We Take Berlin*, and various other repetitions and lapses.

Must one be gay to fully understand and appreciate this book? It's a bit like saying, "Must one be heterosexual to fully appreciate the writing of Michael Ondaatje or Jane Urquhart?" I hope the answer to both questions is no. A reader is a reader is a reader.

On the back cover Persky is called "the most important writer about homosexuality in North America today." Had he examined the issues he proposed, had he provided more piercing critiques of the writers he quotes and had he illuminated the "erotic theology" that has shaped his life, this description might have been more applicable. Unfortunately the blurb outshines the book.

Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer. He does not have any tattoos.