

**REVIEW OF “MICHAEL TOLLIVER LIVES”
BY ARMISTEAD MAUPIN**

Reviewed by Richard Amero

Michael Tolliver Lives by Armistead Maupin is not as good as some claim it to be; and it is not as bad as others say it is. While many who have become attached to the characters in their earlier manifestations would be pleased to see them again and many who are gay might see the novel a call for liberation, others would find it hard to give the book an unqualified endorsement; still others would be shocked at the grab-ass, steam room, semen-stained togetherness.

A novel within the novel could have been terrific, if Armistead Maupin had used more care in plot development. Too often the author takes away what he gives; thereby ruining what might have been a revelation or climax.

The novel depends on its predecessors to win sympathy for its characters. If it were simply an account of Michael Tolliver’s discoveries that love is possible at the age of 54 for one who is afflicted with HIV and who is a gardener and that his being gay surmounts the objections of his holier-than-thou “biological” family, the novel might be able to carry the reader through to its end without misgiving.

Like many writers of what seemingly is difficult to accept as plausible, the novel calls for a suspension of dis-belief. Because people in general differ so much in their inclinations and behavior, there must be people out there who find their elderly partners not only attractive but capable of giving and receiving love and affection in its sexual and non-sexual forms.

Hilarious moments live in the memory . . . the orchid in the toilet in a gay Florida Bed and Breakfast called eponymously “Inn Among the Flowers,” the talking back to an mechanized voice in a Prius comically dubbed “Carlotta,” the engagement in three-way sex while on a family visit to Florida; and the attempt by Brian to find the cave where Ishi --- an aboriginal Indian discovered in 1911 and placed on exhibit in San Francisco until his death in 1916 --- hid from spectators.

At times Maupin gets as good as he can get. His explicitness in sexual matters is refreshing, though some non-gay people may wish it were not so explicit; and some gays, might wish he was more so. The main characters Michael and Ben are almost coquettish as they primp before their encounter with Patreece Johnson, a hairdresser to Alice, Michael's biological mother.

Events and people crop up pell-mell as one peruses the pages. What seems at first unusual becomes boring through repetition, such as the quipped one-liners of most of the characters.

Unless accompanied by a glossary, it is difficult to see how any one can make sense of many of at-the-time relevant citations and comparisons. What may seem contemporary while one is reading it in the year 2007 may become "historic" or (worse) non-relevant a decade or so later. What will one make of the reference to Terry Schiavo in 2020? Who are Colonel Butler, Sally Bowles, and Mammy Yokum?

Michael Tolliver Lives could have been a jolly book about emancipated homosexuals, lesbians, and transgender people in San Francisco who are beginning to learn a sobering lesson after the death of so many of their "confederacy," following the advent of AID's in the 80's. It could have contained the mocking zest of Rabelais' **Gargantua**; the élan of Robin Hood and his merry men; the exuberance of Falstaff and his scalawag companions; the tragedy and sauciness of Puccini's **La Boheme**. It has this ribaldry in places. Then the hilarity falls flat. Plot coincidences, that seem inevitable in the hands of masters like Cervantes and Henry Fielding, become incredulous and strained. Readers are entertained in sections, exasperated in others. After it is over, they have the sensation of water slipping from their fingers.