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Editor's Choice

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The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, The Rise of Soap Opera, the Children of the Gospel Church and Other Meditations by Anthony Heilbut; Knopf, 354 pages (\$30). This is a brilliant, one-of-a-kind and immensely challenging book by a brilliant, one-of-a-kind, immensely challenging American writer who has obviously been affected by 21st century gender liberation. Before this, critic and Grammy-winning gospel record producer Anthony Heilbut had written two wildly disparate books whose relationship to their subjects seems definitive: "The Gospel Sound" about American gospel music and "Exiled in Paradise" about the immense salutary influence – especially in Hollywood – of those emigres who fled the Nazi horrors. You can probably add to Heilbut's definitive list "Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature," sometimes called one of the most profound considerations of homosexual literature extant.

Heilbut wastes no time here militating for the pivotal role of homosexuals and lesbians in the gospel music of the American Pentecostal church. In the process, mainstream America learns vocabulary we couldn't possibly have known (that, for instance, the great gospel performers, used the words "sissies," "punks" and "children" interchangeably). The essay is called "The Children and Their Secret Closet" and it ought to go without saying that Heilbut will have no truck with that very same Pentecostal church raining punishing hellfire on those responsible for its greatest musical glory.

From there, we get "Aretha Franklin: How She Got Over" ("she is not merely one of the best-selling vocalists of all time; she is also the most purely folkloric to succeed in a worldly context"), novelist Joseph Roth, the history of soap operas, "the Male Soprano," the blues and Josh White and, in the title essay, as profound and personal and candid a "meditation" on fandom as certifiable intellectuals allow themselves in public. Neither his alienation or his ecstatic advocacy are designed to leave any reader comfortable – or unenlightened.

– Jeff Simon