



# Phallos

*Samuel R. Delany*

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## **Phallos** Samuel R. Delany

Fiction. PHALLOS is the tale of a tale, recounting the pursuit of mystic knowledge throughout the Mediterranean world in the reign of the emperor Hadrian. Filled with wit and erudition - and deeply homoerotic - this is a Lacanian riddle to delight and intrigue the growing number of admirers of Delany's more recent fiction, Hogg (1995), and The Mad Man (1996). Delany is a novelist, critic, and professor of English at Temple University and has also written an award-winning autobiography, The Motion of Light in Water (1988).

## **Phallos Details**

Date : Published October 31st 2004 by Bamberger (first published October 28th 2004)

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Author : Samuel R. Delany

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## From Reader Review Phallos for online ebook

### Patrick says

Certainly one of the most perverse (pardon the pun) "pornographic" novellas ever written the mostly cold academic tone of this worked for me despite Delany's indulgences (the phrase "his large member" must be repeated over two dozen times in the 120 pages).

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### Daniel Frontino Elash says

On its surface, this novel describes a scholarly search for a likely-forged, much older text purporting to describe a lost Roman novel. Also, finally, a worthy successor to Petronius! And after all, not everyone besides Hadrian refused to worship Antinoos.

Much will be made of the shocking contents, high intellectual qualities, etc. of this book-- but that's just Delany for ya. What's really special about this book is Delany's portrayal of how gay men build our lives and communities together, and transmit our wisdom across our generations, with or without anyone else's knowledge or approval. That is what makes this book a precious little stick of dynamite in the puritanical walls of the ages.

If you like that kind of thing too, you'll also enjoy his latest, "Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders." Also NB, an expanded 2nd edition of "Phallos" is immediately forthcoming.

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### Rebecca Jordan says

One of Delaney's newer books, Phallos is a story-within-a-story. An interesting study in multilayered ways to tell stories, the narrator claims to be a scholar who presents a summary and brief history of "Phallos," a gay pornographic novella supposedly lost throughout the centuries and just recently resurfaced. The narrator (Randy) provides a summary, as well as several excerpts, of "Phallos," and he, as well as two friends Binky and Phyllis, provide occasional commentary on the likelihood (or lack thereof) that "Phallos" is a centuries-old text as opposed to decades-old. Its authenticity becomes elusive, just as the title phallos--a supposedly stolen relic--is in the inner story.

I found the form refreshing--I've seen it a few times in different novels, but this one manages to successfully make the inner story and the framing story mirror each other. Ultimately it is a story about power--the phallos, just like power, does not exist, and seeming to have it is the same as having it. It's a commentary on how power is practiced in our world--power becomes a thing that we give to people, whether we're aware of it or not. It's social power that Delaney is interested--in words and lies but also how people are treated because of it.

It would have had five except, throughout the summary sections, I wished to have more "excerpts" from the invented book. Delaney's voice as Neoptolomus' the narrator is lush and rich and full of insight.

It's funny to have a feeling that a lot of that insight is missing, because at the end the scholar Randy says he's

elided much of the book's power by providing only summary. Phyllis and Binky, in pages-long footnotes, rush to chastise him for excluding much of the racial, sexual, and gender politics. That exclusion itself, then, becomes part of the discussion. There are a lot of layers in this novella that need even more unpacking from someone more attuned than I, but ultimately I enjoyed it and hope to use the form in my own work.

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### **Akira Watts says**

This is an odd one. A somewhat scholarly analysis/summary of what is may be a work of gay erotica from the 17th? century or a hoax from 1969 (in Delany's next novel, *Dark Reflections*, the protagonist describes writing the novel, so it's probably the latter). Most of the actual erotic content is elided as the text summarizes a story involving the pursuit of the phallos of the unnamed god (itself quite similar to the beast/creature appearing in the *Mad Man*) that may or may not exist and may or may not symbolize an assortment of things.

For me it all works. It's a tangled and convoluted story that promises to reward rereadings (and, while the premise seems to owe much to Borges, the text itself reminds me not at all of him) and there are multiple layers of the tale itself to engage with. And, being Delany, there are moments of writing that are absolutely spellbinding - the last paragraph of the 1969 text is amazing.

Probably not for everyone - even in summary things are rather explicit - but quite rewarding nonetheless.

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### **L.A. Jamison says**

I almost forgot this book is fiction. It is an interesting read with some hot scenes and tells the story in a way I've not seen often done. Phallos

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### **Frank Ashe says**

Delany is a magnificent writer, but I wish he'd go back to science fiction or fantasy. :-(

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### **Mills College Library says**

Fiction D3379p 2013

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### **Furio says**

Mr Delany enjoys a widespread acclaim by critics and common readers: with good cause, his mastery of the language is outstanding and he knows perfectly how to develop a good story. Both qualities are to be found and appreciated in "Phallos" too but an author so esteemed must perforce keep his standards extremely high.

In this work he chooses a literary topos: he feigns he has found an older work by an unknown author, a pornographical novel set in the late Roman empire and he engages the reader in a witty, cultured commentary on this novel, inserting erotic excerpts from the same.

Problem is, his "commentary" is not witty enough to stand on its own feet, and the excerpts, though teasing enough, are not so outright erotic as to give satisfaction at least in that way.

To read this work is just like reading an interesting literary essay (with some useless shows of erudition where the language is convoluted) about a work which does not exist.

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## Jesse says

“A tale of a tale,” to cite Delany’s own characterization, thus situating his text within the tradition of self-reflexive literature associated so closely with Borges; declaring it a phallus-obsessed *Ficciones* is inevitably reductive but sketches out the general textual landscape. Just like the Argentinian master, Delany unapologetically takes it as a given that literary esoterica and other epistemological pursuits can be just as thrilling as an adventure yarn or mystery story. For *Phallos* is indeed a mystery at heart, albeit unconventionally so.

A brief opening note outlines the experience of a young potential reader who, after failing to track down a copy of an obscure erotic novel called “Phallos” by an anonymous author, is forced to resign himself instead a lengthy synopsis posted on the internet by an obscure academic residing in Moscow, Idaho. This summary is what constitutes the main text of *Phallos*, though other layers of narrative become intricately intertwined with this ostensibly "straightforward" explanatory text.

[...]

Despite the fact that all of the explicit sexual material has been edited out (the author worries over issues of hosting sexually explicit material on a university website), I found much of *Phallos* to still be a surprisingly sexy read. Delany is masterful at titillating solely through inference...

[...]

I also ended up being quite touched by Neoptolomus’s constant discovery and affirmation of the polymorphous quality of love, sex, and desire: “with each of my adventures,” he muses at one point, “I had thought I’d learned a lesson about love, only to discover, with the next, I’d merely learned a lesson about a lover.” And to claim Neoptolomus as a democratic lover would be an understatement: his bedfellows encompass all races, ages, nationalities, and takes no mind of class status, level of education, sexual proclivities, or even orthodox standards of attractiveness. It’s constantly a pleasure to encounter how our protagonist discovers beauty and sexual fulfillment simply by being open to their possibility.

I’m not sure if the novella of *Phallos* is republished here in its original form, or has been altered in this “enhanced and revised edition,” which is essentially a scholarly edition of the text. Added at the end is an “Afterward” as well as three scholarly essays—they’re all very academic in nature (that is, highly theoretical and employ the terminology of the academy), and I found lots of interest while perusing them without getting too caught up in the intricacies of their arguments. I’m glad they’re included as they affirm that a text like *Phallos* merits such close scholarly attention, though I also think it would have been nice to also include

at least one analysis immediately accessible to the casual reader.

In the end what I found so wonderful about *Phallos* is that it essentially invites the reader to embrace the text as a kind of sophisticated variation on the "choose your own adventure" formula. Delany seems to intentionally avoid ever dictating how the text should be read or understood, placing that control (literally) into the reader's hands. Skip over the extensive footnotes, or dig into the minutiae. Ponder over the broad philosophical questions that are slyly invoked, or simply be entertained by a quick-paced erotic adventure tale. Admire the intricate narrative construction, or marvel at the meticulous historical detail. In the end, it's all up to you.

[The full review can be found on my blog *Queer Modernisms* . Apologies for the inconvenience, but as posting a review on Goodreads is to "expressly grant" full license to the content, it's my small attempt at maintaining some control over my writing.]

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### **Ralphe Wiggins says**

I have been a great fan of Delany's non science fiction books. This book seems to be a mix of science fiction and gay novel. To me, it is primarily Delaney showing off is enormous erudition!

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### **Don Naggie says**

Devoured this book. Excellent.

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### **Mark says**

Much as I love Delany's work, sometimes he gets over-convoluted and gimmicky. This is a short novel about a supposedly legendary pornographic novel reputed to have ancient origins, but may really just be a modern fraud. Not an unknown phenomenon, there are many examples of works that have been "back-dated" by devotees (or art dealers of questionable ethics) and cult leaders (possibly the most significant of which is Hermes Trismegistus, a late classical era invention that ultimately took on the aura of something much, much older among alchemists). In this, Delany gives a thoroughly savvy account of researching the provenance of the book, and then goes on to tell the story contained in the book.

And here's where it gets odd. Supposedly, the narrator has a copy of the book. Instead of just republishing it complete, he excerpts it and then talks about what is left out. It becomes, then, a book about the story you would be reading if you had the original book, with commentary and extensive footnotes. It is not, ultimately, a pornographic novel but a novel about a pornographic novel (*This Is Not A Cigar*) which, treated this way, is not very pornographic at all. (The narrator tells us he's leaving out the "juicy bits" and only describes what they might be---"the erotic acrobatics then goes on for seven pages" etc.)

It's a cute trick and entertaining as an example of academic/literary study, a kind of palimpsest. Of course, all this is layered atop the fact that the book in question is wholly fictitious. As an example of one of the ways in which fiction can become, by gradual steps, "fact" it is a very clever book. Mercifully, it is also very short (95 pages). Once the idea is thoroughly conveyed, it loses interest unless the reader is a devotee of the kind

of fiction it parodies, in which case it may be a thoroughly tantalizing piece.

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