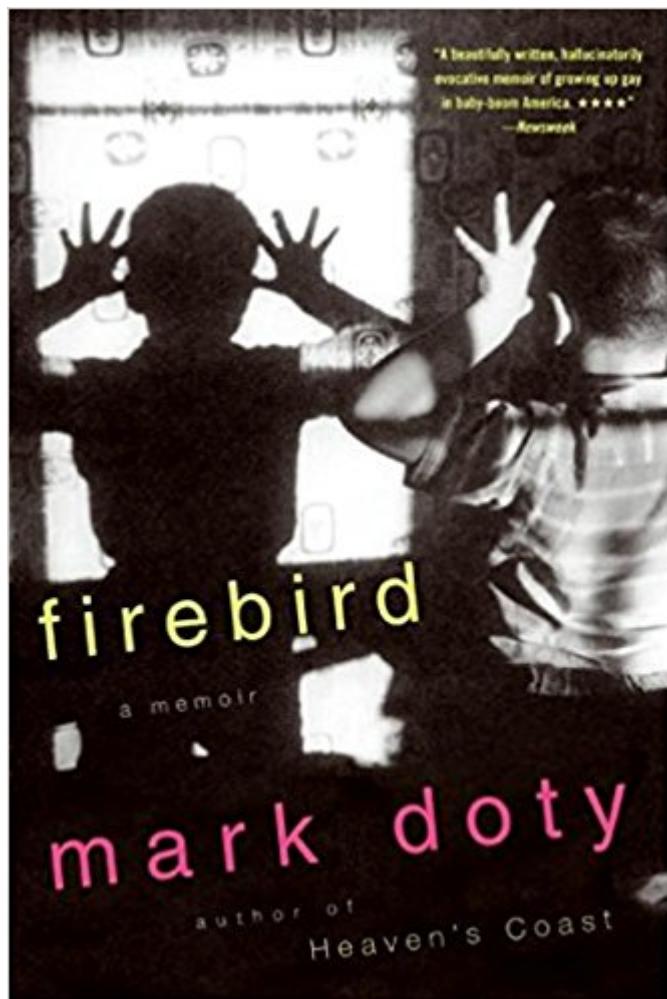


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# Firebird: A Memoir



## Synopsis

In *Firebird*, Mark Doty tells the story of a ten-year-old in a top hat, cane, and red chiffon scarf, interrupted while belting out Judy Garland's "Get Happy" by his alarmed mother at the bedroom door, exclaiming, "Son, you're a boy!" *Firebird* presents us with a heroic little boy who has quite enough worries without discovering that his dawning sexuality is the Wrong One. A self-confessed "chubby smart bookish sissy with glasses and a Southern accent," Doty grew up on the move, the family following his father's engineering work across America—from Tennessee to Arizona, Florida to California. A lyrical, heartbreaking comedy of one family's dissolution through the corrosive powers of alcohol, sorrow, and thwarted desire, *Firebird* is also a wry evocation of childhood's pleasures and terrors, a comic tour of American suburban life, and a testament to the transformative power of art.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Childhood's work is to see what lies beneath," Mark Doty writes in his memoir, *Firebird*. And adulthood's work, he suggests, is to make sense of what the child-self once saw. Doty, a poet, does this remarkably well, capturing the peculiar talismans of youth—"little cars of fragrant plastic whose wheels turn on wire axles that can be popped loose and examined; hard candies; sweet, chalky wafers strung together into wristlets and necklaces"—as well as a child's experience of sin: I am standing paralyzed by what I've done, there's a rush and roar from the direction of the living room, my father rising from the couch, he's coming down the hall, I'm afraid he's going to spank me, I remember the last time, the humiliation of it, him pulling my pants down on the porch and whaling

me, his red face filled up with blood and rage, striking at me because what have I done? Now I've done something plain and sharply lit like the big shards of glass on the floor... It's clear from the start that the author's home life was not happy. His father's job with the Army Corps of Engineers kept the family crisscrossing the country; his older sister got pregnant at 17--"these girls knew what they were doing, these girls married to get out"--and ended up, eventually, in prison; and his mother, a frustrated artist, sank eventually into depression and alcoholism. As if growing up in this family during the 1950s and '60s weren't difficult enough, Doty's homosexuality provided additional anguish. A confrontation over his long hair led to a humiliating scene at a barbershop where Doty's father had dragged him and ended up with his attempted suicide at the age of 14. There are plenty more heart-wrenching episodes like this, and at times you might wonder why you'd want to put yourself through the ordeal of reading about them. Doty himself seems aware of this. "Why tell a story like this, who wants to read it?" he demands near the end of the book, then responds, "Even sad stories are company. And perhaps that's why you might read such a chronicle, to look into a companionable darkness that isn't yours." That may be one reason for reading *Firebird*; the other, undoubtedly, is Mark Doty's precise and lyrical prose, his acute perception, and his compassionate heart. --Alix Wilber --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Doty, an award-winning poet (*Atlantis*) and memoirist (*Heaven's Coast*) has penned an autobiography of his early years that, while beautifully and sensitively written, is more moving intellectually than emotionally. Using his family history and personal recollections to create a snapshot of the artist as a young child and beyond, Doty portrays the rocky emotional and psychological domestic terrain of his youth and adolescence: his family moved frequently; his mother was severely alcoholic; he hid his crushes on other boys from his homophobic parents while his sister became embroiled in a bad marriage and was imprisoned for breaking into and burglarizing a pharmacy. Doty's personal material is sometimes wrenchingAat the story's climax, his mother, drunk, holds him at gunpointAbut he is at his best when describing his relationship to the idea of beauty and how it influenced his growth as an artist. From watching monster movies and listening to classical music as a child to participating in drama class and singing along to pop songs such as Petula Clark's "Downtown" as he grew older, Doty details his evolution as a poet. Through it all, he casts his tragic relationship with his mother as a touchstone for his love of art, relating how he moved from his childhood recognition that "my relationship with my mother is immense... and occupies so much space I can barely see around it" to an adult understanding that she "taught me the things that would save me, and then... she taught me I wasn't worth saving." In the end, Doty's

story illuminates his poetry, but it doesn't match its power. (Oct.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

To the outside world, the four members of Doty's middle-class family could be in a sitcom of the time period: the father is an engineer, the mother looks respectable, the older sister is popular, and the little boy is bespectacled and bookish. But all is not as it seems. Alcohol wreaks its slow destruction on the family. But most crucial to Doty's identity is a difference that occurs even before the disintegration does. The little boy, Doty himself, gradually comes to realize he is gay, and there is no place for being gay in the world in which he grows up. Because this book was written by a poet, the language is rich and evocative. I love the little boy at the heart of the book. Here is one important thing I learned from reading *Firebird*: Doty begins his memoir with a "Prelude" (so termed because of the use of music and art in the book) which is a beautiful essay in its own right and introduces the reader to a way of viewing a memoir. This essay is about a work of art from the 17th century by the Dutch painter Samuel Von Hoogstraten. It's called *Perspective Box with Views of a Dutch Interior*. This perspective box contains the miniature furnishings of a miniature room which are distorted and misshapen; however, when you look through holes designed for viewing, suddenly the room comes into perfect perspective. Interesting way of viewing memoir itself . . . . The metaphor of the work of art for memoir and the detailed description both serve as an inspiration to write with detailed accuracy and imagination.

Best memoir I have read. His command of the language and blunt honesty about himself are unforgettable.

Amazing, insightful, inspired -- I connect with this book deeply even though I am not a gay boy growing up in the South. Artists, misfits, anyone who has felt marginalized or just "odd" -- read this. Doty is a writer who changes your life. (*His Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* is a revelation, a must-read.)

Much has been made about being gay in various notes and reviews of this blazingly honest book. But I don't think it's quite as zeroed in on sexual preference as, say, Edmund White's autobiography, *My Lives*. *Firebird* is, first of all, a book about a very messed-up childhood with parents with plenty of problems of their own. Like a lot of other adult men - gay and straight - Doty

continues to struggle with his relationship with his father. His scene of an actual physical confrontation, at the age of fourteen, with his father struck a nerve with me, as I remembered a nearly identical thing between me and my dad, also when I was about fourteen. And I remembered how frightening it was to me, at least briefly, wondering what I would do if my folks actually kicked me out. Doty was apparently cut loose by his parents, at least emotionally, at about that age, which began a lifelong period of painfully ambivalent feelings toward the two people who should have loved him most and taken care of him. I had trouble with the first part of this book, when Doty tried to tie in his looks at the perspective box and other cultural landmarks. But it all hung together in the end. This is one hell of a good book about a kid who grew up the best he could under very difficult circumstances and made a good life and carved out a distinguished literary career for himself. I may have to try his other memoir, Heaven's Coast, now. - Tim Bazzett, author of Reed City Boy and Pinhead

A great read from the first to last page.

Outstanding writer . . . brilliant poet as well.

Great read

I read (and met) Mark Doty while I was in college. On the grass at Sarah Lawrence, I memorized his sad, beautiful poetry and read and re-read his book, Heaven's Coast, chronicling his life with his partner dying from AIDS. So, I was very excited when Firebird was chosen by my book club. Again, I found myself amazed and delighted by Mark Doty's use of imagery, but I was also disappointed as the book leapt from experience to experience without explanation. Maybe this is why I never felt "inside" his character, and at the end, was left feeling as though the chapters were more like poems, mysterious pieces of his life that were without resolution. Mark Doty is a man of great accomplishment, a poet of unquestionable talent, but after this book, he's still a mystery to me.

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