

alumni today

More Tales Yet to Tell

Pioneering author leaves San Francisco but not the characters he brought to life there

laugh. “It was a conservative, satirical column, if you can imagine such a thing.”

The irony is rich for Maupin, who came out publicly as a gay man a decade later and now is a celebrated author and screenwriter. Maupin’s iconic *Tales of the City* series of eight best-sellers, which grew from his fictional serial in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, have sold more than 6 million copies worldwide in 15 languages. *Tales*, set in San Francisco, Maupin’s home for the past 40 years until his recent move to the Southwest, was a ribald soap opera following the marijuana-fueled adventures of six characters of heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual persuasions. Readers couldn’t get enough of the close-knit gang and their friends, with quirky, romping stories from the pleasure-seeking days of San Francisco in the 1970s, ’80s and beyond. More seriously, Maupin was among the first writers to introduce the scourge of AIDS into American literature.

“*Tales of the City* marked the first time that gay characters were integrated in a storyline in the mainstream of popular fiction,” Maupin said, with a trace of Southern drawl reflecting his Raleigh upbringing. “In San Francisco, people were shocked, even gay people. You have to understand that at that

Armistead Maupin Jr. ’66 grins as he looks back on his Chapel Hill days, when he was a right-wing columnist at *The Daily Tar Heel*.

“I was the campus conservative,” he said, with a

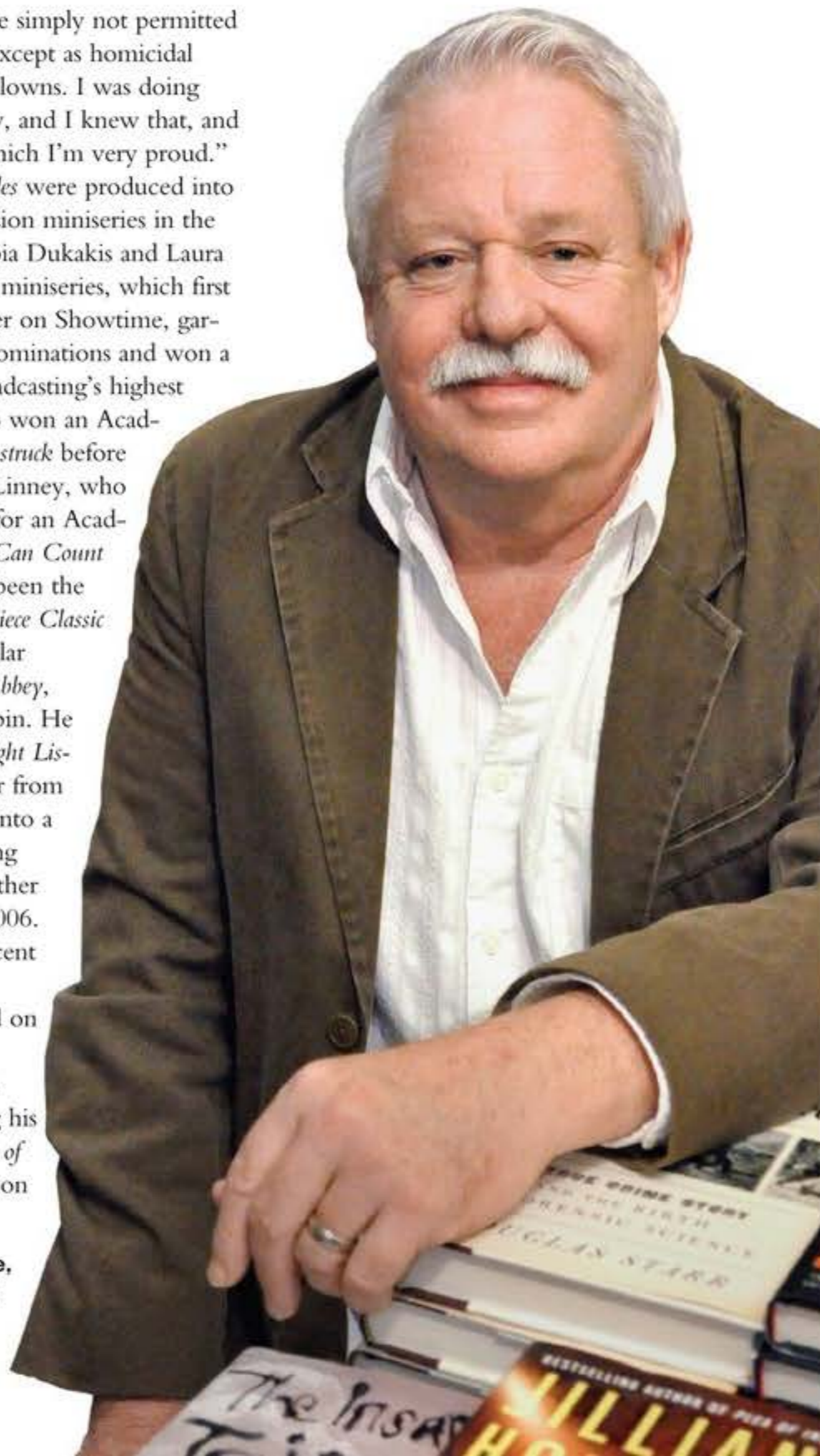
time, gay people were simply not permitted into popular fiction except as homicidal killers and neutered clowns. I was doing something brand new, and I knew that, and it is something for which I’m very proud.”

The first three *Tales* were produced into an eponymous television miniseries in the 1990s starring Olympia Dukakis and Laura Linney. The popular miniseries, which first aired on PBS and later on Showtime, garnered three Emmy nominations and won a Peabody Award, broadcasting’s highest honor. Dukakis, who won an Academy Award for *Moonstruck* before her *Tales* work, and Linney, who was nominated later for an Academy Award for *You Can Count on Me* and lately has been the host for PBS’ *Masterpiece Classic* introducing the popular miniseries *Downton Abbey*, remain close to Maupin. He also authored *The Night Listener*, a psycho-thriller from 2000 that was made into a motion picture starring Robin Williams, another longtime friend, in 2006.

Maupin’s most recent book is *Mary Ann in Autumn* (2010), based on one of the principal characters from *Tales*.

The author is writing his 11th book, *The Days of Anna Madrigal*, based on

Armistead Maupin Jr. ’66 moved to Santa Fe, N.M., after decades in San Francisco.



another main character — played by Dukakis on television — and due out later this year.

Tales lives on in popularity — the story now spans 36 years, including two books since 2000 — as evidenced by its world-wide premiere as a musical last summer at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco.

‘I’d found my calling’

Maupin, born to a conservative Christian family in Washington, D.C., and raised in Raleigh, was in the student legislature at UNC and served as vice president of the class of 1966. In a hint of foreshadowing, it was Maupin’s idea, as a class gift, for the on-campus memorial honoring novelist Thomas Wolfe ’20.

After graduation, Maupin enrolled in law school but dropped out. He served in Vietnam as a Navy officer and later returned to his *DTH* roots as a reporter in Charleston, S.C., at the *News and Courier* (now *The Post and Courier*) and later at The Associated Press. He eventually transferred to AP’s San Francisco bureau. Maupin credits his journalistic skills, particularly researching, as key to his writing. In 1976, he launched his *Tales* serial in the *Chronicle*, blazing a trail in pop culture.

Maupin says he had known he was gay since he was 13 and almost told his parents in his teens. “It’s a good thing I didn’t, because back then, I would’ve surely been sent for electroshock therapy,” he said. “Homosexuality was considered a disease, after all, and that was the common cure.”

Maupin came out in 1977 in *Tales*, by way of a letter his character Michael Tolliver writes to his parents. Although Maupin admits there is a bit of him in each character, Tolliver is the most autobiographical. The news, as groundbreaking as his serial, took time to sink in for the folks in North Carolina.

“My mother said, ‘I’m happy that you’re happy, but I just don’t want to see it hurt your career, sweetie.’ I said, ‘Mum-mie, you don’t get it, this is my career.’ I’d found my calling.”

Maupin, who has worked tirelessly as an activist for gay rights, is pleased with what will become his legacy.

“I always felt that the most important thing, what made me most happy, is that I’ve helped open hearts to the notion of a sexually diverse population,” he said.

Actress Laura Linney reads a poem at the wedding of Armistead Maupin and Christopher Turner in 2008 at the home of novelist Amy Tan in Sausalito, Calif.



Indeed, last year the Lambda Literary Foundation honored Maupin with its highest honor, the Pioneer Award, for his groundbreaking influence and calling him a “literary lion” at a glitzy gala in New York at which Dukakis introduced him.

Division ‘is staggering’

Maupin and his husband, Christopher Turner, a Web developer, married in Vancouver, Canada, in 2007 and again in California in 2008, after same-sex marriage was legalized there. Their wedding was at the home of novelist friend Amy Tan, famous for *The Joy Luck Club*, in Sausalito.

Maupin speaks slowly and deliberately, in a warm and gentle way, with a dry wit. But getting him talking about politics and current events, one senses a fiery soul under the calm demeanor. He was bitterly disappointed that North Carolina, where he still has family, became the 31st state to constitutionally ban same-sex marriage. On a recent coast-to-coast road trip, including stays in gay-friendly Provincetown, Mass., and the Nevada desert for the famous Burning Man festival — and stops for public readings from his manuscript — Maupin had a few observations.

“The division between Americans right now is staggering,” he said. “Driving cross-country, we noticed along the Plains these gigantic crosses on the highway. I didn’t have the same feeling I got in Rio de Janeiro seeing the Christ the Redeemer statue, for example. This seemed like an act of aggression, like, ‘We own this country and are taking it back.’ On the positive side, this country has grown up in ways not fully reflective of our politicians these days.”

For Maupin, who once worked for the late Sen. Jesse Helms at Raleigh television station WRAL, his thinking also has evolved as the world has changed.

“I was living in fear when I was a

young, closeted conservative,” he said. “I think a lot of people embrace right-wing thought when they’re afraid of what’s inside them. Coming to terms with my repression made me re-examine all sorts of things I’d been taught by Southern culture in the ’50s — my racism, my misogyny, all of it. Opening up my heart served the additional purpose of making me into a writer. I try not to judge people, even modern Republicans, but that’s hard sometimes, because they’re so all-fired set on judging me.”

Maupin and Turner, along with their Labradoodle, recently moved to Santa Fe, N.M., swapping urban life for 15 acres on the edge of an arroyo outside the famed artsy, New Age town. After 40 years in San Francisco, with icon status in the gay community (and *Tales* sites as tourist attractions), he made headlines with the move and shocked readers and even acquaintances.

“There are few places that I’ve felt instantly connected,” Maupin said. “One was Charleston, which I first requested in the Navy, and I felt that way when I moved to San Francisco 40 years ago, and I felt that way about Santa Fe. I’ve learned to trust my instincts and fantasies. Even though my books are set in a specific place, San Francisco, I consider myself a citizen of the world. But a few friends do feel somewhat betrayed by the move.”

This doesn’t mean Maupin is retiring. “I plan to keep on writing,” he said. “This is definitely not my last book, and I can’t even say for sure if this will be the last of *Tales of the City*. Though I don’t think I will start *Tales of Santa Fe*, it is a place where I will write, and it may very well color my work.”

— Andy Trincia ’88