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TAN ABOUT TOWN 'QUEER EYE GURU PENS NEW MEMOIR

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Tan France.
Photo by Marcus MacDonald

BOOKS

Tan about town: 'Queer Eye' guru pens new memoir

BY TONY PEREGRIN



Tan France.
Photo by Marcus MacDonald

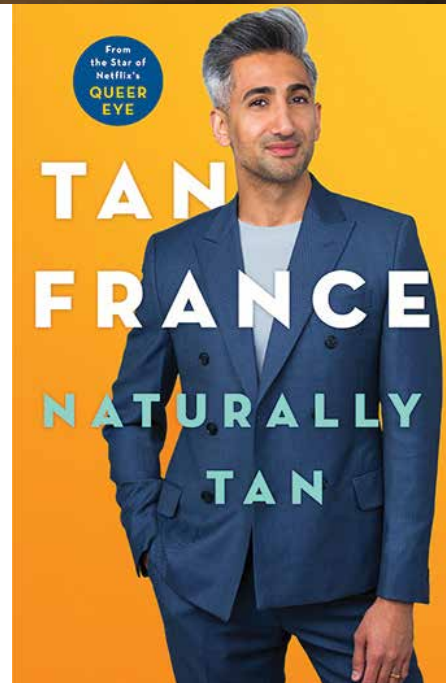
The title of Tan France's new memoir, *Naturally Tan*, refers to the *Queer Eye* star's aim for authenticity—a mindset that once eluded the first openly gay, South Asian man on television. In the new book, France reveals that, as a 10-year-old boy, he would steal skin-bleaching products from a cousin due to the shame he harbored regarding the color of his skin.

"I haven't had the balls to tell her I took it because, since then, I've been ashamed of the fact that I succumbed to the pressure," he writes in his memoir. "I kept the dirty little secret to myself. I'd only use it at night, before bed, when no one else was going to catch me. Let me tell you, that shit hurt."

"It was hard when I first got to *Queer Eye* because it felt like a lot of pressure," France told *Windy City Times*. "I spent many, many a year trying to be as private as possible, to not shock anybody by my mere existence. But now I'm on a show where I'm very openly myself, and very authentically me. You don't get to see the full version of me on *Queer Eye*—it's a 44-minute show and there are five of us plus a hero who we are focusing on—so *Naturally Tan* is my story, told my way."

Windy City Times: What was the driving factor for writing a memoir at this stage in your life and career?

Tan France: Well, I never wanted to do a style book. Somebody suggested that to me early on, and I was, like, "That's never going to happen—I'm not that person." I couldn't care less about that. But I had to learn to accept the fact that that's what a lot of people come to me for. They



just want some very simple, basic fashion knowledge.

So, *Naturally Tan* includes touchstones for people who are seeking fashion advice, but I also wanted people to be able to read this book and realize "Okay, I'm going to learn some things about what it's like to be a person of color." Or maybe if they're already a person of color, what it feels like to feel not so alone.

WCT: In *Naturally Tan*, you write about the

"art of not being a bitch at work." Why do you think managing your inner bitch is so fundamental to success in the workplace?

TF: When I first started my business and I had my first employee, there was no one for her to bitch to other than me. So I made it very clear—you do not bitch in this workplace. If you're not happy about something, tell somebody at home, don't tell me. If there's a problem, tell me and we'll try and correct it, but don't just bitch. And when I hired my subsequent employees, I made it very clear that being a bitch is going to get you nowhere.

Bitching does nothing. Yes, it's great to vent, but that's what your friends are there for, that's what your family's there for—not your colleagues. And thankfully, it created a really positive work environment, and I'm happy to say my employees are still very close friends. Best friends at this point, which is wonderful to see.

WCT: Speaking of close friends, you've said that before *Queer Eye*, you had no gay friends—and now you have four gay besties via the show and you're also one of most highly visible queer, Asian men in the United States.

TF: So, when I was applying for *Queer Eye*, that was just after I had retired, so literally a few days after. And up until that point, I was working around the clock. I have friends, but they were my husband's friends. I didn't have time to make new friends because all I was doing was working. And so, a gay circle of friends was something I never tried to find and find and cultivate.

With *Queer Eye*, it's different. When I went to

an audition and I got an in-built group of boys who are now my, well, they're my family. And so it feels really empowering to have people around me that have similar experiences. The majority of my friends up until this point were heterosexual, and I love them very much, and they are equally my friends as my *Queer Eye* boys. But, my gay friends have experiences that I share, and that feels really important that they understand exactly what I'm referring to when I'm referring to something. And so that's why it's been important to continue to gain gay friends. I didn't realize what I was missing when I didn't have them.

WCT: When you first meet *Queer Eye* participants, you encourage them to ask you anything they want to know. Why turn the tables on them from the get-go?

TF: You know when I first did that on *Queer Eye*, somebody who was on the production team said, "Well, we need the show's focus to be about the heroes, not on you. We need to start asking them questions instead of starting with you." And I said, "Well, you clearly don't understand my style of communication. This person's never met me before. They don't know that they can trust me. I'm not going to ask very intimate details of their lives without them know that they at least have somewhat of a friend in me." It's a way for me to break the ice, and for me to show them that, although I am on a show, although I'm in the public eye, this is a situation where we are completely equal. We are just two humans having a conversation. Ask me whatever you want, and then I'll ask you what I want.

WCT: The Chicago stop on your book tour [which took place June 11] was sold out [with a 200-name waiting list]. What are some of your favorite things about the Windy City?

TF: The river is gorgeous. I think it's on St. Patrick's Day when you dye it green, right? I was there once when it was St. Patrick's Day, but not for the parade. I just so happened to be there and it was green, and I love, I love the celebration at that time of year.

But the city in general, I love it. I love downtown. It feels like a much cleaner, friendlier New York City. I visited for the first time about eight or nine years ago and I've been back three or four times. However, I'm done with The Bean. I enjoyed it for a moment, but it's very touristy. [Laughs] I tried to go a few months ago, and I definitely can't be around The Bean. There were already so many tourists, and then they get very excited.

WCT: Are you able to walk into [Boystown nightspots] Sidetrack or Roscoe's without being recognized?

TF: If I'm wearing a very low cap and if I wear prescriptive glasses—with those two things, and a big scarf to hide the back of my hair, I can usually get away with it.

WCT: I love that you can still get away with going to gay bars incognito. While we're on the topic of gay nightlife, I have two fashion-related queries for you. The first is: What fashion advice do you have for men over 50?

TF: It's not actually about the age. I don't think it matters. If it makes you feel good, if it makes you feel confident, go for it. I had somebody comment a few days ago on my Instagram,

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BOOKS

'In the City' author talks storytelling, Stonewall

BY FRANK PIZZOLI

Taylor Saracen always had a passion for storytelling. Her parents warned her writing was not a lucrative profession so instead she chose teaching, she told Windy City Times with a humorous irony in her voice.

After 11 years of teaching, Saracen turned to writing, publishing three novels in 2018 that includes her new adult Rise Up series.

Her latest book—*In the City by the Lake*—has striking parallels to the period of time that spawned the Stonewall Riots, which mark their 50th anniversary this year. The book is work of historical fiction focused on the emotional journey of a 21-year-old closeted mobster living in Chicago during the LGBT emergence of the late 1920s to early 1930s, a period deemed the “Pansy Craze.” In the mid-1960s, New York City Mayor John Lindsey wanted to clean up the city with the advent of the World’s Fair taking place there. Many consider the Stonewall police raid an extension of this policy.

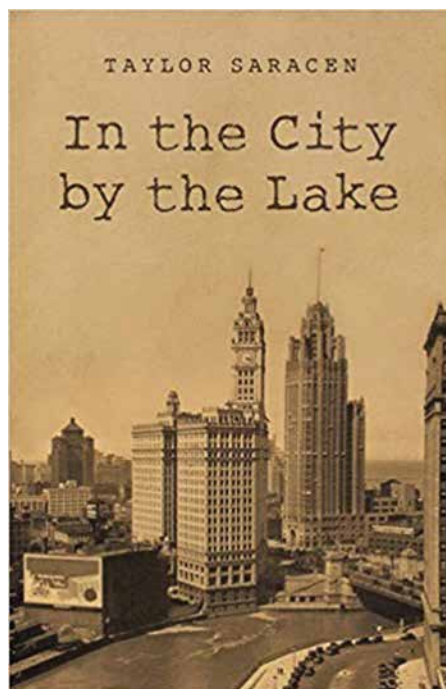
Windy City Times: There are amazing the parallels between the Chicago Pansy Craze in the 1920s, the 1969 Stonewall Riot, and the current political climate for the LGBT community.

Taylor Saracen: I’ll say. Some things change. Some do not. And I wasn’t explicitly thinking about the connections. I wrote the book over a period of time. It’s more that we’re going backwards in our current political environment.

WCT: The doorman at the Stonewall, a mob guy, is a closeted gay man.

TS: And my character Viktor Mikhailov, who follows in his father’s footsteps in the Russian mob, takes on an assignment none of his comrades want. He’s secretly pleased.

WCT: At the time, Chicago is a cesspool of organized crime, with several outfits fighting for a piece of the Prohibition pie—and Viktor’s slice is the openly gay Towertown, also known



as Boystown?

TS: Yes, Viktor’s job is to provide whiskey to the queer clubs he covertly frequents. He gets rich while finding himself in an unconventional relationship with his top client’s muse, an enigmatic redhead named Calvin Connolly.

WCT: And they’re very different men?

TS: They are. Calvin, and his throng of idealists who pack the pansy parlors—believe they stand on the precipice of a revolution. Viktor is not convinced.

WCT: Viktor is conflicted?

TS: He’s a skeptic by both nature and lack of nurture. He questions the conservative culture’s capacity for real change while still hoping broad acceptance is imminent. Maybe then he could accept the parts of himself he hides.



Taylor Saracen.
Photo from Saracen

WCT: And the collision of circumstances, same as today, creates problems for Viktor?

TS: The repeal of Prohibition leads to financial issues for Viktor. Generally, the Depression-era disapproval of 1920s liberal lifestyles ushers in a slew of deeper problems. Sensationalized news stories regarding a rash of sex crimes paint homosexuals as depraved monsters.

WCT: The backlash then, as now under the Trump administration, precipitates laws against the queer community?

TS: The government’s intent is not only to eradicate pansy parlors—but homosexuality entirely. Eventually, Viktor arrives at a decision he feels unprepared to make, he struggles with the rami-

fications.

WCT: How so?

TS: It seems so regarding religion, especially with trans issues and general civil rights.

WCT: Why now? Why a backlash from the momentum gained by marriage and military service rights?

TS: In a down economy, those feeling left out grow scared. They need enemies to blame.

WCT: And the Enemies List seems to be growing...

TS: It’s not just queer folks. There’s also Anti-Semitism. I see it. I never liked it. In some ways, the Fascist writing is on the political wall. Everything’s fine until it isn’t.

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saying, “You’re too old to be wearing that.” And my retort was, “I couldn’t care less. Look how happy I am in that picture.”

And that’s how I feel. If you decide to wear an oversized hoodie and some board shorts, it’s not the look I would suggest, but if it brings you joy, go for it. If it makes you feel like the best person you can be, go for it.

And if you are really struggling to find your style, maybe use this as a jumping off point. If there’s a person in the public eye, whether it be in sports, or an actor, or whatever, that you think, “He dresses well. I like his vibe”—start with that. Google images of that person and try

and find alternatives to what they’re wearing. There’s always a cheaper alternative available to what someone in the public eye is wearing.

WCT: My second fashion-related query: What advice do you have for gay men who relentlessly and continuously post shirtless selfies?

TF: I wouldn’t have style advice. I’d just think, “Gosh, if that’s what you want to post, and you feel confident enough to do so, and that’s your vibe, go ahead. Do that.” If you are posting those pictures, just know that you’re going to have to keep that up, because when you don’t, people are going to call you out for it. And I don’t do that kind of pressure. [Laughs]

For me, it’s different. I’m married. I’ve been married for a long time. I want people to know that, yes, I’m still young and sexual—but there’s

so much more that I want you to know about me.

I’ve been guilty of posting a picture where you can see the upper part of my chest. It’s not very often I’ll show anything lower than that. You’ll read in my book where I felt really embarrassed by my skin for many, many years, and it took me a long time to feel like I wasn’t less than because of my skin color. So, when I’m posting those pictures it’s to show people that I am very proud of my beautiful, brown skin.

WCT: You’re hosting an upcoming new competition series on Netflix called Next in Fashion. How is the hosting gig an exciting new direction for you to explore from a creative standpoint?

TF: I love Queer Eye and it brings me so much joy because I feel like I’m part of a movement.

Next in Fashion fills this need in me for design in fashion. I love to watch new designers create something incredible. I don’t have that luxury anymore. I don’t have a brand anymore, and so being part of that process feels incredible.

Next in Fashion is the first time I got to host-host. As I mention in the book, I am very new to this industry, and this is the first time I got to host in the traditional sense. We are five hosts on Queer Eye, but it’s reality television. Next in Fashion is the first time I get to use a teleprompter, and there’s a live audience, and it’s just... I love the show so much, and my co-host, Alexa Chung is just formidable.

Naturally Tan, published by St. Martin’s Press, is now out in bookstores and on websites.