

# WATERFRONT

A Complete  
Guide to Bars &  
Nightlife in Central Florida

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the mostly fabulous

## ERIC ORNER

Ethan Green has yet to find a husband, but his creator and alter-ego is enjoying the search. By Scott Seomin

"His vice is men. He's not *Garfield* and lasagna doesn't do it for him," cartoonist Eric Orner says of Ethan Green, the somewhat geeky homo protagonist in Orner's comic strip *The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life of Ethan Green*.

"He just loves men and he needs a lot of time to sit around and think about men," added Orner. Appearing in over 70 gay and lesbian newspapers in the U.S., Canada and England, *Ethan Green* the comic strip offers a sometimes satirical, always accurate peak at life in a gay ghetto. And Ethan Green the character — a sympathetic, not-yet jaded, socially awkward twentysomething queer — is the reader's tour guide through life where perfect pees rule supreme and meeting Mr. Right is somehow just out of reach. Make no mistake, this is not *Hi & Lois*.

In 1989, *Ethan Green* leaped from the pencil of Eric Orner and onto the drawing board when the Chicago native and recent Tufts University graduate was the political cartoonist for the ultra-conservative New Hampshire newspaper *The Concord Monitor* and

**"I have a huge affection for these characters."**

starving for gay self-expression.

"I just needed an outlet," the 33 year old explains. "I was beginning this wonderful adventure of life as a gay man and there was a lot to talk about and the way I talk is that I draw. I started drawing Ethan because I felt a need to write his stories.

At the *Monitor*, I was drawing all day but not about things that interest me, which can be boiled down to one word: Boys."

Soon after the handsome Orner began to draw and write about boys, he moved to his current home of Boston and (after ignoring a now ex-boyfriend's negative comments about his comic efforts) sent his strip to several gay newspapers. Boston's *Bay Windows* was the first to run *Ethan Green*, and soon dozens of other papers — including New York's *HX*, San Francisco's *Bay Times*, Chicago's *Windy City Times*, London's *Pink Paper*, Montreal's *Village*, and Toronto's *Extra* — were printing the exploits of the boyfriend-searching Ethan.

"That took some getting used to because I was out at that point, but to be printed in a gay paper...well, now that's out!"



ERIC ORNER's Ethan Green:  
A sympathetic, not-yet  
jaded, socially awkward  
twenty-something queer.

Orner laughs. Although the self-syndicated Orner still ships copies of *Ethan Green* to gay newspapers himself three times a month, he is no longer forced to cold-call editors of new publications.

"I'm in the happy situation at this point where if a paper wants *Ethan*, they usually find me, which is great." Today, Orner has published three *Ethan* books (a fourth is due next year)

and the strip has hit a milestone: *The Long Island Village Voice*, a non-gay weekly newspaper, began running *Ethan's* adventures.

Part of the charm of *Ethan's* life and times is his friends and acquaintances, none of whom (save for the rarely seen family member) are straight. Bucky, a bartending circuit boy with an

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impressive body, is Ethan's best friend ("You need a little sex in any story and basically, Buck has nice biceps and that's why he's there," Orner says). Charlotte, the no-nonsense dyke next door, is Ethan's lesbian equivalent while Lucy, Ethan's tuna-obsessed cat, acts as his Greek chorus. And then there's Todd, whom Orner describes as Ethan's "arch nemesis anti-sister" and a "smarmy, noxious, social-climbing fink." Todd, as Orner explains, is that one guy in every gay man's life who just never goes away. "Ethan and Todd have all the same friends and go to the same parties, but don't like each other very much," says Orner. "Todd will go to a lot of trouble to host a dinner party just so he can *not* invite Ethan."

In the world of *Ethan Green* — where Etienne, a trick of Ethan's, is wanted by the police and Zolna, Ethan's favorite fortune teller, reads sushi in lieu of tea leaves — the reader cannot help but wonder the basis of these cartoon players. Their artist, however, denies that any of his pencil and ink renderings are based on his own real-life friends or acquaintances.

"I have a huge affection for these characters, as limited and as one-dimensional as they are," Orner notes. "I feel they are real in my life, but they aren't modeled on anybody in particular."

There is, however, an exception to the all-fictionalized character rule: The Hat Sisters, a pair of real-life Boston drag queen who act as Ethan's dotting aunts. "I put them in the very first Ethan strip I wrote," Orner says. "I was only running in the Boston paper and these are heroines of Boston; I wanted to ride on their popularity a bit. They've remained in the strip ever since."

The cartoonist admits that the obvious question about his work is also the most-often asked: 'Is Ethan Green really Eric Orner?' He is quick with his reply: "*Ethan Green* is not autobiographical. People often make the mistake when they're looking at some piece of fiction — it doesn't matter if it's a book, or movie or cartoon — they assume the main character is the author. Superficially, that would make a lot of sense; I

mean, we're both short and vaguely culturally Jewish. But I'm not writing the story of my life and putting Ethan's name on it." When pressed, Orner, who resembles the gym-obsessed Bucky more than the somewhat nerdy Ethan, offers the greatest similarity between himself and his creation: "We're pissy," he says with a laugh. "We're both a little cranky."

The success of Orner's two-dimensional leading man was unintentional, which is evident when the cartoonist is asked how *Ethan Green*, both the comic strip and its star player, came to be named.

"It was soooooo random," Orner says, almost apologizing for the lack of a better anecdote. "I live off Green Street and there was this college student around here named Ethan. The strip needed a name, and there was Ethan, walking down Green Street. If I had any idea that it would follow me around for the next ten years, I might have sat down and thought about it for a minute. But the name itself was less important to me than 'The Mostly Unfabulous Social Life' because the word 'fabulous' had become such a cliché in gay circles. It was shorthand for the perfect life in a gay neighborhood."

So why 'Unfabulous?' "Because I think 'fabulous' connotes the lifestyle men strive for in a gay enclave, be it West Hollywood, Hillcrest, or Chelsea. For example, I don't think Ethan will ever think he's fabulous like Bucky. Ethan has the notion of not really measuring up to that standard," explained Orner.



ERIC ORNER, author of *THE ETHAN GREEN CHRONICLES: More Stories from His Still Unfabulous Life*.