

A NEW DESTINATION FOR GAY WRITING

CHELSEA STATION

ISSUE 2

EDITED BY JAMESON CURRIER



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Jameson Currier

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Contents

<i>More Than This</i> by Stephen Mead	4
<i>Letter from Utah</i> by Lee Houck	9
<i>The Weight of Wisdom</i> by Tom Cardamone	19
<i>Watching Glee with My Mother</i> by Scott Wiggerman	25
<i>From Kissing</i> by Michael Graves	26
<i>In Conversation</i> : David Pratt and Michael Graves	33
<i>My Movie</i> by David Pratt	38
<i>Green Gotham</i> by Matthew Hittinger	46
<i>East Tenth Street, 1999</i> by Nicholas Boggs	47
<i>Homomonument, Amsterdam</i> by Jeff Mann	53
<i>In Conversation</i> : Charles Silverstein and Perry Brass	54
<i>iso</i> by Eric Nguyen	60
<i>Like a Cat Mysteriously Moving</i> by Raymond Luczak	62
<i>Youth</i> by Trumbull Rogers	63
<i>A Mere Matter of Marching</i> by Jeffrey Luscombe	65
<i>Coffee in Camelot</i> by Robert Siek	77
<i>Natural Selection</i> by Lewis DeSimone	78
<i>The God-Shaped Hole</i> by Michael T. Luongo	86
<i>The Cake is a Lie</i> by Jonathan Harper	91
<i>The Kiss</i> by Daniel M. Jaffe	98
<i>Gay and Jewish: A Reading List</i> by Wayne Hoffman	100
<i>Talking with Edmund White</i> by Eric Andrews-Katz	102
<i>Sacred Monsters</i> reviewed by Eric Andrews-Katz	105
<i>Quarantine</i> reviewed by Charles Green	106
<i>Two Literary Festivals, One City</i> by Eric Andrews-Katz	107
<i>A Study in Lavender</i> reviewed by Anthony R. Cardno	110
<i>Beatitude</i> reviewed by Anthony R. Cardno	111
<i>A Fast Life</i> reviewed by Richard Johns	112
<i>Brothers in Arms</i> by Jarrett Neal	114
<i>In a Galaxy Far, Far Away</i> by Jon Marans	121
About the Poets	126

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On Writing

David Pratt and Michael Graves

In Conversation

In December 2011 writers David Pratt and Michael Graves sat down to talk about their respective writing careers, short fiction, and books: Graves about his recent short story collection, *Dirty One*, set in Leominster, Massachusetts and revolving around a pack of adolescent characters who live in the acid-drenched, suburban town, and Pratt about his forthcoming *My Movie*, a diverse collection of stories linked by the roles of film, video, and memory in queer lives.

David Pratt: The stories in *Dirty One* cover quite a few years. How did you decide, as Bob Seger would say, “what to leave in, what to leave out?” How did you determine the order?

Michael Graves: It was intuitive. I started writing *Dirty One* when I was twenty. And it was everything I was working on. The order of pieces just kind of revealed itself to me. I did end up shuffling the stories, just a little. I always knew “Comb City” would be first since it introduces the entire collection and the link within: the setting of Leominster, Massachusetts. Also, I always knew that “Seahorse” would be the finale. It’s a personal story, sort of. It’s very close to me. I’m really proud of “Seahorse.” And the wonderful Sean Merriwether nominated it for a Pushcart Prize. Now, I am wondering how your collection came together? Your stories cover even more years...

DP: Oh, thanks for reminding me!

MG: No no, I don’t mean it that way...

DP: Aw, I didn’t think you did...

MG: I mean, how has your gay fiction has evolved since you began publishing in the 1990s? And how did that evolution help create this collection?

DP: I began with several stories about growing up gay. The title story, “My Movie,” captures that time of life, as does “Not Pretty,” inspired by a kid from whom I bought a bus ticket one summer on Cape Cod. It’s based entirely just on the look on his face. I saw for just a few seconds; it was devastating. “The Snow Queen” paints a portrait of my hometown in the 1960s. I am very happy to see it in print. Two other stories with the same characters have been published, but somehow no one ever took the original, though I did create a stage version a few years ago. Then there are stories about one-night stands, which I find so poignant, especially when they go wrong, about personal ads, about addiction and compulsion, and about AIDS. The best, most enduring relationships in the book are in an AIDS story, “The Island.” Both couples are suffering. What they had is disappearing before their eyes. The narrator of “Series” has had many friends die, and, even though he is partnered with a man who is probably negative, he goes looking for sex with young men, i.e., those supposedly unspoiled, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Then there is more recent, speculative fiction: “Calvin Gets Sucked In” and “Ulmus Americana.” The hero of “Calvin” finds himself living inside a gay porn film, with all the attendant pleasures and annoyances. “Ulmus,” which our publisher, Jameson Currier of Chelsea Station Editions, “commissioned” for this volume, is about love between two trees, but their precarious existence suggests the lives of gay couples. Jim was a great help in selecting, ordering, and revising stories. He’s very to-the-point and has great instincts.

MG: Agreed. Jameson does have terrific instincts. His comments and ideas and suggestions are always vital. Tell me, why did you title the collection, *My Movie*? Does film inspire your fiction? What are some of your favorite films?

DP: It is not so much the film industry or the process of filmmaking that has inspired my fiction, though as a



photo by Craig Gidney

Michael Graves at the Outwrite Book Fair in Washington D.C. Summer 2011

kid I was fascinated by film as a physical thing, and by the projecting (and to a lesser extent the shooting) of it. I also loved newspaper movie ads and the world of movie theaters. I was fascinated when I saw new cans of film being delivered to our neighborhood theater. Those aspects of film do not interest me now. Few of my stories contain actual films. In one that does, “Another Country,” the films are made up: amateur movies that the heroine’s son and his best friend made as teens. She finds herself at a festival comprising those movies. Usually, my stories are about the artificial or projected image as metaphor for how an alienated (queer) person uses his/her imagination to create a world that makes sense, even if it is a sad or creepy or dangerous world. I find creepy comforting. Maybe “satisfying” is the word. Many of my stories are subjective and expressionistic, edging into the surreal. Many of the signal moments are psychological events, visions or projections. Because of all this, Jameson Currier chose “My Movie,” the title of the lead story, as the title of the collection. I was introduced to the gay world via peep shows in the Seventies and Eighties.

Peeps were this world I could disappear into. I didn’t have sex; I just watched. That world shows up in some of my stories; you get a glimpse in “The Addict.” As for “real” movies: I love anything by Kubrick or Kurosawa. I have seen Kubrick’s films several times each, especially *2001* and *Barry Lyndon*. My favorite Kurosawa is *Dodes’ka-Den*, in which a damaged young man in a Tokyo slum inhabits a personal movie, imagining he is a trolley car conductor. I love Kieslowski’s *Decalogue* and *Double Life of Veronique*, and a lot of Scorsese; *Goodfellas* and *Raging Bull* are near perfect movies. I am also a John Waters fan, *Female Trouble* and *Pink Flamingos* in particular. I am a fan of Matthew Barney as both filmmaker and visual artist, and I’m starting to get more into Luis Buñuel and Guy Maddin.

MG: Any pop culture guilty pleasures?

DP: Muppet clips on YouTube, especially the Swedish chef. When I was in Montreal, Daniel Allen Cox was kind enough to put me up. So at one a.m., I’m up watching Muppet videos with the author of *Krakow Melt*. How cool is that? Also, my partner and I are huge “Golden Girls” fans. Your question about pop culture reminds me that the Smurfs play a large part in your lead-off story, “Comb City.” How would you characterize the importance of media figures and ads in your stories? How have media and ads affected your generation and its lifestyles?

MG: Television was really my best babysitter as a child. Both of my parents worked. Period. It was reality and there was no choice. Media influenced me terribly. With *Dirty One*, I wanted to use products, shows, pop culture in general to paint the world of adolescence as I see it. From my experience anyhow. I think, in the Eighties, TV was a way to escape. As a grown-up, though, and I do now feel like a grown-up, I take media and pop culture lightly. Yes, I certainly ingest it, but I comprehend its worth. Children see it as absolute truth. And now, our kids have cell phones, Facebook and everything electronic. I guess neither one of us should hate on Facebook, though. It’s been great for getting word out about our books!

DP: Absolutely. Though, I have to say, I think that going out and meeting bookstore managers and audiences in person at readings remains the best way to make a strong, lasting impression and sell books.

MG: I do love venturing out to stores and meeting folks. It's very fun and I'm quite lucky to be able to do so. You embarked on quite a tour with your novel, *Bob the Book*. Where was your most memorable reading?

DP: I did several readings with Felice Picano, who has been promoting his *True Stories* and his new book of gay romances. That has been memorable because he has seen and experienced so much, and so many people turn out to hear him read and to ask about his long career as author, editor, activist, etc. Beyond that it is not any one reading that stands out; it's how, at every bookstore or LGBT literary festival there are these true believers working long hours, often alone or nearly so, to promote books and reading and the social/community function of their stores and festivals, which is still very much there, in spite of the Internet, LGBT centers, and so on. I was also knocked out by the generosity of friends and relatives around the country, some who I had not seen in years, who bought the book, talked it up, hosted me when I came to read, and drove me around, just like no time had passed at all. And of course, I have to mention that you and I are planning to read together.

MG: At Giovanni's Room this spring, yes. I can't wait! Ed Hermance, the owner, is lovely and welcoming. I'm truly honored he considered even having me walk through the front door. Giovanni's Room is literary history. The oldest LGBT bookstore in the country. It's been landmarked, as it should be. I feel a great sense of pride and accomplishment, knowing I will recite my fiction there.

DP: What has the reception been like when you have done readings from *Dirty One*? Are there particular sections you like to read, or that audience members like to hear? Are there questions you get repeatedly?

MG: I read "Comb City." I do want to read "Seahorse." "A Snow Day" is actually the centerpiece of the book. It's about a little kid, Cassidy, who wants to be a pop star. She's highly determined and a very hard worker. "A Snow Day" really conveys what I was trying to accomplish with the collection. I wanted to be loud, to be myself. I wanted to go, "Pop!" All in all, people have been amazingly supportive and kind to me. I've met lots of readers, other writers too! I truly love doing events or readings. The

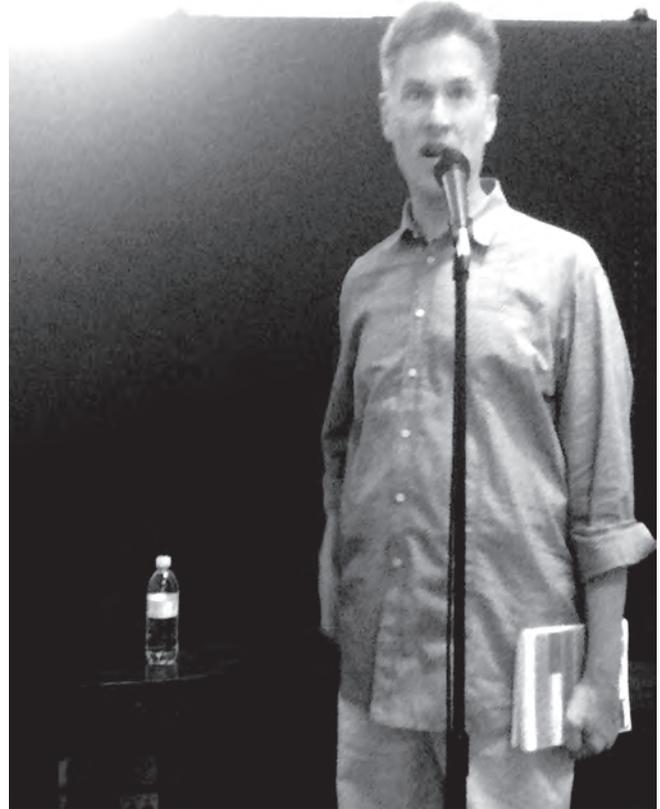


photo by Craig Gidney

David Pratt at the Outwrite Book Fair in Washington D.C. Summer 2011

question I'm asked most is, "What do people from your hometown think of the book?" My answer is still the same: I'm pretty sure people enjoy *Dirty One*. And the collection isn't meant to paint Leominster in a poor way. It actually looks at the city with affection and gratitude.

DP: Any plans to move from there, or are you staying put for now?

MG: It makes sense for us to live here now. My husband works here... I work here. And our families are here. But I could live any place. I love New York. I don't feel anxious in New York. I actually feel calm. And I love that you can eat at a deli any time of day. I love the sidewalks, the mom and pop stores, the chatter on the streets. Whenever I'm in New York, I just smile the entire time. I recently read at Barnes and Noble in New York, thanks to Lou Pizzitola. We were driving into Manhattan and I just started crying. I couldn't believe it! Me reading in New York City. I think of New York City as my big friend

I see not often enough. New York is like my pen pal. Let's see... I love Cape Cod too. Provincetown is amazing. So many artists, beautiful sights, terrific food. And winter... is a ghost town. A prime setting for lots and lots of writing... and hot chocolate. Really, I would go anywhere my husband wanted to go. He's my home anyhow. He's amazing. He's the best part about me.

DP: Do the two of you want children, like the narrator of "Seahorse"?

MG: I grew up my kids on my hip. Being around kids was just easy for me. I think as soon as my husband and I got hitched, everyone expected us to jump on the baby bandwagon. We got that question more times than I can tell you. But it doesn't truly make sense for our lives. But I never say never about anything positive, and children could be a positive thing. Right now, my books are my babies, I suppose. Obstacles? I think having or adopting children is tricky for anyone. It's expensive, it's a great deal of work! So, those who do it typically want to have a family desperately and I admire that.

DP: Were short stories your first writings? Had you tried other genres before? Had you already tried a novel?

MG: I composed a lot of bad poetry as a kid. And I still keep at it. But, yes, stories were my first serious work. Stories were the first written pieces I intended to publish. The shorter format simply speaks to me. It's like creating a pop single or something. Plus, I was schooled via short fiction so I guess the genre just embedded itself into the creative portion of my brain. I wrote a screenplay, too, about two brothers who are in love with one another and just want to make it to Disney World. I also wrote a novel in college about a mystery ham sandwich that must be delivered to Mississippi. It's locked inside a briefcase and the delivery boys are not allowed to look inside. Eventually, they discover an array of jewels jammed inside the cheese. I lost that manuscript... somewhere. It's probably in my childhood room, in a drawer surrounded by sticker books and candy wrappers.

DP: A mystery ham sandwich? You have to find it! I don't think that's been written about before.

MG: Thanks, David. I'm sure, if I look, I would find it,

corrections and all, inside a G.I. Joe Trapper Keeper. I really had a thing for G.I. Joe. Anyhow, I remember there being lots of cigarette smoking in the book. Many scenes take place in diners or delis. It is void of any modern pop culture references.

DP: I'm hooked! Starting digging! But now, just so that we don't make it all about us, what other writers are you reading at the moment?

MG: I'm loving *Zipper Mouth* by Laurie Weeks. She's simply brilliant. I read with her in New York and I find her to be very sweet and very interesting. You must read her! Also, I'm reading lots of short stories. Lorrie Moore. Mark Twain. Lee Smith. I'm teaching an interdisciplinary course at Lesley University and I've created many reading tasks for my students. So, I'm re-reading many pieces that I read... forever ago. And, what's most exciting, I get to read my student's fiction. I feel very privileged. How about you? Who have you been reading?

DP: Lately for me it's been translations. I bought bilingual editions of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*. The translation of *Illuminations* is not very good, and my French is so-so, so after reading both versions I still end up thinking, What is he actually saying? But I think I would be dazed and confused in any case. His stuff is so trippy. I'm enjoying Baudelaire more, in both languages. Many of my characters also fight that engulfing Ennui. That's certainly true of the characters in "One Bedroom." One has a vision of the other's personal Hell, but the guy whose Hell it is can't see or believe it. Now, you've spoken about some novels past. I know you have a novel you are preparing now. What can you tell us about it?

MG: It's called *Parade*. It's about two cousins who burn down a church, move to Jupiter, Florida, and create their own religion/government. The main male character, Reggie, wears heels through almost the entire piece. There is a lot of Christmas imagery, a lot of cocktail talk, a lot of vamping going on. It's a fun novel, but it does have a serious message. It's based on Buddhism, loosely. How about you? What can we expect from you next?

DP: I have a long novel I have been working on for a while. It takes place on a college campus in early 1980. Everyone

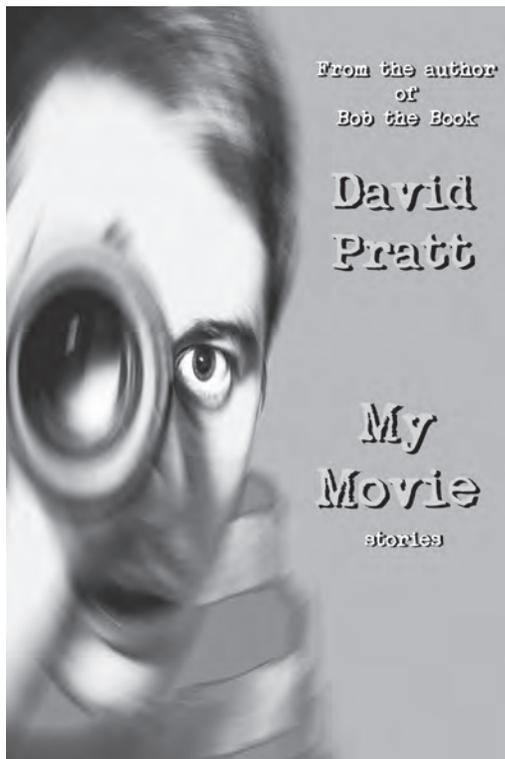
is facing big life decisions, when an older transfer student appears and shakes things up for our closeted hero and his best female friend. He isn't prepared for how much he will be shaken in return. I also have a novel about a New York City family that endures a business failure. Over the years, the youngest daughter finds out how it came into being and why it failed. And I have many more stories. Oh, and if anyone is interested, a play. Or two.

MG: Wow, lots of stuff. I guess that's what comes of writing for so long!

DP: There you go again!

MG: I'm kidding, of course! Well, I do look forward to everyone having a chance to dive into your new collection, *My Movie*. And I do look forward to future readings and collaborations. Any final words, Mr. Pratt, perhaps on the future of gay publishing?

DP: I think lovers of books will always find a way—to create them and have access to them. It's hard to say if ebooks will hit a ceiling and go no further, or if electrons will replace paper. I don't know what genres will prevail. Erotica, romance, and mystery seem indestructible, and at least the first two will always have to have gay-specific subdivisions. But, having just read new crime novels by Mark Zubro and Greg Herren, I would say there is a need for gay-specific detective stories, too. Queer people feel a tremendous affinity for that noir world, but we rarely see ourselves as legitimate, rounded characters in mainstream crime novels, Robert Parker being perhaps an exception. Then there are the writers who think more in symbols and who address existential questions--the so-called "literary" niche. There may be less of a need for it to be gay-specific, but I don't think it's going away, either. Taking myself as an example, I speak gay and I think in gay. I don't think my narratives can come out any other way.



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“This impressive collection confirms David Pratt’s emergence as one of our most talented voices. Carnal and graphic as the best erotica and as elegiac as a finely rendered memoir, these stories vividly capture the palpable sense of isolation that haunts each of our lives. ‘The Addict’ is the best story I read last year—beautifully paced and harrowing. *My Movie* is absolutely essential reading.”

— Tom Mendicino, author of *Probation*

“Pratt is awfully good. He writes about yearning, loss, and love between men with the piercing precision of poetry. Even when grieving, he charms. To my mind two stories, ‘Calvin Gets Sucked In’ and ‘The Island,’ are classics. ‘Calvin’ encapsulates the grief and longing of a besieged generation with wit, generosity, and relentless perception. ‘The Island’ transcends classification and, in its depiction of exile, is not only a gay masterpiece but an American one. I haven’t enjoyed nor been so moved by modern fiction in a very long time.”

—Jennifer Levin, author of *Water Dancer* and *The Sea of Light*

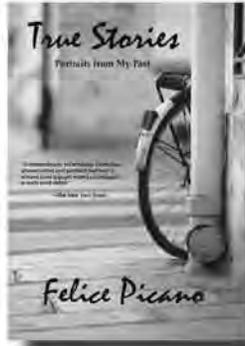
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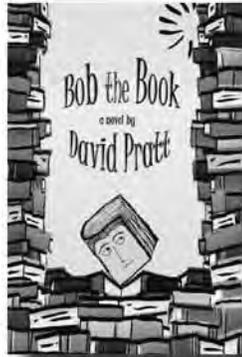
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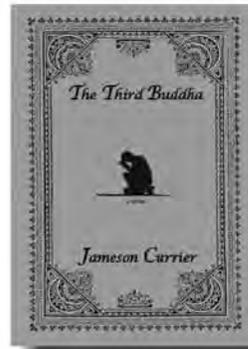
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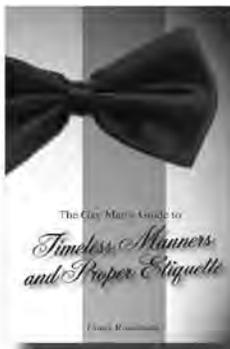
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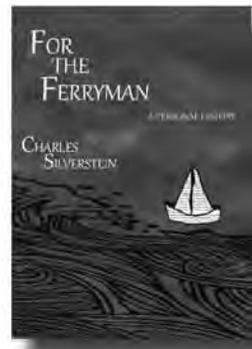
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