

Reading Material

Talking with William Sterling Walker

Vance Philip Hedderel

Desire: Tales of New Orleans, William Sterling Walker's collection of short fiction set in New Orleans, was recently named a Lambda Literary finalist in Debut Fiction. Earlier this year, author Vance Philip Hedderel sat with Walker to discuss his new book and his writing and publishing success.

Vance Philip Hedderel: How did you come to write *Desire: Tales of New Orleans*?

William Sterling Walker: I was always a proficient writer in school. When I was thirteen or fourteen, my mother gave me her old Underwood typewriter. I wrote sappy poetry in my teens and a novella in my sophomore and junior year of high school. But it wasn't until college that I took myself seriously as a writer and started keeping a journal. I was working full-time in a supermarket and going to the University of New Orleans part-time, periodically changing majors. After ten years I finally got my B.A., then moved to New York to do graduate work at Brooklyn College. I've lived there ever since.

In 1981, I read James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Ellen Gilchrist's *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, and knew that I wanted to write short stories. Being from New Orleans, of course they would be about New Orleanians, where eccentricity is highly prized but not sufficiently compensated. (Neither is discipline, for that matter.) My stories and characters are filtered through my impressions, experience, and sensibility. I respect the meaning of words, and strive for clarity in my writing. I believe I have a good ear for dialogue. In one of the stories I quote Alfred Hitchcock, who said that he didn't film slices of life, but slices of cake. I hope I serve up dessert, but even more: a whole meal—at Galatoire's! And I hope that readers will find some of what I've written funny.

Hedderel: Can you tell us how you came up with the title?

Walker: The book was originally called *Odd Fellows Rest*, after a cemetery in Mid-City. That's also the title of one of the stories. My publisher, Jameson Currier, wanted something that would make it immediately clear to readers that the book is about New Orleans, which he considers a selling point. So I used the title of another story in the collection, for its resonance and echoes of Tennessee Williams, and added the subtitle, and we're both happy with it. Jim has been great to work with, and I'm very pleased to be a Chelsea Station Editions author.

Hedderel: What places in the city inspire you and why?

Walker: The whole city inspires me—people and places. I have many memories of my life there and I draw on them for my stories.

Hedderel: You mention Tennessee Williams. Would you care to comment on your influences?

Walker: I've already told you about James Joyce and Ellen Gilchrist. I worship E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *Maurice*. *Howards End* is probably my favorite book. I love how he forms a sentence. *A Confederacy of Dunces* was published during my junior year in high school. It influenced me in the same way that *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* did, and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and *Lancelot*: I knew that I wanted to write about where I lived. I was familiar with the story of how John Kennedy Toole killed himself in despair after failing to get a New York publisher, and how his mother took the manuscript to Percy, who got it published locally, by LSU Press, and it became a bestseller that won the Pulitzer Prize. The story intrigued me. The other book I remember reading that semester was *Crime and Punishment*—it blew me away. But the biggest influence was Edmund White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, although it was only the second gay novel I'd ever read.

Hedderel: The stories in *Desire* are book-ended by tales set in New York. Do you consider yourself a Southern writer?

Walker: Yes, an expatriated Southern writer. Because I still have family and friends in the city and the Gulf Coast, I return quite a bit (though not nearly enough) and when I do, I always have the sensation that I continue to live a parallel life there—even after twenty years in New York. In an ideal world, I would keep a house in the Marigny and reside there in the Spring and Fall.

Hedderel: Are you working on something now?

Walker: A historical novel about John Singer Sargent. It's challenging, not only because it's about an actual famous artist in another century, which involves a lot of research, but because of the length. The short story or novella feels natural to me. I love to write them, and the "space" between a short story and novella—35 to 75 manuscript pages—is comfortable for me. But it probably has less to do with my attention span than with not having the luxury of uncluttered time to think and write while holding down a full-time job to earn a living, a familiar problem for writers.

Hedderel: Are you writing any more stories set in New Orleans?

Walker: I'm finishing a few stories that I decided not to include in *Desire*. That's part of my process. Each time I thought I had finished *Desire*—about three or four times—I realized I wasn't done. There was always room for polishing. And I think it made *Desire* a better book. I eventually plan to collect these stories into another book. It will be called *The Summer for Ex-Lovers* after one of the stories.

Hedderel: What advice would you give to other writers?

Walker: Keep a diary (or journal or notebook—whatever you wish to call it) and write in it religiously. Don't be afraid to let a piece sit in a drawer for a month or two without looking at it. And read Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*.



William Sterling Walker
Photo by Lenora Gim

Hedderel: What are you reading now?

Walker: I always read a few books at a time. Right now I'm juggling Henry James's *Roderick Hudson*, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and Christopher Bram's wonderful biographical history, *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*. I just finished the latest installment of Robert Caro's biography of LBJ, which took forever—it's very dense reading—but was worth the effort. I recently discovered Roberto Bolaño, the late Argentine writer. I love his short stories. And between all of that, I continue the research for my novel.

Vance Philip Hedderel, a New Orleans native now living in the Washington, DC area, is a poet and performance artist whose work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Chelsea*, *Poetry East*, *Cape Rock* and the *Eugene O'Neill Review*. His performance pieces include *A Seminar on Hate and Desire*, *Should Women Hang?* and *This Is London (Not New York)*.

LAMBDA LITERARY FINALIST

"William Sterling Walker is a wonderful writer, fluent, warm, intelligent, and real. His stories about gay life in New Orleans are firmly rooted in place, and all his characters, gay and straight, are observed with a wise heart and a deep soul."

—Christopher Bram, author of *Gods and Monsters* and *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*

"*Desire* is a sensuous, nostalgic, and evocative collection of stories set in sultry New Orleans before that dreamy dream got washed away."

—Valerie Martin, winner of the Orange Prize for *Property*

"These are stories that ask to be lived in—gorgeous, moody, sophisticated—not unlike the vividly conjured New Orleans that William Sterling Walker's haunted characters inhabit, flee from, inevitably return to. Walker is a brilliant guide through the labyrinth of this city and these seething lives, fluent in the mutually reinforcing tropes of desire and regret."

—Paul Russell, author of *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*

"This beautiful collection is not so much a set of stories as an intricate song cycle, one that arranges and rearranges recurrent fragments of memory and sensation—light, fragrance, and music—like the tesserae of a mosaic, the shifting patterns converging into a haunting panorama of the life of our ecstatic, fated generation of gay men."

—Mark Merlis, author of *American Studies* and *An Arrow's Flight*

"*Desire* is dreamy and affecting, stories of a New Orleans that was gone before Katrina ever got there. It's been a while since I've read a collection so well written, so intricately composed, with such beautiful and evocative descriptions of a time and a place."

—Caroline Fraser, author of *God's Perfect Child* and *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution*

"William Sterling Walker's *Desire* feels to me like a welcome heir to Ethan Mordden's classic *Buddies*—picking up perhaps where he left off and setting us down amid the lives, loves, and sexual adventures of a community of gay men in New Orleans. These linked stories are alternately poignant and seductive, and the structure is elegant and deceptively casual—they build in force until you feel like they belong to you, or you to them."

—Alexander Chee, author of *Edinburgh*

"Full of vivid characters, *Desire* serves up a delicious slice of gay life in pre-Katrina New Orleans with plenty of nostalgia and heart, with stories as steamy and sassy as the city itself."

—Jameson Fitzpatrick, *Next*

"A wonderful book. Walker's characters are very real and he writes of them from his heart and he imbues his stories with sophistication that is truly a New Orleans characteristic."

—Amos Lassen, *Reviews by Amos Lassen*

"This compilation of short stories stands to prove that gay men are not always the exuberant, fun-loving queens portrayed on TV. Each story looks at how New Orleans has played into the characters' identities, how the city has shaped them, how it has

sucked them in."

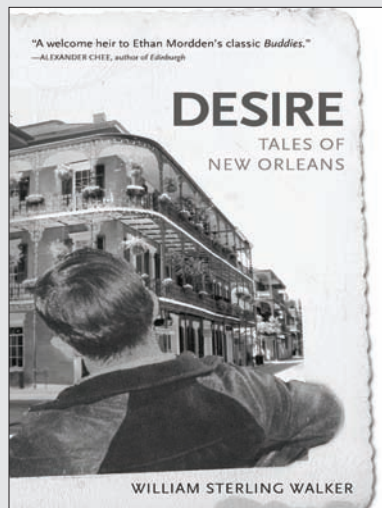
—Katie Abate, *Edge*

"*Desire* is a guilty pleasure of a read, conversational and conspiratorial. It's almost as if these people are welcoming you into their private chats, dishing out the latest neighborhood gossip about who picked up whom, whose ex is now someone else's current."

—Sandy Leonard, *Lambda Literary*

"Equal doses of wit, longing, poignancy, hope, seduction and loss, all woven together by this talented author. I give it a full five stars out of five."

—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*



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by William Sterling Walker

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