

Trebor Healey, author of *Through It Came Bright Colors*

Interviewed by Mike McGinty

Mike McGinty: You begin the book with a beautiful quote described as an Ojibwa Song: “Sometimes I go about pitying myself when all the time I am carried on great wings across the sky.” Who are the Ojibwa and how did you come across the quote?

Trebor Healey: The Ojibwa are a Native American tribe from the Minnesota and North Dakota area. I’ve been into Native American literature, spirituality, practices, etc. for awhile and I ran across the quote in a few places.

Mike McGinty: Why did you choose it to open your novel?

Trebor Healey: I thought it captured exactly how we often don’t trust the process of life and so we don’t really see what’s happening. My novel is about people in difficult situations who do trust, and people in difficult situations who don’t, as well as about people who learn to trust. Basically, the quote is a liberating kind of poem/idea and it reminds you to just chill and deal with what’s in front of you and trust it!

Mike McGinty: There’s another Native American reference in the early part of the novel, when something Paul says makes Neill think of Chief Joseph and his famous quote. Who was Chief Joseph?



Trebor Healey: Chief Joseph was the leader of the Nez Perce tribe in the Pacific Northwest. The Nez Perce were basically forced off their land and hounded by the U.S. Cavalry. Chief Joseph surrendered eventually, after a long game of cat and mouse through Idaho and nearly to Canada.

Mike McGinty: So what did Chief Joseph say that makes Neill think of him?

Trebor Healey: He made one of those great inspired speeches, which included the oft-quoted line I was referring to: "I will fight no more forever." Neill's relationship with his older brother Paul is problematic – they've been fighting for years, and it all suddenly seems pointless when their little brother, Peter, is diagnosed with cancer. Neill's process is very much about a series of surrenders to what is, versus what he wants his life to be or thinks it should be.

Mike McGinty: Your prose is obviously influenced by the fact that you're a poet. Was this something you consciously strove for, or did it come naturally?

Trebor Healey: It's just how I write. Fortunately, I've always been a narrative poet, more interested in lyricism and imagery that moves toward other imagery so that connections are being made that carry the story forward.

Mike McGinty: Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh* has this same poetic sensibility, and tackles a similarly tough subject of its own: the sexual abuse of children. Do you think such highly emotional topics - fraught with passion, loss and grief - lend themselves more easily to this kind of treatment?

Trebor Healey: I think poetry emerges out of trauma. Poetry is raw – the raw truth. This is the necessity of poetry. They don't have fiction workshops in housing projects and prisons, but they do have poetry workshops. It's how the heart speaks when it's really raw. For me, it's the best tool I have in writing fiction. It's like my hammer.

Mike McGinty: You mentioned how you like to make connections that carry the story forward. In the book, Neill finds a lot of similarities between his relationship with Vince and Peter's struggle with cancer. He even says that "the two situations were the same" on some level. Does Neill view his homosexuality as a cancer?



Trebor Healey: No, but I understand what you mean. There is a parallel here, at least in Neill's mind. Again, it's the traumatic dilemma of both situations. Neill feels hopeless, full of dread, "diagnosed" in a sense with being queer. At the outset of the story it's a curse for him, and then he finds Vince, who liberates him from that view as well as confirms it. Part of what the story is about is learning to see things for what they are versus the inaccurate metaphors we attach to things. But it's also about making use of



metaphor as a door to understanding. Metaphor is inexact, often a kind of broad sword, but metaphor is a process too and it can evolve along with a character. Good metaphors do.

Mike McGinty: Neill certainly evolves over the course of the book. He starts out as a suburban, middle-class guy who is innocent in many ways. He even describes himself as "a blank sheet of paper in need of a story." Enter Vince, a thief, a junkie, a bitter, angry survivor of child abuse and cancer. Did you struggle with making their relationship believable?

Trebor Healey: Not at all. Opposites attract. Neill is like most gay kids from the suburbs – his spirit has been slowly dying for years. Neill wants to learn to live for real and he comes from a world that doesn't trust life; that keeps it in check. Enter Vince with everything that's missing. He's the antidote to the suburbs.

Mike McGinty: The novel contains many references to religion and spirituality. One of the obvious ones is that you name Neill's brothers Peter and Paul. Why did you choose those names?

Trebor Healey: Well, it's my poetic connection to my Irish Catholic upbringing. I'm not a Christian now, but I love the story. It's a great story, full of great imagery. Saints Peter and Paul are really the fathers of the church, and they are very different archetypally. Peter is very human, full of doubt, stumbling even. Paul, on the other hand, is rigid,



evangelical, never doubts himself, a corruption of the original message—which is love, right? See the parallel in the brothers?

Mike McGinty: Vince introduces Neill to works like the Tibetan Book of the Dead and Jung's writings, and actually brings him on a visit to a Buddhist lama. What significance do these have?

Trebor Healey: Vince and Neill have been lied to by the world, like most gay people: the proscribed reality of the suburbs, Christianity, heterosexual hegemony, etc. They are two young men who are both very driven on a heart level, and they want to know what's going on. They want to find a way to live honestly in the world. The occult is always a good place to start, and it's probably the starting place of choice in San Francisco, if not most places nowadays where there are alternative communities. Wisdom exists for the most part outside of the mainstream.

Mike McGinty: There is a feeling of profound gratitude which comes through in the book's title and goes a lot deeper than "looking on the bright side of things." Neill was able to see the gifts in all the pain of what he went through. What does it take, in your opinion, for a person to be able to turn that corner and get to that place, instead of wallowing in misery?

Trebor Healey: Necessity, plain and simple. When you have no choice and cannot afford to wallow, you turn the corner. We are all stronger than we know. And all of us have incredible courage in reserve that we only discover when things go badly wrong. And so many things we perceive as 'bad' or 'tragic' in our lives often end up the things that make us real human beings. Support from others is essential I think too. Gratitude comes from love, and love comes from community.

Mike McGinty: A book like this could easily devolve into a tedious chronicle of doomed young love with a treacly disease-of-the-week TV movie feel to it. But none of it comes across that way. How did you avoid that booby trap?

Trebor Healey: Black humor. When my brother was ill, we used to watch those movies – Brian's Song and Something for Joey, all those – to take the edge off. Humor is a lot more powerful than sentimentality, I can tell you. But it's worth pointing out that there is something there in those films as well. Life is sometimes treacly. Hanging out with your



mother in a hospital while your brother moans in pain? It's like a cheap shot. We were brutally honest and we'd joke about how cliché things sometimes felt. I guess this is what TV culture does to one. In writing about it, I just tried to stay honest with myself and respectful of the feelings and the real situation. You've got to try to lift it up, over and over, when you write about this kind of thing. You can't let it fall into that comfortable, treacly Lazy Boy chair.

Mike McGinty: You avoid that nicely by including not one, but three coming-out scenes. But in each one, Neill expects a much worse reaction than he gets. In fact, he admits that "I'd underestimated them all." Do you think this is typical of gay people who come out?

Trebor Healey: No, I don't. I've heard horror stories, as have we all. Neill is a lucky boy. He's also a very cautious guy, so he tends to prepare for the worst. He's wounded and he's learned not to trust the world. I think gay people are wise not to expect much, and to be very wary – look at our political and religious culture. But I do think we often underestimate straight folks—or, I should say, the culture at large. The majority, which unfortunately is a silent majority for the most part, do not despise us. If we don't underestimate them, maybe they won't underestimate us.

Mike McGinty: The book deals with sibling rivalry, surviving cancer, first love, and a young person's struggle to find his identity. These are universal themes, but by presenting them in the context of homosexuality and coming out, do you think that makes your novel a "gay novel" or you a "gay writer?"

Trebor Healey: Oh that. Let me quote Jesus, whom I'm not in the habit of quoting: "It is you who say it." I'm kidding in a way. I don't really care. It's the reality of publishing and the reading public and this identity politics-focused culture. I'm happy to be called gay, homo, fag, queer. I'll thank you for calling me that. The gay community saved my life and has responded to my writing and supported me and I wouldn't be here without all of those great folks. I love queers, and am proud in any way I am associated with them. Sure, I want everyone to read my book and I hope they do, and I hope people don't limit themselves to their sexual orientation when choosing books to read. I certainly don't, nor do most readers I know.

Mike McGinty: So what are you choosing to read these days?



Trebor Healey: I've been reading a lot of short stories: Mary Gaitskill, Barry Lopez and Sherman Alexie really stand out. I'm reading a lot of contemporary writers too: David McConnell's *Firebrat*, Marshall Moore's *The Concrete Sky*, and Juliet Sarkessian's *Trio Sonata*.

Mike McGinty: What about books and authors that have influenced your work?

Trebor Healey: When I was in high school and college, I was super into Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald – I had to read everything they wrote. I did my senior thesis on Melville and read all his books, too. Then I discovered Jack Kerouac and Genet, Camus, Celine, Gide, Pablo Neruda, Rilke and Rumi. Later I got into Lawrence Durrell, Jeanette Winterson, Chekhov's short stories and Louise Erdrich and Lois Ann Yamanaka. The most important book of the last 10 years for me is Tom Spanbauer's *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon*. I was awestruck at this man's voice. It's with me forever.

Mike McGinty: And now your own book can be with others forever. What's next for you?

Trebor Healey: Well, I'm off to tour this book in October and November. I'm giving up my job and apartment, so who knows? I'm working on a new book – a road novel about a sort of drug-addled Huck Finn who finds his Jim in a Native American medicine man while he's riding his bike cross-country with his lover's ashes tied to the handlebars. I moved to LA to write *Through It Came Bright Colors*. LA has been good to me. Now I need a new city for a new book.

