



Doty, Mark (b. 1953)

by Christopher Matthew Hennessy

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Mark Doty. Photograph by Mark Lacey.

Author of several volumes of poetry and two major memoirs, Mark Doty, winner of the National Book Award for poetry, is one of the most celebrated American poets to emerge from the 1980s and 1990s. Doty helped bring the AIDS narrative and the experiences of gay men to a wider audience through emotionally resonant stories, a richly stylized poetic voice, and poems characterized by brilliant language and a polished surface. His work universalizes themes of loss, mortality, and renewal.

Most notable in this respect are the highly praised volumes of poetry *My Alexandria* (1993) and *Atlantis* (1995) and the prose memoir *Heaven's Coast* (1996), which deal poignantly and frankly with the failing health and ultimate death of Doty's partner Wally Roberts. *My Alexandria* was chosen by Philip Levine for the National Poetry Series, won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was a National Book Award finalist. The volume also won Britain's T. S. Eliot Prize, making Doty the first American to earn that honor.

In 2008, Doty was awarded the National Book Award for poetry for *Fire to Fire: New and Collected Poems*.

Beginnings

Born in Maryville, Tennessee, on August 10, 1953, Doty is the son of an army engineer. His father's job necessitated the family's frequent relocation, to places in Tennessee, Florida, southern California, and Arizona. In his memoir *Firebird* (1999), Doty recounts growing up as a "smart bookish sissy with glasses and a Southern accent." The book, which spans Doty's childhood and adolescence, describes a troubled family life and explores the poet's early recognition of his homosexuality. It emphasizes how the idea of beauty affected Doty's growth as an artist.

In 1971, at age eighteen, Doty, apprehensive about his homosexual urges, hurriedly married fellow poet Ruth Dawson. The two poets co-wrote three chapbooks, work to which Doty no longer feels an allegiance. At this time, Doty was attending Drake University in Iowa, after which he earned an MFA in creative writing at Goddard College in Vermont. In 1980, feeling that he must live life as an openly gay man, Doty ended his marriage and moved to New York City, where he soon met Roberts, the man who would become his partner of 12 years.

Doty published what he considers his first book, *Turtle, Swan* in 1987. The debut volume was praised by Marianne Boruch in *American Poetry Review* as a "stunning arrival" and lauded by *Booklist* for universalizing gay experience and showing "an example of how we live, how we suffer and transcend suffering." A much discussed poem from this first book is the stirring "Charlie Howard's Descent," which meditates on the true-life tragedy of a young man from Bangor, Maine, who was thrown off a bridge by homophobic teenagers in 1984. Doty's indictment of homophobia is eloquent and forceful.

Doty's second book, *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight* (1991) was also warmly received. Its poems are both formally accomplished and emotionally accessible. An exemplary poem from this book is "The Death of Antinous," which features the Emperor Hadrian holding the "chiseled liquid waist" of the statue of his lost

love. The poem ends: "Longing, of course, / becomes its own object, the way / that desire can make anything into a god."

The Best of Times, Worst of Times

In 1989, Doty and his partner were tested for the HIV virus. Doty tested negative; Roberts tested positive. After a steady decline of five years, Roberts succumbed to AIDS-related complications in 1994. His diagnosis and failing health are the subject of Doty's emotionally searing third book *My Alexandria*, a volume widely considered the poet's best collection of poetry. It was responsible for his breakthrough into the literary spotlight.

In *My Alexandria* Doty explores mortality and the impending loss of his partner. In doing so, he, somewhat paradoxically, creates poems rich in linguistic beauty and stunning in their insight. The poems' expressions of grief are by turns quiet, intimate, angry, and demanding, but always graceful and lucid. For example, in "The Wings," Doty writes:

Don't let anybody tell you
death's the price exacted
for the ability to love;
couldn't we live forever
without running out of occasions?

"The Wings" is a long poem in several sections that makes absence a presence as it moves from an auction where the treasures of the dead are sold, to a heart-wrenching scene where the speaker tenderly describes the ghosts that make up an AIDS quilt. Near the end, the poem takes on a prayerful tone and the speaker calls for "the encompassing wings of the one called / unharmed" to enfold his dying lover.

The dark poem "Fog" recounts the aftermath of an HIV test as the speaker and his lover speak to the dead via a ouija board (a nod to James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*).

Critic Deborah Landau contends that the poems in *My Alexandria*, though not polemical, "transform homophobic narratives about the disease, offer comfort to those living with HIV, and encourage empathy from those whose lives have not yet been affected by the virus."

In his fourth book, *Atlantis*, Doty, using the backdrop of Cape Cod, explores mutability and transformation. The book's centerpiece (and title poem) is a long, open-hearted tour de force that contains lines like "I thought your illness a kind of solvent / dissolving the future a little at a time."

In this volume, Doty develops an "aesthetic of ruin" in the face of his partner's dying. For example, in "Two Ruined Boats," he sees art as a "mode of travel, / but not a means of repair," lamenting that "my art / could only articulate the sheen, / or chronicle the fashion in which / the world gains luster as it falls apart." As is fitting for the expression of a psyche battered by the loss of a loved one, *Atlantis* contains scenes of storms and their aftermath.

Atlantis also includes the poem "Homo Will Not Inherit," which forcefully responds to a bigot's picketing placard by unabashedly moving through the shames and joys of gay desire (including a visit to a bathhouse) to culminate in a transcendent acceptance of eros: "I have my kingdom." This book is also notable in that it marks Doty's first volume published by a large commercial house.

The loss of Roberts is also recounted in the memoir *Heaven's Coast*, which movingly and honestly depicts a loving gay relationship and the grief resulting from a partner's death. Widely acclaimed as one of the best

AIDS memoirs, the book won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction.

Sweet Machine (1998), Doty's fifth book, is a transitional work in that it shows its speaker attempting to move on with life after great sorrow. It is more urban and gritty than Doty's previous works.

Some poems in *Sweet Machine* concern the rediscovery of desire and the appetites of the body. (The book's epigraph is Hart Crane's line "Thou canst read nothing except through appetite.") "Lilacs in NYC," for example, is a frenetic lyric that explores the various levels of meaning behind "you enter me" in the context of sex and desire. "Sweet Machine," on the other hand, examines desire's consuming powers by contrasting a beautiful billboard model with a seemingly drugged-out boy who can't stop scratching at his skin.

The book also confronts the power of art as a force that is both creative and destructive. *Sweet Machine* employs a hyper-musical language that is more intensely wrought than that of the previous books.

Source (2001) moves Doty's poetry into a more socially engaged realm. *New York Times* reviewer Ruth Padel argues that the poems of *Source*, "about painting, cityscapes and people . . . [are] searching out the American self." Doty's surfaces "are intensely, and self-reflectingly, American," she adds. In Doty's descriptions of scenes from Vermont to New York City to Key West to Cape Cod, the poet engages every level of the physical world (tattooed skin, a drag queen, flowers, horses, the earth itself) but, not unlike in Whitman's grandiose poems of America, he often imbues them with a kind of luminosity.

Source is rife with images of flesh and body. "Flesh" is seen, in "At the Gym," as that which "goads with desire, / and terrifies with frailty." The volume also contains poems of deep ontological searching, explored in the title poem and in "Manhattan: Luminism," in which he wonders:

. . . there is something stubborn in us
--does it matter how small it is?--
which does not diminish.
What is it? An ear, a wave?
Not our histories or who we love
or certainly our faces, which dissolve
even as we're living. Not a bud
or a cinder, not a seed
or a spark: something else:
obdurate, specific, insoluble.
Something in us does not erode.

Even in wondering about that which "does not erode" (the soul?), Doty uses imagery of the body.

Source also contains two poems--"Letter to Walt Whitman" and "Elizabeth Bishop, Croton, watercolor"--that pay homage to two poets who have greatly influenced him.

Influences and Honors

Indeed, throughout his books, Doty explores deeply felt allegiances to several important predecessors. His most important influences are modern Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, and American poets Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill, all of whom were also gay.

Doty learned from Bishop how to use the telling details of observation to show the mind at work, as well as how to offer insight into the inner life through engaging the physical world. *My Alexandria* speaks directly to Cavafy (for example, in the poem "Days of 1981" which explicitly echoes the Greek poet's own "Days

of..." poems) and mirrors Cavafy's own concern with memory and his elegantly but simply-stated style. The linguistic influence of Crane and Merrill is more obviously seen in the poems of *Atlantis* and is modified in *Sweet Machine* by language that is increasingly more complex, intense, and musical.

Doty has also written *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001), a slim nonfiction hybrid book that combines art history and personal memoir. It begins with an intense look at the eponymous still life painted by seventeenth-century Dutch painter Jan Davidsz de Heem. Doty is also the editor of a collection of essays, *Open House: Writers Redefine Home* (2003).

In *Dog Years* (2007), Doty recounts his relationship with Beau, a beloved golden retriever. A poignant memoir that witnesses to the complex relationship between human beings and animals, the book is a loving rumination on his bond with a dog who taught him a great deal about love and loss.

In addition to numerous awards such as the Witter Bynner Poetry Prize of the American Academy of Arts & Letters, Doty has also received fellowships from the Guggenheim, Ingram Merrill, Rockefeller, and Whiting foundations, and from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 2008, Doty's *Fire to Fire: New and Collected Poems*, a volume that collects poems from the poet's seven previously published volumes as well as new ones, won the National Book Award for poetry.

A blurb on the website of the National Book Foundation, which governs the National Book Awards, describes Doty's poems as "Elegant, plain-spoken, and unflinching . . . With their praise for the world and their fierce accusation, their defiance and applause, they combine grief and glory in a music of crazy excelsis. In this generous retrospective volume a gifted young poet has become a master."

Conclusion

Doty writes poems of sumptuous detail and imagery while at the same time embracing emotionally raw subjects such as mortality and loss. His poems also explore art, beauty, and beauty's surface, as well as the flaw, the wound, and the limit.

Doty's talent lies in crafting poems with a finely polished verbal "sheen" (a favorite word of his). But his poetry's shimmering linguistic surface has been criticized by some readers. In an essay in the *New Yorker*, Helen Vendler argues that Doty's elegiac style "smooths out pangs, smooths out anger in its wish to be, above all, graceful." Doty has responded to this criticism in "Concerning Some Recent Criticism of His Work" (*Sweet Machine*) in which he writes, "Every sequin's / an act of praise."

Doty is among the most prominent gay poets of his generation, and he has earned distinction as an AIDS memoirist. He has also managed to transcend the category "gay poet" and to find a wide audience and commercial success. As Robert Martin suggests, if Doty's work endures, it will be in part "because he has understood the need both to record the suffering of AIDS and the desire for human gestures to transcend all loss and to write in a form at once delicate and powerful."

Doty and his partner, novelist Paul Lisicky, live alternately in Houston, where he teaches at the University of Houston, in New York City, and in Provincetown.

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About the Author

Christopher Matthew Hennessy is the author of *Outside the Lines: Talking with Contemporary Gay Poets*, in which he interviews some of the most prominent poets writing today, including Frank Bidart, J.D. McClatchy, Alfred Corn, Carl Phillips, Mark Doty and Henri Cole. He has published interviews, reviews, author profiles, and poetry in national and international journals. Hennessy is associate editor of *The Gay and Lesbian Review-Worldwide*.