



Gale, Patrick (b. 1962)

by David Leon Higdon

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Patrick Gale. Photograph by Aidan Hicks. Image courtesy Patrick Gale.

Although gay and lesbian characters figure prominently in all but one of his twelve novels, Patrick Gale does not write the traditional coming-out or escape from oppressive environment narratives. Rather, he draws on his own varied background and experience to explore gay men and lesbians in complex, often dysfunctional, family units set within the three worlds he finds most meaningful--London, Winchester, and Cornwall, the worlds he experienced most personally.

Gale was born on January 31, 1962 on the Isle of Wight. Before reaching adulthood, he was minded by a murderer in Wormwood Scrubs Prison where his father was administrator, had discovered music at Pilgrim's School in Winchester, attended Winchester College School where his writing ability was recognized and encouraged, and studied English at New College, Oxford. He had hoped to become an actor, but this ambition was not to be realized except in the ways in which he immerses himself in the characters he creates.

Between 1979 and 1985, he worked as a waiter, a cook, a temporary typist, a singer with the London Philharmonic Choir, a house sitter in France, a musician, a ghostwriter of encyclopedia entries, and a bone-sorter for an archaeological team. He describes writing as both "an addiction and a livelihood."

He now lives in and sets most of his works in Cornwall, an area he has loved since he performed in a music festival there when he was ten.

The famous sentence that opens Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*--"All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"--could easily stand as the epigraph to Gale's novels, because he is fascinated with the dynamics, dysfunctions, and fluid emotions within the contemporary family unit. Relationships outside the family involving friends, lovers, teachers, and acquaintances are equally fraught with difficulties and dangers. Absent fathers, missing mothers, hostile siblings, and abandoned children, cut off from loving nurture, protective parents, and supportive brothers and sisters, populate his novels.

Totally unknown to his family, the father in Gale's debut novel, *The Aerodynamics of Pork* (1986), is a serial murderer of London astrologers who finally hangs himself in his jail cell. In *Facing the Tank* (1988), an established art historian becomes pregnant by a Cardinal who abandons her, and an elderly mother discovers that she enjoys playing dead so she can frighten her son. *The Cat Sanctuary* (1990) provides the reader two sisters who have been abused throughout childhood by their father, the one through physical beatings, the other through sexual molestation.

A mother in *A Sweet Obscurity* (2003) leaves a letter utterly renouncing her daughters, and another while drunk fellates her nine-year-old son. Sophie in *Friendly Fire* (2005), abandoned as a baby, never discovers anything about her biological parents, and Eli/Edward in *The Facts of Life* (1995) loses his parents in the Holocaust. *Notes from an Exhibition* (2007), Gale's most recent novel, probes deeply into the destructive effects a mother's manic depression has on husband, children, and her creative work.

From these examples, two conclusions may be reached: the novels offer a surfeit of oppressions, shocks, and disappointments, especially through unexpected deaths and suicides, but protagonists find ways to escape into normal lives, freed from guilt, vocational angst, emotional paralysis, and existential dread. They find creative surges, genuine love, and affirmation of self. The couples in *Facing the Tank*, for instance, flee their town in wonderfully comic marriages.

Gale's early novels were welcomed as genuinely talented comic works that skillfully mixed gay and straight characters in a world replete with eccentric characters, comic revelations, and well-earned laughter. *Ease* (1986), for example, follows Domina Tey, a successful playwright, through her mid-life crisis. Blocked as a writer, she leaves her posh home, rents a room in a run-down Bayswater boarding house, and waits for inspiration to emerge from what she can glean from the other boarders' lives. Her episodic encounters with the mortician, tart, Orthodox monk, gay Frenchman, a very territorial dachshund, and others give her a burst of creativity.

Though he seems more comfortable with tighter, dramatic developments, Gale exploits the episodic structure with increasing deftness in *Facing the Tank*, *Little Bits of Baby* (1989), and *Friendly Fire*.

Gale knows more about multiple plotting than most Elizabethan dramatists and builds most of his novels by creatively contrasting London and Cornwall, past and present, parallel affairs, two people in love with the same person, or sometimes by simply alternating chapters between characters.

In *The Aerodynamics of Pork*, he parallels the lives of Seth Peake (whose death is mentioned in a later novel) and Maude Faith by contrasting gender, age, talent, and quest for a satisfactory same-sex relationship. (Gale wrote this novel on the back of order pads while he was working as a waiter.)

In *Kansas in August*, a brother and sister are in love with and having affairs with the same man, laying bare the psychological complexities of sex and love and the tensions between heterosexual and homosexual loves. Gale uses the same device in *The Cat Sanctuary*, *Rough Music* (2000), *Little Bits of Baby*, *A Sweet Obscurity*, and *Friendly Fire*.

With multiple plots, a provocative title, a framing epigraph from a relevant author, and a gay or lesbian character, Gale creates a novel with a reader-friendly narrator, a realistic focus, and a complex analysis of human relationships.

Between *The Cat Sanctuary* and *The Facts of Life* something changed in Gale's novels: they acquired amplitude in length and depth, which allowed a fuller, deeper exploration of characters, situations, settings and themes; also they became darker in their thematic implications, and some characters become more intentionally destructive.

The early novels had their share of darkness--the serial murders in *The Aerodynamics of Pork*, the pilot deliberately crashing his small plane in *Ease*, the violent mugging in *Kansas in August*, the several deaths and feral destructiveness in *Facing the Tank*; however, they offer hope in establishing promising relationships, escaping a dysfunctional family, and, at the very end of *Little Bits of Baby*, a triumphant same-sex nationally televised kiss.

There is even laughter in *Facing the Tank* when Fergus Gibson's mother has to be buried in a specially altered coffin because the morticians could not release her hold on the pipes she ripped from a bathroom wall or when the groom's parents meet the very wealthy, very black Jamaican parents of their son's fiancée.

Rough Music, *Tree Surgery for Beginners* (1998), *The Facts of Life*, *Sweet Obscurity*, *Friendly Fire*, and

Notes from an Exhibition solidify and develop Gale's commitment to the "great tradition" of English realism. They foreground family sagas, become more concerned with the ways past impinges on present, maintain Gale's transparent style, develop powerful narrative presence, and probe more deeply the acts of charity and aggression within relationships.

The comic scenes lessen, the violent scenes acquire symbolic force, and triumphs are won at greater expense than in the early novels. The protagonists become more embedded in creative activities--a novelist, a photographer, a professional countertenor, a composer, a painter.

The Facts of Life powerfully details a young man's descent into the nightmare of AIDS infections, leading to a death that connects him to his grandparents' generation. We see his collapse through the eyes of his disapproving grandfather, a famous composer also known for his affair with a famous film star, his mother, his devoted sister, and the man loved by him and his sister.

In *Friendly Fire*, Sophie, an orphan, witnesses the destruction of a schoolmaster brought down by the rivalries of her two close friends. *Friendly Fire* is a very traditionally realized novel; however in *The Facts of Life* and *Notes from an Exhibition*, Gale plays with his narratives by rearranging the chronology, to show the reader just how powerful an impact the past has on the present.

Throughout the twelve novels and the short stories in *Dangerous Pleasures* (which form an excellent introduction to Gale's style, characters, and issues), Gale addresses the themes frankly and directly, delineates his characters, especially his gay men and lesbians, honestly and fully, and never veers from his narrative drive, which keeps a reader wanting to read further.

Gale is still a relatively young man, and an amazingly prolific one, so his audience should watch closely for his next ten or so novels.

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About the Author

David Leon Higdon is the Paul Whitfield Horn Professor of English at Texas Tech University. He has published widely on Conrad and other figures associated with Modernism.