



McGehee, Peter (1955 -1991)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Peter McGehee (left) kissing his partner Douglas Wilson. Courtesy of Fiji Robinson.

Although he originally set out to be a playwright, and achieved regional success as an actor, lyricist, and musical performer, Peter McGehee will be best remembered for his deft negotiation of the AIDS pandemic through the genre of screwball comedy in a pair of whimsical novels that record the adventures of Zero MacNoo and his "tribe of characters," *Boys Like Us* (1991) and *Sweetheart* (1992).

Biography

Born on October 6, 1955, the middle of three children, McGehee grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, a city that occupies a central place in his fiction. He played trombone in his high school band and worked as a photographer for the school newspaper and yearbook, and sustained in later life his early interests in music and photography.

In 1976, shortly before graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, McGehee moved to San Francisco, where he wrote and acted in street theater and small revues, including *The Quinlan Sisters*, an *a capella* musical revue that featured social, political, and sexual satire and that took its name from Karen Ann Quinlan, a comatose young woman whose right-to-die was much discussed by the media of the day.

While living in San Francisco, McGehee met Doug Wilson (1950-1992), a Canadian gay rights activist who was visiting for the annual Gay Pride celebration. Wilson had been born in Saskatchewan, would serve as executive director of the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights (1978-83), and in 1983 would move to Toronto to work as an adviser to the Race Relations and Equal Opportunity Office of the Toronto Board of Education. According to the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives, Wilson became the first openly gay candidate to be nominated by a major political party to stand for Parliament, representing the New Democratic Party in the Toronto riding of Rosedale.

McGehee described Wilson as "the love of my life," and in 1980 followed him to Saskatoon. Unable to stand the sharp Canadian plains winter, McGehee moved with Wilson to Toronto in 1982. Although each man pursued other relationships and often maintained separate apartments, they were deeply committed to each other. McGehee married first one and then another female friend in order to remain in Canada with Wilson.

McGehee's deportation by Canadian authorities and his subsequent attempt to break into the New York literary world while living in lower Manhattan from 1984 to 1986 are the subjects of painfully funny letters written to friends in Toronto during this period.

After returning to Toronto, McGehee co-wrote the songs for, and performed with Fiji Robinson in, a new musical revue, *The Fabulous Sirs*, which Wilson produced and marketed as a cassette. McGehee also developed a one-man show about a young gay man's poignant but hilariously-told rejection of his Arkansas family's conventional values, which he revised as *Beyond Happiness*, the novella that Wilson edited for his

Stubblejumper Press in 1985.

Beyond Happiness proved the prelude to McGehee's most popular success, *Boys Like Us*, which appeared in 1991 under the influential Stonewall Inn line of gay and lesbian books that Michael Denny edited for St. Martin's Press.

McGehee's struggle to complete his second novel, *Sweetheart*, while suffering from AIDS-related toxoplasmosis, is recorded in *Labor of Love* (1993), Wilson's "completion" of McGehee's projected trilogy. McGehee died on September 13, 1991, however, before *Sweetheart* could appear, and just days before his collection of short stories, *The I. Q. Zoo*, was released. Wilson, who was ill from AIDS as well, passed away a year later, shortly after completing *Labor of Love*.

Gay Screwball Comedy

A "sweet sort of melancholy" infuses McGehee's two novels. "I lose people," Zero comments quietly at the opening of *Boys Like Us*. "Friends, family, lovers. Sometimes they come back; sometimes not." Zero is not the only person to live in the shadow of loss. His Uncle Markus is haunted by the memory of his first lover, who committed suicide at age nineteen when their affair was exposed and the boy was summarily expelled from college. Throughout the novels sick men must fight an indifferent bureaucracy for access to life-saving drugs and care.

"Where oh where do we get the strength?", a fellow caregiver asks Zero, who has traveled to Los Angeles to see his cousin and first lover, Trebreh (aka gay porn star "Billy Rocket"), before the latter dies. At one memorial service, a pensive David asks Zero, "Do you ever wonder how many times you'll serve as an executor before someone's doing the same for you?"--a question that is answered by Wilson's *Labor of Love*.

What keeps the "melancholy" that infuses McGehee's novels from tipping into melodrama is the comic sweetness of the screwball world that McGehee creates. No matter how egregiously self-involved and tacky the tastes of Zero's blood family in Arkansas, the relatives are endowed by McGehee with warm, vital, larger-than-life personalities whose eccentricities inspire bemusement rather than derision. In Toronto, where Zero has emigrated, his circle of friends includes Snookums, a West Indian-born recovering alcoholic who works as a magazine editor and disguises his premature baldness with a variety of ill-fitting toupees and Carmen Miranda-style turbans; Searcy Goldberg, a middle-aged, plus-sized drag queen who has made Bette Midler's "The Rose" his signature song; and Miss Jesus Las Vegas, an oversexed young Latino drag queen descended from a family of tent preachers, who "performs a stunning version of 'I'm Just a Little Girl from Little Rock,' starting out as Carol Channing and ending up as Marilyn Monroe."

However outrageous their individual personalities, the friends who make up what Zero calls his "entire cast of characters" function as a well-oiled machine when managing the various crises that confront them.

Because McGehee's world pulsates with such comic vitality, an early death proves as much a performance to be stage-managed as a tragedy. Zero's best friend, Randy, may die of AIDS, but not before a last resurgence of strength allows him to complete a film that he has longed to make and to embark on a final, deeply satisfying love affair. (Randy also has the foresight to mandate in his will that, should his homophobic father insist on trying to save face in the community by erecting a stone to Randy in the family cemetery plot, it must bear the inscription "If there were options in the air, my legs were right up there with 'em.") The memorial service that Zero organizes for Randy involves friends coming to the dead man's apartment and each choosing an item from his wardrobe to wear while participating in a dance that erupts spontaneously and that Zero names "Raising the Dead."

Similarly, Trebreh dies surrounded by friends and former lovers after quaffing a last glass of champagne and injecting himself with a lethal serum supplied by a sympathetic doctor: a gay version of the biblical Last Supper.

Thus, although AIDS may exercise its power over the bodies of Zero and his friends, it cannot, finally, break their spirit. McGehee's imaginative daring is to replace the traditional female screwball protagonist with an HIV-positive gay male, Zero MacNoo's very name alerting the reader that he represents a world in which personal whimsy is valued far more highly than social decorum. The last scene of *Sweetheart*--a novel that records a heartbreaking series of illnesses and deaths--sees a sero-positive Zero and Jeff, who have been planning a garden for their apartment terrace, dance together romantically, "so warm and so alive," at least for the moment.

In short, McGehee's world is driven by an acceptance of difference so generous that it reduces potentially destructive greed and jealousy in antagonists to foibles of no permanent consequence, and by a humor that so delights in the outrageous that AIDS is, finally, just the latest, even if the most powerful, obstacle that one must negotiate in order to savor the melancholic sweetness of life. In McGehee's screwball world, AIDS, however devastating, proves finally to be the occasion for men to learn how deeply they are loved and are able to love.

Wilson's Double Talk

In his preface to *Labor of Love*, Doug Wilson records discovering among McGehee's papers after the latter's death brief notes for a third novel that would have concluded the adventures of Zero and his friends, making a trilogy of *Boys Like Us* and *Sweetheart*. As McGehee's first, and many felt, best reader, Wilson was intimately familiar with his characters and intentions. However, because Wilson does not explain which of the plot situations in *Labor of Love* were invented by him and which by McGehee, his involvement with McGehee's characters suggests a variation upon Wayne Koestenbaum's paradigm of the erotics of male literary collaboration. Koestenbaum's theory of literary "double talk" attempts to account for the ways in which "men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse" in which one member of the team invariably "keenly feels lack or disenfranchisement, and seeks out a partner to attain power and completion."

A recurring image in *Boys Like Us* and *Sweetheart* is the prince who rides to the rescue of the damsel in distress. Significantly, McGehee dedicates his second novel "For my prince, Doug Wilson," acknowledging the importance of Wilson in his life. In his two novels, however, Zero's romantic relationship with David (Wilson's alter-ego in the novels) is clearly in the past. *Sweetheart* concludes with Zero comfortably reconciled with David as a close friend, but passionately sharing his life and bed with Jeff.

As Wilson's *Labor of Love* opens, however, Jeff is mentioned only as having suddenly died, leaving Zero--who is dying of toxoplasmosis, an AIDS-related condition in which lesions form on the brain, resulting in a loss of balance, eyesight, and memory--to be cared for by David, who is himself seriously ill. In Wilson's "completion" of the story of Zero and David's relationship, every character in the book--including Zero himself, before he dies--testifies to David's being the only man whom Zero ever really loved.

Wilson, in effect, takes back from McGehee the printed portrait of their relationship, retelling their story from David's/Wilson's point of view. Unfortunately, Wilson lacked his late partner's skill as a novelist. David's self-righteous, at times deeply self-pitying, tone tarnishes the brightness of McGehee's comic world, reducing to flat, mechanical exchanges the witty banter that characterizes *Boys Like Us* and *Sweetheart*, and rendering wooden and one-dimensional McGehee's vibrant, whimsical characters. *Labor of Love* fails precisely because Wilson lacks McGehee's screwball sensibility.

If David's "labor of love" is to care for Zero in his last days and then distribute Zero's ashes as his lover would have wanted, Wilson's was to attempt to complete McGehee's projected trilogy. Wilson's novel remains valuable as a fictionalized portrait of McGehee's last days, and as evidence of the peculiar opportunity for creative collaboration that came with the AIDS epidemic as gay men cared not only for the bodies of their friends and lovers, but struggled to preserve their body of creative work as well.

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Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.