



Peck, Dale (b. 1967)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Novelist and literary critic Dale Peck is the author of a controversial collection of fiction reviews and four novels, including *Martin and John*, one of the most highly acclaimed works of AIDS literature.

Peck's first two novels were published before he turned 30, and his prodigious talents have been praised for their "emotional wisdom" and "somber lyricism." The influential *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani has described Peck as "a fiercely gifted modernist" and "one of the most eloquent voices of his generation."

Dale Peck was born on July 13, 1967 on Long Island, New York, but had a peripatetic childhood, moving with his family from Long Island to upstate New York to Colorado, before finally settling in Kansas. His mother died "under mysterious circumstances," as Peck has recalled, when he was three years old, and his father subsequently remarried three times.

Offered a scholarship, Peck attended Drew University in New Jersey, where he wrote his first novel (unpublished) as his senior honors thesis. After graduating from Drew, Peck attended the writing program at Columbia University, where he studied with the noted writers Susan Minot and Joyce Johnson.

Peck's first published novel, *Martin and John* (1993), was sent out to 25 publishers before finally being accepted by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. The novel is an ambitious, intricately structured series of stories about a young gay writer named John and his lover Martin who dies of AIDS.

The story of John's life is told in brief, italicized vignettes that chart his violent Midwestern childhood, his eventual escape to New York City, his work as a hustler and sometime porn actor, his love of Martin, Martin's death from AIDS, and John's own probable infection.

Interleaved with these italicized vignettes are longer narratives that comment on John's life or invert it in some way. Either real or made up--as John explains in one narrative, "Sometimes I don't know what I remember, what's real and what's been transformed with time"--these stories began as tales John told himself as a child to drown out the sounds of his parents' fighting. Although the settings, ages, social classes, and even sexual orientations of the characters change from narrative to narrative, the ongoing themes remain the same--love, longing, violence, death, and bewilderment.

Critically lauded upon its release and commercially successful, *Martin and John* was hailed as one of the first "cross-over" AIDS novels, although Peck himself dismisses this notion as a "myth." As Peck explained in an interview given some three years after the release of the novel, "*Martin and John* received enormously positive reviews in the mainstream press, yet as far as I can tell my readership was 90 percent white gay men, and 10 percent heterosexuals. For the most part, heterosexuals don't buy or read books that are deemed 'gay.'"

Peck's interest in deconstructing traditional narrative structures continued in his next novel, *The Law of Enclosures* (1996), an experimental hybrid that alternates fiction and biography.

The book is organized in three sections; the first and third sections chronicle the courtship and eventual unhappy marriage of a fictitious couple, Beatrice and Henry--whose names echo the parents of John from Peck's first novel. These sections enclose the middle segment, an angry and intensely written memoir of Peck's own mother's death and his adolescence spent with an alcoholic, and often abusive, father and a succession of stepmothers.

Although the character John is absent from the novel, *The Law of Enclosures* is, if not explicitly a sequel, then certainly an extension and amplification of the story begun in *Martin and John*.

The novel was adapted into a film in 2000 by the Canadian director John Greyson, with a screenplay the director co-wrote with Peck.

A slight departure from his first two works, Peck's third novel, *Now It's Time to Say Goodbye* (1998), is a sprawling, gothic thriller set within a small, racially polarized Kansas town, and told in a heightened, almost biblical, prose style.

Recounted by 17 alternating, and mostly first-person, narrators, the story concerns Colin Nieman, a novelist, and his ex-hustler boyfriend, Justin Time, who, reeling from the toll AIDS has taken on their friends and troubled by their own disintegrating relationship, flee New York to the supposed bucolic life of rural Kansas. One month after their arrival, a white teenage girl is raped and kidnapped, and Colin is wrongly implicated in the crime.

Steeped in allegory and symbolism, the novel's overriding concern is marginalization, whether as a result of race, gender, social class, or sexual orientation.

Peck's next book, *What We Lost* (2003), termed a work of "creative nonfiction" by its publishers, again blurs the boundaries between biography and fiction. With a startling lack of sentimentality, Peck recounts a year and a half of his father's childhood; living in poverty in rural Long Island, sharing a one-room home with his seven brothers and sisters and an abusive mother, Dale Peck, Sr., at the age of 13, is in effect kidnapped by his alcoholic father and abandoned on his uncle's farm in upstate New York.

The boy flourishes on the farm, with its daily chores and routines, and discovers for the first time familial love and respect. But when his mother unexpectedly demands his return to Long Island, the boy is forced to choose between his brutal family and the loving relationship he has established with his uncle and aunt, a decision that determines his future and the legacy he will eventually pass on to his own son.

In an interview Peck stated that he believed this was a "defining time" in his father's life. "It wasn't so much when he became who he was," Peck explained, but rather "when he felt a lot of choices got closed off. There were a lot of people my father might have been in that year, and it was the last time in his life that would ever be the case."

In addition to his novels, Peck has written a number of short stories. His "The Law of Diminishing Returns" appeared in *Granta* (Spring 1999), and several of his shorter fictions have been published in *Conjunctions*, including "Thirteen Ecstasies of the Soul" (Spring 1998), "Fever Dreams: A Geography of the Mind" (Spring 2000), and "Fruit Salad" (Spring 2001). The stories "Making Book" and "Bliss" were published in *Zoetrope* (Spring 1999); "Bliss" won an O. Henry Award and was reprinted in *Prize Stories 2001: The O. Henry Awards* (2001).

Peck's article "Making History" appeared in *Over the Rainbow: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America Since Stonewall* (1995), edited by David Deitcher; and he wrote the "Foreword" to *Queer 13: Lesbian and Gay Writers Recall Seventh Grade* (1998), edited by Clifford Chase.

Peck is also an occasional literary critic, and his reviews have appeared in such publications as *Artforum*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *Out*, and *The Village Voice*.

In 2002, Peck created what he has referred to as a "ruckus in the publishing world," due to an annihilating review he wrote in the July 1 issue of *The New Republic* of a book by the novelist Rick Moody. In the now notorious opening line of that review Peck wrote, "Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation." Because of this and other equally eviscerating reviews, Peck has become the self-described "most hated man in literature."

Peck republished the Moody review, along with 11 others, in *Hatchet Jobs: Cutting Through Contemporary Literature* (2004). The collection features mostly negative, though often well-argued, essay-reviews on a range of novelists both established--such as Philip Roth, Thomas Pynchon, and Julian Barnes--and relative newcomers, such as David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen. Two omnibus essays are also included, one on novels about African-American women, and the other, on "gay-niche" fiction, titled "Stop Thinking: The (D)evolution of Gay Literature," of which Peck is mostly disparaging.

"If as a novelist, exposing homophobia is your mission," Peck remarks in the essay on Ethan Mordden's *How Long Has This Been Going On?* (1995), "then it seems worthwhile to point out that there's only so much one can learn about homophobia by looking at gay people; eventually you have to examine the homophobes, and that means looking at straight people."

Peck currently teaches creative writing at the New School University in New York and lives in Manhattan.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.