



Cameron, Peter (b. 1959)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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The gay American writer Peter Cameron, author of three short story collections and four novels, is renowned for his astute explorations of the shifting, impulsive emotions of unconventional characters, and, above all, for his elegant, intoxicating dialogue. Critically revered as one of the best dialogue writers working today, his characters speak with both subtlety and profundity. As Richard Eder, in the *New York Times*, noted, Cameron's "largest achievement" is his character's conversations. "Ferocity, sadness, humor and a groping toward discovery propel them. They are . . . textured, nuanced and many-levelled."

Although same-sex desire and homosexual characters appear in most of his stories and each of his novels, Cameron's works do not fit neatly into the category of "gay" fiction (epitomized perhaps by Andrew Holleran's classic *Dancer from the Dance*); they are, instead, more assimilative or integrative in nature, populated by characters both gay and straight, as well as those whose sexual identities blur all classifications and labels.

Born in Pompton Plains, New Jersey in 1959, Peter Cameron grew up there and--for two years--in London, England. He graduated from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York in 1982 with a B.A. in English Literature.

Upon graduating, he moved to New York City and worked for a year at St. Martin's Press before concentrating on administrative work for nonprofit organizations, including the Trust for Public Land, a land-conservation organization, and, from 1990 to 1998, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, an organization that protects and extends the civil rights of gay men, lesbians, and people with HIV/AIDS.

He has taught creative writing at Oberlin College, Columbia University's Graduate School of the Arts, and, since 1988, in Sarah Lawrence College's M.F.A. program.

Cameron first gained notice as a short story writer. He sold his first story, "Memorial Day," to *The New Yorker* (May 30, 1983) and published ten more stories in that magazine over the next few years. Cameron's stories have also appeared in *Grand Street*, *The Paris Review*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The Yale Review*.

In 1986, Cameron published his first book, *One Way or Another*, a collection of stories, which received a special citation by the PEN/Hemingway Award, honoring outstanding first books of fiction. Two stories from this collection were selected for the *O. Henry Awards Prize Stories* (1986): "Homework" and "Excerpts from Swan Lake." His story "Jump or Dive," was also selected for inclusion in *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (1994).

His second story collection, *Far-Flung*, appeared in 1991. *The Half You Don't Know: Selected Stories* (1997) contains material from Cameron's previously published short fiction collections along with two previously uncollected stories.

In 1988, Cameron was hired to write a serial novel for the just-launched (though now-defunct) weekly magazine *7 Days*. This serial, which was written and published a chapter a week, subsequently became

Leap Year (1990), an exuberant comic novel set in New York City at the end of the 1980s.

The elaborate plot of *Leap Year* revolves around Loren and David Parish, a young, recently divorced couple and their precocious five-year-old daughter, Kate. Amiably divorced, Loren and David maintain a lingering, and often disruptive, sexual attraction to one another. They have also, however, recently both fallen in love with other men: Loren with a television executive and David with an aspiring photographer. As Cameron's third-person narrator nonchalantly explains, "No one had known David was bisexual until he had recently announced he had a boyfriend named Heath."

Although a series of distractions and near-disasters--including a bungled kidnapping, an attempted murder, and several medical emergencies--threaten David and Heath's new relationship, the plot is resolved promisingly, though far from predictably, in this ambitious first novel.

In contrast to the high-pitched conflicts and crosscutting of *Leap Year*, Cameron's second novel, *The Weekend* (1994), is a quiet, lyrical comedy of manners.

A novel about the anxieties of letting go of the past and embracing the uncertainties of the future, *The Weekend* concerns a midsummer reunion of old friends. Lyle, an art critic, visits the upstate New York home of his best friends John and Marian, an affluent married couple who have recently given birth to their first child, to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the death of Tony (John's half-brother and Lyle's lover) from AIDS.

At the last minute, Lyle decides to bring his much younger, prospective boyfriend Robert, a painter/waiter, for the weekend. Robert's appearance at the gathering is an awkward surprise for both John and Marian, which in turn strains the tentative beginnings of Lyle's relationship with Robert. Cameron fluently modulates the tensions inherent in the situation: between the past and the present; between the younger and older generations; between insiders and intruders.

A feature film based on the novel, written and directed by Brian Skeet, was released in 1999.

Although gay and bisexual characters appear in Cameron's next two novels, *Andorra* (1997) and *The City of Your Final Destination* (2002), they are subordinate, though indispensable, to the central stories, which focus on the intrigues of heterosexual men.

Cameron has spoken of the crisis of conscience he faces as a gay man writing about a diversity of characters and experiences: "[W]ith *Andorra*, I started thinking: 'Maybe he should be gay, the main character.' I kept thinking: 'I'm a gay man.' I kept going back and thinking about it: 'Maybe he is gay, or should be gay. Or there should be more homosexuals in the book.' Then I just thought: 'No. It's like having children. I don't think you should try to dictate the sexuality of your children, and I don't think you should try and dictate the sexuality of your characters.' He wasn't gay. There was nothing I could do about it."

Andorra concerns Alexander Fox, who, after the sudden deaths of his wife and young child, flees the United States and forges a new life abroad, hoping to leave his memories and his past behind. Fox settles in Andorra, a country he had once read about in a novel (referring to Rose Macaulay's *Crewe Train* [1926]), although as one of Cameron's characters explains, Macaulay never visited Andorra and her portrait of the country is "very inaccurate."

Cameron's portrait of Andorra is also, purposely, inaccurate; a land-locked country high in the Pyrenees in reality, Andorra is artfully re-imagined as a sun-dappled seaport with lush beaches in the novel. Cameron has stated that he prefers to use his imagination to make up the world of his novels rather than conduct research to get the facts right. He has admitted to being comfortable making mistakes, and feels that if he gets the *emotional* life of a book right readers will allow him to get the *physical* world of the book wrong.

While in Andorra, Fox becomes enmeshed in the schemes and conspiracies of several locals and drifts into simultaneous affairs with two women, one of whom is married and whose sexually-ambivalent husband is also attracted to him. These events become strangely reminiscent of Fox's recent past, and the novel skillfully twists into a contemplation of the persistence of memory and the power of imagination.

The City of Your Final Destination, Cameron's most accomplished novel to date, is set mainly in another cleverly re-imagined country--Uruguay--and, again, concerns a character compelled to embark on a life-altering journey.

Omar Razaghi (born in Iran, reared in Canada, and now a doctoral student at the University of Kansas) receives a grant from his university to write the authorized biography of the Latin American author Jules Gund, who had published one novel, to critical acclaim, and then, as one character acerbically states, "spent twenty miserable years trying to do it again, and failing over and over," before finally killing himself.

Initially denied authorization from Gund's literary executors (comprised of Gund's widow Caroline, his mistress Arden, and his brother Adam) to write the biography, Omar makes an unannounced visit to Uruguay hoping to change their minds. Caroline is mostly indifferent to the endeavor, while Arden does not believe in biographies, especially those of artists and writers; she believes "their work should speak for itself." In opposition to the two women, Adam, although he thinks biographers are "clever, vindictive, ruthless people," is in favor of the biography, believing it will likely help to revive his brother's fading reputation and, thereby, increase sales of his novel.

Adam Gund is one of Cameron's supreme inventions. Opinionated, caustic, and droll, expressing himself in the epigrammatic manner of a Wildean aesthete, Adam is an elderly gay man living out his final years in Uruguay with his much younger Thai boyfriend, Pete. Adam laments that a biography of his brother's life, complete with wives and mistresses, sounds hopelessly nineteenth century, while his life, as a homosexual with an ex-prostitute lover he has legally adopted as his son, is more postmodern, and, therefore, infinitely more remarkable.

The City of Your Final Destination begins as a study of the difference between a biography and a life and deepens into a meditation on the random nature of love and the ways in which people confront or avoid life's choices.

Cameron counts among his strongest influences the domestic novels of British women writers such as Rose Macaulay, Barbara Pym, Penelope Mortimer, and Elizabeth Taylor. He admires these writers for their elegant command of language, astute understanding of human nature, and perceptive view of the world, qualities that he strives for in his own work.

Cameron lives in Greenwich Village, New York.

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www.peter-cameron.com.

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.