



Bernard Cooper.

Cooper, Bernard (b. 1951)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Bernard Cooper, author of the award-winning *Maps to Anywhere*, blurs the boundaries between autobiography, essay, poetry, and fiction in his elegantly crafted works. His primary subjects include growing up gay and middle class in the 1950s and 1960s, familial relationships, sexuality, memory, and AIDS.

Cooper was born in Hollywood, California in 1951, the youngest of four sons to second-generation Jewish parents. He attended the California Institute of the Arts, where he received a Master of Fine Arts in 1979. After graduating, he abandoned the visual arts in favor of writing, initially supporting himself as a shoe salesman. He has taught at the UCLA Writer's Program and at Antioch University, Los Angeles.

Cooper's first book, *Maps to Anywhere* (1990), cannot easily be categorized. Published as a collection of memoirs and first-person essays, the book nevertheless won the 1991 PEN/Hemingway Award for Fiction. Cooper himself had always considered the pieces that make up the book as nonfiction; however, when he began to send his writings to various literary journals they began to publish them as short stories, fables, or even prose poems.

The book weaves together a collection of short, concise philosophical meditations on art, architecture, and religion, as well as more fanciful contemplations on such mundane subjects as baked potatoes and the origins of the barber pole. Longer, evocatively detailed pieces explore Cooper's memories of his childhood in Los Angeles, of his adulterous attorney father, his mother and her love of kitsch, and his oldest brother who was dying of leukemia and for whom Cooper had a complicated, though repressed, sexual attraction.

Cooper's first novel, *A Year of Rhymes* (1993), is also largely autobiographical. In an interview Cooper explained his decision to move from his usual mode of memoir and into the realm of fiction. "Memory was the starting point, the springboard for every chapter; and then I allowed myself to embellish on the memory, or to follow the memory in directions that were not necessarily factually accurate. So it really seemed to want to take the shape of a novel."

Set in suburban Los Angeles in 1962, the novel concerns the 11-year-old Burt Zerkin as he moves from childhood innocence to the beginnings of adult understanding. Through a series of sexual attractions and fantasies featuring, among others, his best friend, his adult brother who is slowly dying of leukemia, and the local fire marshal who has given a speech at his school, Burt begins to comprehend, and accept, his dawning homosexuality.

That novel was followed by a further collection of memoirs, *Truth Serum* (1996). The title piece, which originally appeared in the *New Yorker*, about his experiences with a psychiatrist who administered an experimental mixture of sodium pentothal and Ritalin intended to reduce the "frequency and intensity" of Cooper's sexual fantasies involving men and which instead empowered him to accept his homosexuality, won Cooper an O. Henry Award.

In other memoirs in the book, Cooper again explores his coming-of-age in Los Angeles, complete with

shopping trips for back-to-school fashions, adolescent crushes, and failed attempts at heterosexuality. He also investigates the more recent past, delving into his inability to come out to his father, and the devastation of AIDS and his reaction to the matter-of-fact bravery of his lover who tests positive.

Cooper's most recent work, *Guess Again* (2000), is a collection of eleven short stories, most previously published in such literary periodicals as *Ploughshares*, the *Paris Review*, and the *North American Review*. These precisely crafted stories, equally humorous and poignant, are concerned with love, loss, betrayal, tolerance, and acceptance.

Cooper's essays and memoirs have been anthologized in Thomas R. Cole's *The Oxford Book of Aging* (1994); Brian Bouldrey's *The Best American Gay Fiction 1996* (1996); Robert Drake and Terry Wolverton's *His: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers* (1996); and James McConkey's *The Oxford Book of Memory* (1996). His work has also appeared in the *Georgia Review*, *Grand Street*, *Harper's*, the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, the *Mid-American Review*, *Nerve*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *North American Review*, the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Shenandoah*, and the *Threepenny Review*, among others.

Cooper resides in Los Angeles, California and is currently the art critic for *Los Angeles* magazine.

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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.