



Cooper, Dennis (b. 1953)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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One of the most controversial writers working today, Dennis Cooper is best known for his series of strikingly original, critically acclaimed, albeit transgressive and contentious, novels exploring the nature of sexual obsession, alienation, brutality, and death. His works obsessively feature callow but beautiful adolescent boys, predatory older gay men, punk rock music, drug abuse, explicit sex, and graphic violence.

As the critic Catherine Texier has noted, "This is high-risk literature. It takes enormous courage for a writer to explore, as Mr. Cooper does, the extreme boundaries of human behavior and amorality, right to the abyss where desire and lust topple into death."

"It also takes courage," Texier continued, "not to mention a strong stomach, for the reader to follow the author in his very graphic and unforgiving journey into hell."

Cooper has been praised for his polished, lapidary style, and for fearlessly pushing past the thematic boundaries of contemporary art. His unique narrative voice has been particularly acknowledged by critics for capturing the inarticulate, blunt, yet loosely poetic, language of laconic, drugged-out teenagers.

Guy Mannes-Abbot, writing in the *New Statesman and Society*, has observed, "[Cooper] knows exactly what he is doing in his fiction, the boundaries he crosses and those he balances on, and his direct, taut prose rarely snags on itself. But it is the audacity of the writing, perfectly mirrored in its subject, that propels Cooper toward the rank of high stylist."

He has also courted controversy and debate for his works' extreme sexual nature, seemingly bordering on pornography, and his alleged fascination with pedophilia. Cooper himself has even been the recipient of death threats and protests by outraged gay activists.

Drew Linsky, writing in *Lambda Book Report*, summarized the dissenting critical climate: "Many readers will simply find the [novels'] rewards too scant for all the repellent acts . . . one must endure."

However, as the critic Reed Woodhouse asserts, "Dennis Copper is an intellectual's pornographer. . . . The obscenity in Cooper is ironized, italicized, made into a cold abstraction."

Biography and Early Career

Dennis Cooper was born on January 10, 1953 in Pasadena, California, the son of a wealthy businessman. His parents divorced when he was young.

Cooper has described his family life as a deeply alienating experience: "I had severe problems with my parents. . . . the divorce proceedings took forever, and my parents did not behave well during that period. The fact that parents barely exist in [my] books is probably because I escaped mine as completely as I could beginning in my teenaged years. I crashed at friends' houses a lot, and tried to distance myself from the

hell going on in my family home, and, ever since, I've had a very distanced relationship to my family."

At the age of 15, after discovering the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud and the tales and novels of the Marquis de Sade, Cooper "got serious about writing," and produced a thousand-page novel--an imitation of Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, set in high school. He promptly burned the manuscript, however, afraid his mother would find it.

Cooper attended the Flintridge Preparatory School for Boys, a private establishment in La Cañada Flintridge, California, where he became, according to biographer Earl Jackson, Jr., "the leader of a group of outcasts: budding poets, druggies, and punks, who eventually would provide the models for the wayward youths who populate his fiction."

Cooper was expelled from Flintridge in the eleventh grade and graduated from a Los Angeles County public school. Afterward, he attended Pasadena City College for two years and spent another year at Pitzer College, in Claremont, California, where he studied with the poet Bert Meyers, before dropping out of school entirely.

Before he achieved success as a novelist, Cooper was best known as a poet, and his works were celebrated by such writers as Edmund White and Felice Picano. Cooper's first poetry collection, *Terror of Earrings*, was published in 1973, when he was twenty years old.

In 1976, Cooper founded *Little Caesar Magazine* and two years later established Little Caesar Press, which he ran until 1982. It was through the Press that Cooper published his second collection of poetry, *Tiger Beat* (1978), as well as twenty-four other poetry chapbooks, featuring such writers as Gerard Malanga, Tim Dlugos, Joe Brainard, and Eileen Myles.

Cooper's first published prose work, *Antoine Monnier*, also appeared in 1978.

Cooper's third poetry collection, *Idols*, was published in 1979. Three further poetry collections followed: *The Tenderness of Wolves* (1981); *The Missing Men* (1981); and *He Cried* (1985).

In 1984, Cooper moved to New York City and later that year published his second work of fiction, the novella *Safe*.

A year later, he moved to Amsterdam, mainly in pursuit of a boyfriend. He lived there for nearly three years before returning to New York.

The George Miles Cycle

While in Amsterdam, Cooper matured as a poet and prose stylist and began work on the novel *Closer*, which was published in 1989, the first in a sequence of five interconnected books that has become known as the George Miles Cycle. The other novels in the series include *Frisk* (1991), *Try* (1994), *Guide* (1997), and *Period* (2000).

George Miles, a recurring character in two of the series' five novels, as well as the model for most of the other major young male characters in the cycle, is also the name of an actual person in Cooper's life: his most important and influential friend from high school onwards.

As Cooper explained in an interview: "[Miles] was a few years younger than me, and very sweet and brilliant, but he had a severe chemical imbalance, so he was all over the place; really chaotic and unpredictable. Our relationship was intense and unforgettable, and if I have a muse, it's him."

The two remained extremely close friends, and years later, when Cooper was 30, he and Miles had a brief sexual relationship. Cooper lost contact with Miles, however, after he moved to Amsterdam, and tried tracking him down, but without luck. "In a way," Cooper noted, "I wrote the novels for him, and assumed that somehow, somewhere he was reading them, and knew how important he was to me."

In 1997, Cooper finally learned that Miles had killed himself ten years earlier while Cooper was still living in Europe.

The first novel in the George Miles Cycle, *Closer*, a chronicle of sexual anomie, won, in 1990, the inaugural Ferro-Grumley Award, which recognizes excellence and experimentation in gay literary fiction.

Frisk, the second and most critically divisive book in the series, with its fetishized scenes of violence and torture, is a vivid account of a man whose fascination with explicit "snuff" photos of young boys leads to a killing spree in Holland.

When the novel was published in 1991, members of the gay activist group Queer Nation denounced Cooper and his works for their glorification of pedophilic sex crimes. In San Francisco a leaflet was distributed, proclaiming that "Dennis Cooper Must Die! Must Die! Must Die!" and suggesting that Cooper himself was guilty of murdering young boys.

Cooper later defended his intentions, saying, "I present the actual act of evil so it's visible and give it a bunch of facets so that you can actually look at it and experience it. You're seduced into dealing with it So with *Frisk*, whatever pleasure you got out of making a picture in your mind based on . . . those people being murdered, you take responsibility for it."

A film adaptation of the novel was released in 1995, directed by Todd Verow, with a script by Jim Dwyer, and featuring Craig Chester and Parker Posey. Cooper himself makes a cameo appearance in the film.

Cooper continued to mine his themes of alienated youth and sexual oppression with *Try*, the story of an angelically beautiful teenage son of two sexually abusive fathers, who finds solace in the home of his uncle, a producer of child pornography. As a review in *Publishers Weekly* noted, "Cooper's novel is less a case study in sexual abuse . . . than a window on a nightmarish suburban world, where domestic norms are subverted to such a degree that adults are either pointedly absent or predatory pedophiles."

The series' fourth installment, *Guide*, has come to be considered by many critics Cooper's masterpiece. Cooper places himself as a participant squarely in the center of the story and employs a single, first-person voice, constituting a break from the detached, impassive third-person of his previous narratives. He also adopts, to startling effect, the stylistics of various non-literary genres, such as self-help manuals and substance-abuse rehabilitation pamphlets.

"Though the story is as compelling as it is perverse," wrote a reviewer for the *Library Journal*, "Cooper purposefully overrides it with an innovative style and raw, truthful character studies. There is a real elegance to the choppy waves of prose, which allow this work to transcend the form of the novel while working within it."

Cooper concluded his quintet of novels in 2000 with *Period*, a splintered tale of satanic sacrifice, gang rape, and nonchalant mutilation, which *Publishers Weekly* nonetheless called a "darkly comic ride through the looking glass of marginal youth culture." The novel also celebrates the return of the George Miles character.

As Cooper has explained, "The cycle doesn't so much end as collapse in on itself, and all that's left is a writer, his memories of a dead boy he loved, and the books that tried and failed to understand and express that love."

Other Works by Dennis Cooper

Cooper's post-George Miles Cycle novels include *My Loose Thread* (2002), a spare, dialogue-driven tale about a teenage boy struggling to understand his physical attraction to his younger brother. *The Sluts* (2004), concerning an online community that comments on a website dedicated to gay male escorts, was the recipient of the 2005 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Fiction. His most recent novel, *God Jr.* (2005), tells the story of the disintegration of a marriage in the wake of an adolescent boy's death.

Cooper is a highly prolific writer. His other works include the 1992 collection of short stories, *Wrong*. That same year, Cooper edited *Discontents: New Queer Writers* (1992). *The Dream Police: Selected Poems, 1969-1993*, a gathering of new and previously published poems, appeared in 1995.

He has also contributed articles and reviews for a variety of publications, including *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *The Advocate*, the *Village Voice*, and the rock music magazine *Spin*. A collection of these works, *All Ears: Cultural Criticism, Essays, and Obituaries*, also appeared in 1995.

He has coauthored two graphic novels: *Jerk* (1993), with Nayland Blake, and *Horror Hospital Unplugged* (1996), with Keith Mayerson.

In 2003, he founded the Little House on the Bowery imprint, which focuses on the works of young North American writers, for the independent publisher Akashic Books, and has since published works by Travis Jeppesen, Matthew Stokoe, and Derek McCormack, among others.

Since 2005, Cooper has been dividing his time between Los Angeles and Paris. While in Paris he has collaborated with the French theater director Gisèle Vienne and the composer Peter Rehberg on four theatrical works: *I Apologize* (2004), *Une Belle Enfant Blonde* (2005), *Kindertotenlieder* (2007), and a stage adaptation of his graphic novel, *Jerk* (2008).

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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.