



Larry Duplechan

Duplechan, Larry (b. 1956)

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Lambda Award-winning author Larry Duplechan is best known for *Blackbird* (1986), a classic coming of age novel about a black teenager growing up in the bland outer suburbs of Los Angeles in the mid-1970s. Although *Blackbird* is neither Duplechan's first nor his last novel, it is the one in which he perfected a tone of voice and a perspective that had never previously been so well articulated.

Blackbird established Duplechan as a gifted writer with something to say, yet for reasons largely beyond his control, his career failed to yield the recognition and rewards his work warranted. The result was that he became disillusioned with his prospects as a writer, and for many years he abandoned the craft altogether. In 2008, however, he returned to print with *Got 'Til It's Gone*, his first novel since 1993.

Duplechan is an autobiographical writer. His novels do not recount events that actually happened to him, but they closely reflect his life and personality, especially through the voice of his most famous character, the protagonist of four of his novels, Johnnie Ray Rousseau. Indeed, he has referred to Rousseau as his "alter ego. Just about all Johnnie Ray's likes, dislikes, attitudes, beliefs, political leanings, sexual quirks, and bad jokes, coincide strikingly with my own," Duplechan told Christopher Davis in 1987.

However, it needs to be borne in mind that the parallels between Duplechan and Johnnie Ray Rousseau are not exact. Moreover, what Johnnie Ray believes (like what Duplechan believes) is subject to change. Attitudes expressed in any particular book correspond to beliefs held at a particular time. For example, much has been made of the youthful Johnnie Ray's exclusive attraction to white men, but as the saga of Johnnie Ray evolves over the decades, his sexual tastes broaden to include black men as well.

Duplechan was born on December 30, 1956 in Los Angeles, California to middle-class parents of Creole heritage who had emigrated to California from the small town of Mermentau in southwestern Louisiana. His father, Lawrence Duplechan, Sr., was an electronics engineer; his mother, Margie Nell Andrus Duplechan, worked as a postal clerk and office manager. He is the oldest of four brothers.

Duplechan grew up mostly in Southern California, but spent two years in Sacramento. He sang in the choir of the fundamentalist Baptist church that his family attended. After graduating from high school, he enrolled at University of California, Los Angeles, where he majored in English and where he met the man who would become his life partner, Greg Harvey, a fellow singer in UCLA's men's choir.

As an undergraduate, Duplechan worked as a librarian's assistant at UCLA and remained there for a couple of years after he graduated in 1978. He has described his education as preparing him to be a "well read secretary," and for most of his life he has been employed in that capacity. Between 1980 and 1990, he worked as a word processor and secretary. He has since worked as a real estate legal secretary and as a litigation secretary at a large law firm in Los Angeles.

Duplechan is a talented singer and as a child he dreamed of a life in music. As he told Margaret Alic in 2005, "I've been singing all my life, in church, in school. I had dreams of being a singing star, sort of the mythical

lovechild of Johnny Mathis and Barbra Streisand."

After graduating from college he pursued a singing career. He appeared in clubs as a pop/jazz soloist and as a member of a jazz vocal group, "String of Pearls," but the stress of establishing himself as a professional singer while working a full-time job and being involved in his relationship with Harvey led Duplechan to give up his musical vocation and to turn to writing as an outlet for his creativity.

"I was in a relationship with a man who, while he really admired my talent, really, really wanted me to be home having dinner with him . . . and here I was, working a 40-hour job and singing in clubs at night. . . . [Harvey] basically said, 'You can continue to do this singing thing, or you can be with me, but you can't do both.'"

Given this ultimatum, Duplechan "chose the guy and stopped singing." He turned to writing instead, "But writing," he told Alic, "was always a far-away second to singing."

Fittingly for an autobiographical writer, Duplechan's first novel, *Eight Days a Week* (1985), centers on a singer's struggle between his love of singing and his love of a man. The interracial love story debuts both Duplechan's characteristic narrative technique and his alter ego Johnny Ray Rousseau, whose name alludes to gay pop singer Johnnie Ray while also acknowledging Duplechan's Creole heritage.

In the novel, Rousseau is a young black singer involved with Keith, a blond, blue-eyed bodybuilder/banker who is cerebral and bisexual. The novel, like all but one of Duplechan's subsequent novels, is narrated as an extended monologue, told in a conversational style peppered with references to popular culture, especially music and campy movies. This deceptively simple style has the effect of creating intimacy between writer and reader and it may help explain why readers who have never met Duplechan feel as though they know him.

At the center of *Eight Days a Week* is race. The lovers are attracted to each other by their racial difference, but their racial differences, or, rather, the stereotypes associated with those differences, also create problems for sustaining their relationship. Indeed, all the many differences between the men, from Keith's preference for classical music as opposed to Johnnie Ray's love of pop to their striking variations in temperament and ambitions are but markers of the racial difference that both brings them together and ultimately leads to their separation.

Although both men desire the "other," their "otherness" finally makes their relationship too difficult to sustain.

In *Eight Days a Week*, Duplechan anticipates the negative response some readers may have toward his alter ego's attraction toward white men. As Johnnie Ray notes, "I was once told by a black alto sax player named Zaz (we were in bed at the time, mind you) that my preference for white men (and blonds, the whitest of the white, to boot) was the sad but understandable end result of 300 years of white male oppression."

Charles I. Nero has described Johnnie Ray's forthrightly expressed preference for white sexual partners as a challenge to the idea that "a black person's attraction to a white" is pathological; he also contends that Johnnie Ray's declaration of such a sexual preference is "a major moment of signifying in African American literature: the sexual objectification of white men by a black man."

Still, Duplechan has received little support from the black literary establishment, which has mostly ignored his work, perhaps in part because in addition to his sexual preference for white men he has repeatedly stated that his sexual identity has been more crucial in shaping his sense of his place in the world than his black identity.

Eight Days a Week received some positive reviews in the gay press, but was largely ignored by mainstream critics. The novel is flawed (as Duplechan has himself remarked, it "sort of topples under the weight of its own cleverness"), but nevertheless engaging because of its accessible style and the attractiveness of its protagonist.

Despite the failure of his first novel to garner much critical attention, Duplechan forged ahead with his second, the work on which his reputation now rests.

Blackbird may be regarded as a prequel to *Eight Days a Week* since it presents Johnnie Ray Rousseau as a precocious teenager using music to cope with the sometimes confusing emotions he feels as he comes of age and comes out in a predominantly white desert town near Los Angeles.

The title, which alludes to the Beatles song of the same name, signifies Johnnie Ray himself, a bird waiting to be set free. The lyrics to the Lennon-McCartney song urge a solitary bird with broken wings to "fly into the night" for "You were only waiting for this moment to arise."

Although the novel's plot is distractingly complicated, its arc is simple. Johnnie Ray, who at the beginning of the novel feels isolated and lonely, discovers not only that he is not alone, but also falls in love with an older young man who initiates him into sexual pleasure.

After some melodramatic moments, including a suicide by one classmate and the brutal beating of his best friend by his father and an attempt by Johnnie Ray's parents to have his homosexuality "cured" through an exorcism, the young man finally escapes the confines of his small-minded suburb and emerges into the freedom represented by UCLA, where at the end of the novel he has begun college and discovered a new home.

When he arrives at UCLA, Johnnie Ray says he "never felt so free in my life." He describes the term's first meeting of the Gay Students Union as "the world's biggest homecoming for me."

Michael Nava, in his introduction to the Arsenal Pulp Press twentieth-anniversary edition of the novel, observes that *Blackbird* is especially important because it reflects the attitudes of a post-Stonewall generation. (He argues that the writers who published immediately after Stonewall, such as Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and Larry Kramer, were expressing pre-Stonewall attitudes.)

What distinguishes the post-Stonewall generation, and Duplechan's novel in particular, Nava argues, is its absence of the kind of self-loathing that characterized the work of previous generations. The writing of Duplechan and his contemporaries, including Nava, who grew up under the influence of the gay liberation movement, is distinguished by an unapologetic acceptance of sexual identity as a crucial element of personality.

Hence, Johnnie Ray, who at the beginning of the novel is yearning for a connection with his straight classmates, is finally liberated when he meets another gay youth, Marshall Two-Hawks MacNeill. As Nava notes, Johnnie Ray's discovery that Marshall is gay prompts an epiphany, the realization that his sexual and emotional longings constitute a gay identity that can be fulfilled only by forging a bond with someone else who shares the same identity.

For Johnnie Ray, as for Duplechan himself, his gay identity is more defining than his racial identity. Yet it is not true, as some reviewers alleged, that *Blackbird* is insensitive to racial issues, including the discrimination Johnnie Ray faces as one of a handful of black students in his high school. Indeed, the novel subtly but unmistakably indicates the pervasiveness of racism in the conformist ethos that shapes small-town attitudes.

Blackbird was greeted enthusiastically in the gay press. In the *Advocate* Joseph Bean hailed it as the first contemporary black coming out story, seeing it as remarkable for its depiction of late adolescence. He ended his review by saying "We have all been waiting for this novel to arrive."

In *Gay Community News*, Michael Bronski noted Duplechan's "glorious" use of language, concluding that "What is great about the writing here is not just that it makes for a consistently good read—which it does—but that it also has resonance and depth, as well as feeling and grace."

Blackbird is by no means a perfect novel, but it is a memorable and significant one because it captures the yearning and angst of adolescence at a particular moment in a voice that is at once authentic and unique.

In 1989, Duplechan published his only novel that does not feature Johnnie Ray Rousseau and that is not narrated as an extended monologue. *Tangled Up in Blue* responds to the AIDS epidemic by telling the story of married couple Maggie and Daniel Sullivan and their gay friend Crockett Miller. When Crockett is diagnosed as HIV-positive, Daniel decides to be tested as well, which is when Maggie learns that her husband and her best friend were once lovers.

The least autobiographical of Duplechan's works, *Tangled Up in Blue* demonstrates that the author can write from the perspective of characters unlike himself, including that of a woman. Perhaps the most serious of Duplechan's novels, it tells a heartwrenching tale of love and friendship, illustrating how AIDS devastates the lives of its victims, including those who are not themselves infected by the virus.

Duplechan explained that *Tangled Up in Blue* was "an attempt to answer questions I'd asked myself after the completion of *Blackbird*: Could I write in a voice other than Johnnie Ray's first-person narrative? Could I write believable Caucasian characters? Could I write from the point of view of a woman? Could I write a comic novel concerning AIDS?"

These questions must be answered unequivocally in the affirmative. In some respects, *Tangled Up in Blue* is Duplechan's most ambitious and successfully executed novel. It also sold better than his previous ones.

Still, as John Pearson has observed, writing the novel was a risk for Duplechan, who had cultivated a readership that expected him to write about being black and young and gay.

Indeed, Pearson compares Duplechan's choice to write *Tangled Up in Blue* with James Baldwin's decision to write *Giovanni's Room*, another novel by a black writer with no black characters. While acknowledging that some of Duplechan's readers might have been disappointed by his abandonment of the character of Johnnie Ray Rousseau, Pearson contends that "by focusing his energies on material that does not reflect his own experiences, Duplechan has grown as a writer."

In Duplechan's next novel, *Captain Swing* (1993), the author returns to his characteristic narrative style and to the continuing saga of Johnnie Ray Rousseau.

In *Captain Swing*, Johnnie Ray is a "thirty-something-year-old black queer widow-man," a singer of some success who has not sung a note since his lover Keith was killed in a hit-and-run automobile accident a year ago.

Still wracked with grief, he returns to his home in southwest Louisiana, hoping to make peace with his dying father, Lance, who, according to his aunt, has been asking to see him. When he arrives, he discovers that the reunion has been devised by his aunt: rather than desiring a reconciliation with him, his father once again rejects him.

The novel's plot complications include Johnnie Ray's dalliance with his cousin Nigel, who is now a handsome, lean-muscled young man. Their relationship, which represents a departure for Johnnie Ray in that the object of his desire is not white but black, is depicted both graphically and tenderly.

But the heart of the book is Johnnie Ray's attempt to understand his father's sorrow over the death of his preferred younger brother David in a drive-by shooting even as he must also confront the painful fact that his father is unable to accept his homosexuality or to love him the way he loved David.

The comedy in the novel, which stems from the eccentricities of Johnnie Ray's extended family and from his tendency to view the world through the lens of camp, itself a coping mechanism for the pain of rejection, underlines the book's serious points about family and acceptance and grief.

In one of the book's most poignant moments, after he has been told by his aunt that he has never seen "this kind of sick," referring to the ravages inflicted on his father by cancer, Johnnie Ray riffs on the losses he has experienced from AIDS. He thinks of his friend Crockett, "whom AIDS had reduced to a sixty-some-pound skeleton with skin before finishing him off at thirty-two." He describes AIDS as "an elusive, ever mutating viral horror that doesn't just kill you dead, but kills you *ugly*."

After *Captain Swing*, Duplechan took a sabbatical from writing that lasted more than a decade. He has stated that he was disheartened by the failure of his writing to achieve commercial success, but also that writing is temperamentally difficult for him. As a natural-born performer, he found the isolation of writing and the long wait to receive feedback frustrating.

After a 1994 earthquake destroyed the house that he and Greg Harvey shared, Duplechan returned to music to ease the resultant stress. He founded an *a capella* singing group and also participated in community choirs and quartets, and began performing the ukelele. He also began writing songs. As Margaret Alic reports, "By 2005, Duplechan was singing his high tenor in a church choir and soloing on ukulele and guitar."

In 2008, during the brief period in California when same-sex marriage was legal in California, after 32 years together, Duplechan and Harvey wed.

That same year, Duplechan published his first novel in fifteen years, *Got 'Til It's Gone*, which resumes the saga of Johnnie Ray Rousseau, now forty-eight years old and acutely mindful of his mortality.

The title of *Got 'Til It's Gone* is taken from Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi," with its refrain, "Don't it always seem to go / That you don't know what you got / 'Til it's gone / They paved paradise / And put up a parking lot." The elegiac tone of the novel thus mixes apprehension of impending loss with awareness of a need to live in the moment and to appreciate the present.

At forty-eight Johnnie Ray works as a secretary for a law firm, tortures himself in the gym to forestall the ravages of age, performs as a soloist for the First Assembly of Love Church, where he is a deacon, and seems content to enjoy the company of a series of friends and sex partners.

In the course of the novel, however, Johnnie Ray is torn between his attraction for Joe, a much younger bi-racial porn star who is HIV-positive, and his deep friendship with Dre, a black dancer and choreographer who has loved him for years.

In addition to coping with his own health problems, Johnnie Ray also must deal with the failing health of his beloved mother, Clara, who lives in Palm Springs with her second husband, a Jewish doctor. Diagnosed with a brain tumor, Clara faces the crisis of her imminent death with courage and calm, a reaction that prompts Johnnie Ray to meditate on the meaning of his life, the loss of his previous lover, and the possibilities of the future.

The novel dwells on loss and death, but *Got 'Til It's Gone* is ultimately an optimistic novel that ends with Johnnie Ray finding happiness.

Got 'Til It's Gone won a Lambda Literary Award in the category of Gay Romance.

Interestingly, *Got 'Til It's Gone* unifies Duplechan's canon. Not only does it continue the saga of Johnnie Ray Rousseau, but it also integrates the apparently anomalous novel *Tangled Up in Blue* into that story, for in the most recent novel Johnnie Ray is revealed to have been friends of Maggie and Daniel and Crockett and muses on the married couple's devotion to Crockett during his illness.

This revelation not only unifies the canon, but it also reminds readers that beneath Duplechan's breezy style lurks a great deal of pain and suffering. Indeed, the humor with which his work is infused is often a coping mechanism. While Duplechan may be a comic writer—he has described his books as "romantic comedies"—he knows that in life comedy and tragedy coexist and intensify each other.

Duplechan is a student of comparative religions. After many years of being alienated from Christianity, in his forties he returned to the faith, though not to the fundamentalism with which he grew up. For several years he served as a deacon in the Metropolitan Community Church and even considered entering a seminary.

Duplechan and his husband Greg Harvey currently attend Westwood Presbyterian Church, where they sing in the chancel choir.

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