



Hartinger, Brent (b. 1964)

by Kimberly Pauley

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Brent Hartinger.
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Although best known as a prolific writer of young adult fiction, Brent Hartinger is also a playwright and a mentor for other writers and students. In addition, he is an activist against censorship, particularly of works intended for children and young people.

Born in 1964, Hartinger attended Catholic grade school and high school. He graduated from high school in June 1983. He received his B.A. in psychology and political science from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington in 1986, completing a four-year program in three years. He also completed the coursework for a master's degree in psychology at the same university, though, much to the chagrin of his mother, he declined to write his thesis.

Hartinger began writing at an early age by publishing his own newspaper called *The Weekly Worm* in the third grade, though it was not until after college that he made the decision to write full-time. His work has been wide-ranging, including novels, plays, articles, essays, newspaper columns, and even greeting card copy.

As with many authors, success for Hartinger did not come early or easily. He spent fifteen years trying to get a novel published while supporting himself as a freelance writer and teen counselor. He even worked as an extra in the movie *Come See the Paradise* (1991, directed by Alan Parker), which starred Dennis Quaid.

Hartinger's first break came in 1996 when he won the Judy Blume/Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) Grant for Best Young Adult Novel for a manuscript entitled *Danny Britton's Shadow*. While that particular novel did not sell, it contained elements of the story that led to his first publication contract. More importantly, the award brought him to the attention of an agent and ultimately led to him signing on with his current agent, Jennifer DeChiara.

Hartinger's first young adult novel, *Geography Club* (2003), was rejected by 17 different publishers before it was accepted by HarperCollins. It was inspired by both his own teenage years and his experiences as a founder of Oasis, a gay teen support group with over 200 members.

Somewhat autobiographical, the story follows Russel, a gay teen who at first feels isolated by his sexual orientation. Along with some friends and other gay and lesbian teens, Russel launches a GLBT support group disguised (initially) as a Geography Club.

The book garnered many awards, including being named a Summer 2003 Children's Book Sense Pick. Hartinger also adapted the book as a play and it has now been performed around the country after premiering in Seattle's FringeACT Festival of New Plays in 2004.

Two additional novels follow Russel and his friends: *The Order of the Poison Oak* (2005) and the Lambda Award-winning *Split Screen: Attack of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies/Bride of the Soul-Sucking Brain Zombies* (2007).

Split Screen is particularly interesting due to its format as a "flip book"; simply turn the book over and upside down to read the different stories. Additional novels in the series from different characters' perspectives are planned.

Not all of Hartinger's works prominently feature gay characters or are intended for teen readers. *The Last Chance Texaco* (2004) is the story of a fifteen-year-old in foster care who has one last chance to turn her life around before being shipped off to a juvenile detention facility. Hartinger pulled heavily on his own experiences working in a group home in the late 1980s for this book.

Grand and Humble (2006) is a mystery about a popular teen and an unpopular one and how their lives intersect.

Hartinger's first fantasy novel, *Dreamquest* (2007), has no gay characters at all and is targeted towards a younger demographic (ages 9-12), though critical reviews show both adults and teens admire the book. The protagonist is a young girl who finds herself in Slumberia, a land of dreams and nightmares.

Project Sweet Life (not yet released) returns to the teen world. In it three fifteen-year-old boys are forced by their fathers to get summer jobs but instead concoct a get-rich-quick scheme in order to take the summer off instead. While none of the main characters are gay, a secondary character (an uncle) is.

Hartinger tackles relatively untouched territory with his next book, *ShadowWalkers* (release planned for 2009), a gay genre novel. The main character, a gay teen, learns that he can do astral projection. This is a departure from the "normal" plotline that most gay teen novels feature since, up until very recently, the focus was primarily about the process of coming out or about what it is like being gay.

Hartinger is also an accomplished playwright. Besides the play version of *Geography Club*, he has written over ten plays that have been performed around the country and have been included in more than thirty-five playwrighting festivals.

Having experienced numerous challenges against his books by censors, particularly *Geography Club* (which was banned for a period of time in his home state of Washington), Hartinger is also a vocal proponent of free speech and an anti-censorship crusader. He is one of the founders of AS IF! Authors Supporting Intellectual Freedom, a group of Young Adult book authors who fight censorship and disseminate information about current challenges.

He sums up his attitude toward censorship well with this statement: "What books should a library have? Well, the right question to ask, of course, is not, *Will anyone in my community be offended by this book?* Instead, it's, *Will anyone in my community be served by the presence of this book?*"

In addition to writing and protesting, Hartinger also teaches creative writing for children and young adults in the masters program at Vermont College in Montpelier, Vermont. At one time, he also taught creative writing at the Tacoma School of the Arts.

Hartinger currently lives near Seattle with his partner, Michael Jensen, who is also a novelist. Together, they host a tongue-in-cheek gay entertainment video blog called *Two Gay Guys*. They both contribute regularly to the AfterElton.com website, for which Jensen is the editor.

In 2010, one of Hartinger's articles on AfterElton.com, "Why Can't You Just Butch Up? Gay Men, Effeminacy, and Our War with Ourselves," was honored with a GLAAD Media Award in the category "Outstanding Digital Journalism."

One of the major differences between Hartinger's writing and that of many other authors who focus on the glbtq market is that he always includes some elements of humor. As he said in a June 2003 interview, "Yes, there are a lot of serious issues involving gay youth, and yes, the teenage years can be a time of depression and angst. But it ain't all that bad! Adult writers always seem to remember the emotional turmoil of the teen years, but they don't remember the humor and the fun, which are just as important."

The humor Hartinger interjects in his novels makes them very readable for both glbtq teens and their straight counterparts, especially reluctant readers. His humor aids in getting his messages across in an entertaining and memorable fashion.

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About the Author

Kimberly Pauley is the founder of the YABC (Young Adult Books Central) website. She specialized in adolescent and children's literature at the University of Florida and graduated with a degree in English. An avid reader and writer, her first novel, tentatively titled *Sucks to Be Me: The All-True Confessions of Mina Hamilton, Teen Vampire* is due out in Fall 2008.