



Heim, Scott (b. 1966)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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A portrait of Scott Heim
by Tom Louie.
Courtesy Scott Heim.

Scott Heim is best known for his critically acclaimed debut novel *Mysterious Skin*, about the long-term effects of sexual abuse on two boys by their Little League baseball coach and the subsequent coping mechanisms employed by them as they grow into young manhood. Shortly after the publication of his novel, Heim was named by the *New York Times Magazine* one of the thirty artists under thirty years old likely "to change the culture in the next thirty years."

Homosexuality is integral to Heim's writing, although in interviews he has stressed that he does not want to be "tagged as a gay writer." "Being gay is not the focal point of what I write," he explained in a 1997 profile. "There's a new attitude among writers where there doesn't have to be an apology for gayness in literature. You used to have to explain what being gay was before you introduced it in your writing. That's not the case anymore, and I hope my writing reflects that. I also hope my audience will let me go on to other things besides my sexuality."

Although Heim has disavowed the label "gay writer," he has declared that he is "most interested in the psychology behind the darker human impulses: violence, addictive behavior, 'illicit' or 'taboo' sex."

Heim was born on September 26, 1966 in Hutchinson, Kansas, a small farming community. He earned a B.A. in English and Art History from the University of Kansas at Lawrence in 1989 and an M.A. in English Literature in 1991. Two years later he received a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Columbia University in Fiction Writing.

He began writing "horror stories . . . for my friends" when he was ten or eleven years old. Later, in high school he turned to writing confessional, lyrical poetry although his work became "more and more narrative." By the time he entered college his interests had turned to fiction writing. "At that stage," Heim recalled, "the only difference between [my poetry] and my fiction was that the poems were more economical and didn't have to explain things like character and plot." His first published work was the poetry collection *Saved from Drowning* (1993).

In 1995, Heim published his first novel, *Mysterious Skin*, which he had begun writing while still a graduate student at Columbia University. The novel, set in small-town Kansas, concerns Brian Lackey, a young man who attempts to fill a blank space in his life as he remembers "The summer I was eight years old, five hours disappeared from my life."

The key to Brian's recovery of those lost hours is Neil McCormick, a fellow former member of the local Little League baseball team, who has grown up to be a teenage gay hustler. While both Brian and Neil had been sexually abused as children by their baseball coach, their reactions to the experience differ widely. Brian blocks the incident from his memory, and instead convinces himself that he had been abducted by aliens during those missing hours, while Neil feels "honored" by the coach's attention.

Heim won near-universal critical praise for his deft and sensitive handling of the complicated characters

and delicate subject matter of *Mysterious Skin*. An article in *Kirkus Reviews* asked, "After reading Heim's debut, one question remains: How will he top this?" and called the novel "as searing and unforgettable as an electric shock." The *San Francisco Chronicle* noted that "Heim is breathtakingly unafraid to take chances."

In 2003, the playwright Prince Gomolvilas adapted *Mysterious Skin* for the stage. The play debuted in May of that year at the New Conservatory Theatre Center in San Francisco. In 2004, Gregg Araki, one of the leading figures of the "New Queer Cinema," wrote and directed a film version of Heim's novel. It starred Brady Corbet as Brian and Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Neil. The film was nominated for a 2006 GLAAD Media Award as Outstanding Film.

Heim published his second novel, *In Awe*, in 1997. It is a psychological horror story about three outcasts in a small university town in Kansas: Boris, a gay teenager; Sarah, a 32-year old nymphomaniac; and Harriet, an elderly woman and mother of Sarah's best friend, Marshall, a young man who has recently died from complications due to AIDS. The trio bands together against the bigotry of a group of locals that leads to an outburst of violence and murder.

Although not as critically admired as Heim's first novel, *In Awe* nevertheless received enthusiastic reviews. The *Kansas City Star* called the novel, "Unforgettable . . . A transcendent, bittersweet novel of obsession and pain, love and loathing, memory and desire," while the *Village Voice* noted that Heim "teases out the pleasures of cruelty in language that scalpels one minute, unfurls lushly the next."

Heim is currently working on his third novel, *We Disappear*, which he described in 2001 as "a fractured blur of fiction and memoir, and mostly concerns a parallel between my exorcising of personal demons and my longing to discover the actual identities of a group of primarily anonymous teenage boys who were murdered and buried near an Amish farm in Kansas where I was raised."

Heim's short fiction has also appeared in *Waves: An Anthology of New Gay Fiction* (1994), edited by Ethan Mordden; *Best American Gay Fiction* (1996), edited by Brian Bouldrey; *Boys Like Us* (1996), edited by Patrick Merla; *Personals: Dreams and Nightmares from the Lives of 20 Young Writers* (1998), edited by Thomas Beller; *Best American Gay Fiction 3* (1998), edited by Brian Bouldrey; *Obsessed: A Flesh and the Word Collection of Erotic Memoirs* (1999), edited by Michael Lowenthal; *Circa 2000: Gay Fiction at the Millennium* (1999), edited by Robert Drake and Terry Wolverton; and *The Hot Spots: The Best Erotic Writing in Modern Fiction* (2001), edited by J.H. Blair.

Heim's nonfiction and reviews have appeared in the *Village Voice*, *Out*, *Paper*, *The Advocate*, *Interview*, *Time Out*, *New York*, *Abercrombie & Fitch Quarterly*, *Nerve*, *The Barcelona Review*, *The Kansas Quarterly*, *Men's Style*, *The Pacific Review*, *Christopher Street*, *Cottonwood*, *The James White Review*, *The Santa Monica Review*, and *The Minnesota Review*.

After living eleven years in New York, Heim relocated to Boston in 2002 where he currently resides.

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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.