



## McCauley, Stephen (b. 1955)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Stephen McCauley.  
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Thomas.

Novelist Stephen McCauley has been called a "master of the modern comedy of manners," and his works have been favorably compared to such temperamentally disparate social satirists as Edith Wharton, Evelyn Waugh, Woody Allen, and Barbara Pym, in whose stories, as the writer Robert Plunkett has noted, "ordinary, decent people struggle through the crises, major and minor, of everyday life."

Since the 1987 publication of his enormously successful debut novel, *The Object of My Affection*, which was later loosely adapted into a popular romantic comedy, McCauley has earned both critical esteem and a loyal readership.

His books have been singled out for their shrewd observations about contemporary manners and morals, their tart, clever dialogue and gently ironic tone, as well as their sharply defined characters, particularly the slightly flawed but charming, self-deprecating gay male protagonists.

"I seem to write about characters who have misjudged their situation or misunderstood who they are and what they want out of life," McCauley revealed in an interview. "I don't like ending a book with the suggestion that a solution has been found and that everything is now going to be fine."

Stephen McCauley was born on June 26, 1955 in Woburn, Massachusetts, the middle of three sons.

He studied at the University of Vermont, in Burlington, and in France for a year at the Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, in Nice.

After graduating in 1977 with a B.A. in English, McCauley moved to Boston and took a series of jobs including teaching kindergarten, manning an ice cream stand, working at hotels, health food stores, a yoga center, and for many years at a travel agency. He was also the book review editor and a travel tips columnist for the alternative weekly newspaper *The Boston Phoenix*.

In the early 1980s, McCauley moved to Brooklyn, where he took several writing courses at adult learning centers, before enrolling in the writing program at Columbia University. In 1985, he graduated from Columbia with a Master of Fine Arts degree in writing.

Two years later, McCauley published his first novel, *The Object of My Affection* (1987), about the close relationship between George, a gay male kindergarten teacher, and Nina, a pregnant, single psychology student. As George, the novel's first-person narrator, explains: "I suppose the best way to describe our friendship is as a long and unconsummated courtship between two people with no expectations."

The novel started out as a short story, begun while McCauley was still a student at Columbia University. Stephen Koch, one of his teachers in the graduate writing program, encouraged McCauley to expand the story.

"It was the first time I ever wrote in a conversational style," McCauley recalled, "and it was the first time I tried using a tone intended to be comic. I wrote the story as a tribute to a woman with whom I'd had a short, very romantic friendship. But by the end of it, the characters had taken on lives of their own, and I found I wanted to spend more time with them. So I tossed a pregnancy into their relationship and kept writing to see what would happen."

Most reviewers responded enthusiastically to the novel. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, called the work "a very funny, exceptionally vivid first novel," and observed that McCauley "brings his characters, his *world* astonishingly, captivately alive."

The book was quickly optioned by the film studio Twentieth Century Fox, but it took some ten years before a movie version was released. In 1998, *The Object of My Affection* was loosely adapted into a skillful, if somewhat conventional, romantic comedy by the openly gay director Nicholas Hytner, based on a screenplay by the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein, and starring Paul Rudd and Jennifer Aniston, with a cameo appearance by Sir Nigel Hawthorne.

McCauley has remained grateful, though characteristically detached, about the experience, explaining, "It's a great thing for getting your name and the title of your book into the public eye. It's the kind of publicity a writer of my level can't afford to turn down. . . . But in my mind, the movie is completely separate from my book. It's my book, but it's their movie."

In 1992, McCauley published his second novel, *The Easy Way Out*, another tale of modern relationships, which again comfortably embraced characters both gay and straight.

Critics were as equally impressed with McCauley's sophomore effort as they were with his first novel, citing for particular attention his strong characterizations and droll dialogue. As noted by a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*, the satisfaction of McCauley's novel "arises from the clever, revealing dialogue and the reader's intense involvement with the sharply drawn characters."

Karen Karbo, in her impassioned review of the novel for the *New York Times Book Review*, called McCauley "hugely talented," and mused that he is "really the secret love child of Edith Wharton and Woody Allen." She also highlighted McCauley's "knack for detail" and the way he applies it "to the self-delusion of an engaging cast of characters."

McCauley's third book, *The Man of the House* (1996), investigates father-son relationships, and is a slight departure for the writer, told in a more resigned and melancholic tone than his first two comically wry novels. It is also, arguably, his least successful novel to date.

Meg Wolitzer, in the *New York Times Book Review*, asserted that while McCauley had "mastered the small yet perfect comic gesture," his "control over a larger canvas is more problematic. We see him working through certain complex ideas about attachment and retreat, but his narrator's sluggishness in the face of these concerns can make readers impatient, the way people sometimes feel about chronically underachieving friends."

In 2001, McCauley published *True Enough*, which focuses on Desmond, a gay college professor and author of celebrity biographies, and Jane, a married public television producer, both of whom are middle-aged and vaguely discontent with their lives, and who develop a close bond while collaborating on a series of documentaries about "America's forgotten mediocrities."

Kevin Allman, in the *Lambda Book Review*, maintained that the novel's fundamental premise is that "the lies we tell other people aren't as corrosive as those lies we tell ourselves."

McCauley's most recent novel, *Alternatives to Sex* (2006) is a sharp, sophisticated social satire, set in Boston one year after the events of September 11, 2001: a period in American history when, as McCauley explained in an interview, "everyone was trying to decide between doing whatever it took to combat the collective evil of mankind and do good, and on the other hand, putting all altruism aside and doing just whatever it took to feel good."

Lewis DeSimone observed in *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* that McCauley's novel "makes much of the communal post-traumatic stress disorder infecting the country, as its sundry characters take on various obsessions in an effort to make sense of their lives, or at least to distract themselves from the fear and uncertainty that grip them."

In the universe of McCauley's novel, these obsessions include buying and selling real estate, compulsive house cleaning, and promiscuous online sexual hookups.

As with most of McCauley's other novels, *Alternatives to Sex* garnered generally enthusiastic reviews. Dennis Drabelle, in the *Washington Post Book World*, called the novel "a bravura performance, chockablock with well-chosen words, sweeping psychological insights no truer than they should be, and characters who just might fulfill their desires for lodging and love, if only they knew what those were."

In addition to his novels, McCauley has also published several pieces of short fiction. His story "The Whole Truth" was published in *Harper's* in 1992 and reprinted in *On the Couch: Stories about Psychotherapy* (1997), edited by Erica Kates. His autobiographical essay "Let's Say" was included in *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories* (1996), edited by Patrick Merla. "At the Threshold" was published in the *Boston Sunday Globe Magazine* in 2000, and "In the Greenhouse" was published in 2003 in the *Washington Post Sunday Magazine*.

McCauley has also published several reviews, articles, and profiles in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Gay Community News*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue* and *Details*, among other periodicals.

McCauley has taught creative writing at Brandeis University, Harvard University, Wellesley College, and the University of Massachusetts.

In 1995, he was named Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters by the Ministry of Culture in France, where his books are bestsellers.

He currently resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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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.