



## Russell, Paul (b. 1956)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Novelist Paul Russell is known for his intricate narratives and eloquent prose style. His works often focus, in a non-stereotypical manner, on the sexual and emotional complexities of gay male relationships, especially those that cross generations.

Russell was born on July 1, 1956 in Memphis, Tennessee. He studied English at Oberlin College, and was then admitted to the graduate program in English and Creative Writing at Cornell University. He was awarded an M.A. in English, as well as an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, for a collection of short stories and a novella titled "The Longing in Darkness," which remains unpublished.

Russell received his doctorate from Cornell in 1983 for a dissertation on the novelist Vladimir Nabokov. Upon receiving his degree, Russell was hired to teach English at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Before the publication of his first novel, a number of Russell's short stories appeared in literary journals: "The Witch and the Goatboy" in *Black Warrior Review* (Spring 1981); "Leiza" in *Akros Review* (Fall 1982); "After Mariah" in *Swallow's Tale* (Spring 1983); "Ricky" in *Carolina Quarterly* (Fall 1984); "Emma" in *Southwester* (Winter 1984); "Brushes" in *Epoch* (Summer 1985); and "A Hospital Room, a Tesseract, a Box Canyon" in the *Crescent Review* (Fall 1987).

Russell's first published novel, *The Salt Point* (1990), is set in the 1980s in Poughkeepsie, New York. The story concerns Anatole, a gay hairdresser in his early 30s, and his closest friends Lydia, who is heterosexual, and Christopher, an enigmatic bisexual. Friendships and loyalties are tested when both Anatole and Lydia become attracted to a handsome, sexually ambiguous, 18-year-old boy named Leigh.

Russell uses the "salt point" of his title--the ever-changing place in the Hudson where the river turns into an estuary, switching from fresh to salt water--as a metaphor for the shifting alliances and obligations among the novel's characters. "It's always changing," observes one of the characters of the salt point. "You can't exactly fix it, but it's there, a point. But it's never the same."

Russell followed that novel the following year with the publication of *Boys of Life* (1991). Exploring the outer limits of gay sexuality, the novel follows Tony Blair, a 16-year-old discovered in a Kentucky trailer park by the avant-garde filmmaker Carlos Reichart who is in town to make a movie. Reichart seduces Tony, takes him to New York, and casts him in a series of homoerotic, increasingly violent, sadomasochistic films (with such titles as "New Year in Gomorrah" and "The Gospel According to Sodom").

Finally breaking free of Carlos's destructive grip, Tony marries a rock singer, Monica, and moves with her to Memphis, Tennessee. However, Tony learns that his younger brother has been killed during the filming of one of Reichart's movies, and returns to New York to avenge his brother's death.

Many reviewers speculated that Russell had loosely based Carlos Reichart on the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe or the filmmaker Paul Morrissey. However, Russell subsequently revealed that his initial

impetus for the novel was a biography he had read of the essayist and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, who died at the hands of a male prostitute.

Russell's third novel, *Sea of Tranquility* (1994), is a densely layered and complex work spanning a twenty-year period and set in such varied locations as Washington, D. C., Florida, Turkey, Africa, and the moon.

Shifting between four different narrative points of view, the novel chronicles the lives of a remote, self-obsessed astronaut, his unhappy, alcoholic wife, their sexually precocious gay son, and the son's shy, cautious boyfriend. The narrative, which begins in the 1970s, follows each of the characters as they are forced to redefine their ideas of love and commitment in light of divorce, disillusionment, and the onslaught of AIDS.

*Sea of Tranquility* is included in The Publishing Triangle's list of the 100 Best Lesbian and Gay Novels.

Russell next published *The Coming Storm* (1999), which again tells the story of four interconnected lives, this time set within the claustrophobic world of a boys' prep school in upstate New York. Russell tackles the delicate, and politically inflammable, issue of pedophilia, as he traces the complexities of a sexual relationship between a 15-year-old student and his 25-year-old teacher.

The novel's original title had been "The Pederast," which, Russell stated, "captures the book far better," than its subsequent title, but was vetoed, "for depressingly obvious reasons," by both Russell's agent and his editor. "What I liked about 'The Pederast,'" Russell explained in an interview, "besides its starkness, was the way the term hovered over the book as it unfolded, leading one to ask, along the way, who exactly is the pederast in all this? Because it's not clear to whom that term should refer. There are various overlapping pederasties at work in the novel."

*The Coming Storm* won the 2000 Ferro-Grumley Award for Gay Male Fiction.

In his most recent work, *War Against the Animals* (2003), Russell explores the issues of class, community allegiances, and the divide between gay and straight culture. The novel is set in a small town in upstate New York, where tensions are rising between the working class locals, many of whose families have lived in the community for six generations, and newer residents--predominantly upper-class, and gay--who have begun moving in.

In homage to Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), which Russell avows has a perfect plot, *War Against the Animals* revolves around Cameron Barnes, an HIV-positive, middle-aged, retired landscape architect who has recently migrated from Manhattan, and Jesse Vanderhof, a 19-year-old local who, under the somewhat sinister influence of his older brother, gets involved in a scheme to take financial advantage of the older gay man.

The scheme unravels, however, when Jesse unexpectedly finds himself attracted, both emotionally and sexually, to Cameron. Jesse begins to view his burgeoning homosexuality as a paralyzing form of destiny: "like when their dog Apache had run in front of a car, and he'd watched it from the front porch, helpless to stop it from happening."

Russell is also the author of *The Gay 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Gay Men and Lesbians, Past and Present* (1994). The book contains short biographies of such luminaries as Socrates, Sappho, Oscar Wilde, and Gertrude Stein, among others.

In his introduction, Russell explains the premise of the book: "One of the ways by which gay men and lesbians have survived through the centuries is by recognizing one another in the various disguises we have worn. We have survived on the consolation of knowing there are others like ourselves. . . . The men and women whose names were secretly whispered, repeated, cherished as homosexual helped create and

sustain that amorphous phenomenon we know today as gay culture."

Recent short fiction and essays by Russell include "Underwater," published in Clifford Chase's *Queer Thirteen: Lesbians and Gay Writers Recall Seventh Grade* (1998); "The Golden Book of the Civil War," in Matthew Rottnek's *Sissies and Tomboys: Gender Nonconformity and Homosexual Childhood* (1999); "White Lily," in *James White Review* (Spring 1999); and "Delicacy," in *Gastronomica* (February 2001).

Russell is a Professor in the English Department at Vassar College where he has taught several gay and lesbian studies courses, including "Minority Culture in America: The Gay Experience," "The Gay Male Novel in America, post-1945," and "Queer Alphabets," a freshman-only course that features readings in gay and lesbian literature.

He lives in Rosendale, in upstate New York.

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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.