



## Spanbauer, Tom (b. 1946?)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Tom Spanbauer.  
Photograph by Michael Sage Ricci.

Perhaps best known for his queer take on the history of the American West in *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* (1991), Tom Spanbauer has repeatedly probed the darker undercurrents of sexuality, race, and violence, while simultaneously using his unique prose style to meditate on and question received notions of time, subjectivity, and history.

Spanbauer was born in Pocatello, Idaho, in or around 1946. Like many details of his biography, his date of birth is not known precisely. Interviews with Spanbauer reveal a personality consistent with many of his narrators' voices: his is a playfully irreverent sensibility that takes pleasure in the fictional quality of storytelling, even stories about his own life.

According to Spanbauer, he "was born in Pocatello, Idaho, in the Princess Drive-In Theater, in the trunk. I've always wanted to say that."

Spanbauer acknowledges that sometimes his versions of the truth, even those about his own life, blur the distinctions between fact and fiction. As he admits, "I lie too much . . ." And adds, "Plus fiction is the lie that tells the truth truer, so why stick to fact?"

Still, we do know that Spanbauer grew up in Pocatello on his family's farm, which bordered an Indian reservation. He also attended Idaho State University and then volunteered for the Peace Corps in Kenya.

In the early 1970s, he returned to the United States and worked as a counselor at Idaho State University, where he met and become blood brothers with writer Clyde Hall ("M. Owlfeather"), a Shoshone "two spirit," a relationship that has had a profound impact on Spanbauer's life and writing.

Spanbauer was married at this time, but eventually he came out as a gay man and divorced his wife. In 1978 he moved to New York City, where he worked as a waiter and immersed himself in New York's gay subculture. At this time, he began to write seriously with an eye for publishing his work.

In 1986, he graduated from Columbia University with an MFA in creative writing. In 1988, he published his first novel, *Faraway Places*.

In *Faraway Places*, Spanbauer tells the story of Jake Weber, a thirteen-year-old boy growing up in rural Idaho in the 1950s. Jake's adolescent defiance of his parents coincides with the murder of an Indian woman who is killed by the town banker.

When the victim's son, Geronimo, who is mistakenly assumed to be African American and her lover, is suspected of killing her, Jake is drawn into the mystery. Ultimately the two forge an unlikely partnership when Geronimo exacts his revenge on the banker.

Jake's eventual discovery of Geronimo's lynched body serves as a haunting realization of the racial

intolerance that saturates this Western town.

*Faraway Places* attracted the praise of critics, who found it an extraordinarily accomplished first novel and who especially praised its incantatory language and deft use of symbolism.

After his literary debut, Spanbauer began what is now his best known work, *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* (1991), while supporting himself as a building superintendent in New York City.

Turning away from the minimalist realism of his first novel, Spanbauer focused his attention more deeply on existential questions of history, truth, and the settlement of the American West, issues that make brief appearances in *Faraway Places*.

Jake's realization that "history was always just somebody's interpretation of the events, and not the events themselves" becomes the central motif in *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*, a historical novel set in the first few years of the twentieth century in Excellent, Idaho, a mining town where the mayor is also the madam of a whorehouse.

Ida Richelieu surrounds herself with a number of misfits--Alma Hatch, a bird-loving beauty who works in the brothel, Dellwood Barker, a green-eyed gay cowboy, and Shed, the mixed-race queer boy who turns tricks out back in the "Shed" and narrates the novel.

When Mormons invade Excellent and attempt to colonize it for themselves, a cultural battle ensues that leaves Shed's family decimated. As the lone survivor, he tells his tragic story over and over again to the tourists who gather around him in the Solo Light Lounge.

As he says, though, "a crazy story told by a crazy old drag queen should only make you wonder." Despite the compelling counter myth that Shed offers as a queer antidote to the racist legacies of conquest typically associated with Manifest Destiny, his story complicates our sense of historical truth and provocatively raises more questions than it can answer.

Although *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* challenges the received mythology of the West to expose an ugly reality, it is a book as vital as it is disturbing. The magical language and fully realized characters impart to the novel a poetic quality that has made it a cult classic.

After writing *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*, Spanbauer moved to Portland, Oregon. There he started Dangerous Writers, a private writer's workshop that has gained notoriety for its insistence that its participants probe taboo topics that get at a writer's core sense of self.

As Emily Chenoweth notes, in these workshops Spanbauer encourages his students "to find 'the sore place' in themselves and use it for their fiction." His methods have proven popular among a number of Northwest writers, many of whom have gone on to be quite successful. Perhaps the most famous among them is Chuck Palahniuk.

In the decade following the success of *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*, Spanbauer worked on his third novel, *In the City of Shy Hunters*, which he published in 2001.

Although it has not yet achieved the same cult status as his second novel, *In the City of Shy Hunters* is in some ways a more personal work. Tracing the experience of Will Parker, a young man raised on an Indian reservation who moves to New York City in search of his blood brother and first lover, Charlie Two Moons, the novel is set in the early years of the AIDS epidemic. It reflects many of Spanbauer's earlier interests, but pursues them in a contemporary setting and offers a gritty portrait of the dispossessed in the midst of a

mystifying pandemic.

As the time it took Spanbauer to write the novel suggests, this story was in many ways a difficult one to tell. In interviews, the author acknowledges that writing it almost killed him.

In 1996, Spanbauer was diagnosed with AIDS when he went to a doctor for what he thought was the flu. Since then he has struggled to make sense of the disease and its effects on his life.

As he explains, "Why I almost died is because I took a good long look at this virus and the death and anguish it caused. I lived with it every day for years, then came down with it myself. I went to a place so dark it is unspeakable."

And yet as unspeakable as this pain was, Spanbauer used the writing of *In the City of Shy Hunters* to make sense of his loss. Moreover, he credits writing the novel for perhaps being "the thing that saved my ass," for "the desire to tell the true story as clearly as I knew how kept me going."

Spanbauer continues to write. In 2006, he published a new novel, *Now Is the Hour*. In this work, he returns to Idaho in the 1960s and describes the life of Rigby John Kluesner, a gay seventeen-year-old, as he hitchhikes to San Francisco. Fleeing his Roman Catholic upbringing and the mores of Pocatello, the young man embarks on a journey to self-discovery.

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## **About the Author**

**Geoffrey W. Bateman** is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military*, as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.