

On Writing While Gay, Part 1

Alex Brianson

In late 2017, a Twitterstorm has erupted about the role of homophobia and heterosexism in the publishing industry. It centres on a gay journalist and author, Matt Cain, whose third novel was rejected by 30 editors or publishers because they considered it too ‘niche’ to sell. Off the record conversations with his agent revealed that the book, a comic novel centred around a gay man, was considered too much of a risk. It wasn’t literary enough to be pegged into the Alan Hollinghurst slot, and wasn’t commercial fiction because nobody would buy a book about gay people from a shelf in a supermarket. Apparently.

Of course publishers need to make money. That’s a given. But these days, decisions about which manuscripts to accept are generally made not by commissioning editors, but by marketing departments. And, despite seeing themselves as ‘creatives’, such people, I gather, want not books that could help them dream up a new sales strategy, but rather those that they can funnel into existing schemes and strategies. Eazi-sales’r’them. This one for Waterstones, that one for a Radio 4 review and the TLS, this one for Asda. I’d have thought this was quicksand – the best way to do yourselves out of a job by making yourself redundant. But then, maybe I worked in British universities too long. Academic staff are inconveniences for management; if they could find other ways to teach students and hit research targets, they would.

So, the book is being crowdfunded on Unbound, a new form of publishing, and it has become a minor *cause célèbre*, with famous folk contributing to the funding campaign and helpful publicity generated by the resultant press coverage. Cain is editor of *Attitude*, a gay lifestyle magazine; I’m sure his industry contacts helped in the publicity process, but cynicism aside, his case shows a real dilemma for gay writers, and I wish him success with his *The Madonna of Bolton*.

The problem he has revealed is one that confronts me as an unknown novelist: to be authentic, and use my ‘voice’ enough, I have to draw on my lifeworld, and for me, that’s as a middle-aged gay man. I want to write books that will appeal to a wide audience in terms of accessibility, albeit while refusing to patronise to readers by using only words of two syllables. To make it worse, like Cain I’m from an ordinary background. No Patrick Gale-esque middle class, arty circles on which to draw or in which to squirrel away gay characters among the predominantly hetero worlds of public schools, regattas, and art dealing. I love Gale’s work, but by rejecting his approach in my books, I may be perceived to be pushing myself into a market that, as far as publishers are concerned, is not even niche.

Writers need to draw on their imagination: that’s obvious. I can and do write straight characters, and women, and transgender people even though I’m a cisgender gay man. And I use settings or events that I have not experienced directly myself, or know from visits rather than long periods of lived-in immersion. But there’s a limit to how far I can do that while being authentic and writing in prose that’s original; Austen, not for nothing, famously enjoined writers to work on the milieu that they know, and if you want to follow anyone’s advice about writing, you may as well take it from the best.

What’s more, writing tangentially about gay life is as I have encountered it is not what I want to do. Sure, I’m drawing on a whole range of life experiences in my fiction, not just

those immediately linked to my sexual orientation, but I want to write as a member of a pivotal generation in gay male life and civil rights, at least in most Western countries. My cohort missed the worst of the AIDS crisis, but we came of age with it raging, a fact that shaped the prejudices we faced and which impacted on us psychologically. We took up the torch from those who had fallen, and campaigned, and lived lives that were far from easy. We created and maintained subcultures; we cherished and supported certain artists and music and film and fashion; we struggled to gain the greater equality of today. And all this merits expression, and recording, and transmission, before it passes with us.

I hope that I can convince agents and publishers to feel the same way, and that once I'm published, you'll agree.