

BEDFORD + BOWERY

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B + B Q + A

How the Author of *Killing Williamsburg* Got Questlove to Do a 'Suicide Set'



(Photo: Kimberlee Hewitt)

Tomorrow at **Trash Bar** there's a book party for *Killing Williamsburg*, and it won't be the usual wine-and-cheese affair: starting at 7 p.m., the one and only Questlove will spin songs by musicians who killed themselves. Morbid as it may sound, the night's "suicide set" is in keeping with the book's macabre plot: a cynical Williamsburger is jolted from his ennui when a plague of mysterious, gruesome suicides threatens to turn his "hip, hopping, happening" neighborhood into a ghost town.

Bradley Spinelli penned the novel in 2000, and it takes place in since-gone spots like Planet Thailand, Oznot's Dish, and L Café, where he used to write alongside Robert Anasi, author of *The Last Bohemia: Scenes From the Life of Williamsburg, Brooklyn* (unlike Anasi, Spinelli still lives in the hood). Spinelli recently dusted off the 13-year-old manuscript and published it with **Le Chat Noir**, a Williamsburg-based artists collective. We asked him whether he hates yuppies as much as his hero does, how the recent suicide of Colin Devlin affected him, and what the heck is up with this party, anyway.

Q Why the lag between the time you wrote the book and its publication now?

A I wrote most of it in late 2000. I landed an agent in 2001, started shopping the book around, didn't get any bites but was getting a lot of praise from everyone — and then, 9/11. Nobody wanted to touch the book, not even me. But as time has gone by and

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Sep 2013

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

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Williamsburg became a different place and blew up I realized the book has more of a resonance today than when I wrote it.

Q It’s hard not to think about 9/11 as your protagonist organizes a grassroots effort to dispose of all the corpses that are suddenly turning up. I gather that hit too close to home at the time?

A Disaster novels set in NYC at that time were simply untenable and I had done my homework pretty well. I was as horrified as everyone else after September 11 but I also saw some of the things I wrote about actually happen: there was a shortage of body bags, the National Guard came in, and Giuliani *was* wonderful for a moment. There’s another moment in the book where a lot of people were jumping off of buildings on Wall Street, which some of my friends were creeped out by.

When you revised the book for publication, did you change anything to

Q reflect the tremendous amount of change that has occurred in Williamsburg since you first wrote it?

A No, I didn’t. I revised the book in terms of mechanics, but didn’t change the substance of it. But I’m aware that in many ways this book has become an homage to a neighborhood that doesn’t exist anymore, because so much has changed. I’m acutely aware of how the protagonist in the book complains about how the yuppies move in when he himself is the next wave of gentrification. I’d say the only substantial change is that I put in mention of **Kokie’s**; when I was writing the book I was determined never to give that place way.

Q As I was reading I was tempted to see the suicides as a metaphor for gentrification, but then that seemed less and less likely. Is “the Bug,” as you call these widespread suicides, indeed a metaphor for something?

A I think there a lot of different ways to take it. Obviously my initial impetus to wanting to write this was a way to exorcise my own suicidal tendencies and to me the key moment is when the protagonist moves from this hyperbolic cynicism to showing genuine affection to his city and the people around him. If suicide is a metaphor I think it has to be for that, that everybody needs to find their own reason to live because life is killing yourself one way or another.

Q Were you thinking about the AIDS crisis when you wrote about how the government and media refused to acknowledge the gravity of the problem?

A No, I can’t say I thought about it because I didn’t live in New York then. The precursors are more literary – I was thinking a lot about *The Plague* by Camus and even more so *Blindness* by Jose Saramago. I was more fascinated with the idea of how you respond to an epidemic, how you make do when basic services are falling apart.

Q Of course Williamsburg is dealing with the suicide of **Colin Devlin**. Did you know him? Did it creep you out that his passing occurred while you were publishing this book?

A It did absolutely creep me out. I didn’t know him personally but obviously I’ve been eating at his restaurants since they opened. We all remember when **DuMont** and **DuMont Burger** opened. I think it’s very upsetting and tragic, especially for his children.



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- Q** How did the idea for the book launch come about?
- A** We had a venue, we had the event lined up, and my publicist said, “We really need a DJ.” And I said, “Wouldn’t it be great to do a set all by artists who killed themselves? The only guy I think who’d be crazy enough to do it would be Questlove.” I happened to know Questlove was doing his own book launch party for [his memoir](#), so I went down there and pitched him the idea and he loved it.
- Q** You’re having the party on World Suicide Prevention Day. Is that just a coincidence? Do you worry some people might find it a bit morbid?
- A** No, no it’s not a coincidence. I definitely did it on purpose. I want to go down on record as being anti-suicide. Obviously I’ve been talking about this book for 10 years so I’m aware it can be seen as very morbid but if you look at music there’s a lot to choose from. I think the big problem with suicide in this country is that we don’t talk about it – a lot of people are not aware how common it is, and a way to get people to see how common it is, is to show how many of your favorite writers or musicians have killed themselves.
- Q** There’s a moment in the book where your protagonist finds that he misses all the yuppies he used to rail against. After a dozen years in Williamsburg, have you become similarly accepting of them?
- A** I mean, you just have to roll with it, right? New York is all about change, it’s always changing and it’s always New York. I used to live on the Bedford stop and I moved a bit farther out; I still love Williamsburg. There are things about it that have changed for the better, certainly: I remember when cabs wouldn’t bring me out here from Manhattan, and now there are cabbies who know my neighborhood better than I know it. There have been changes for the worse, too. I was pissed about the rezoning — now with these tall buildings on the waterfront there are more people out here than the subway system can handle. But I have to say also, most people tend to mellow with age — I’m not as angry as I was 10 years ago.

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