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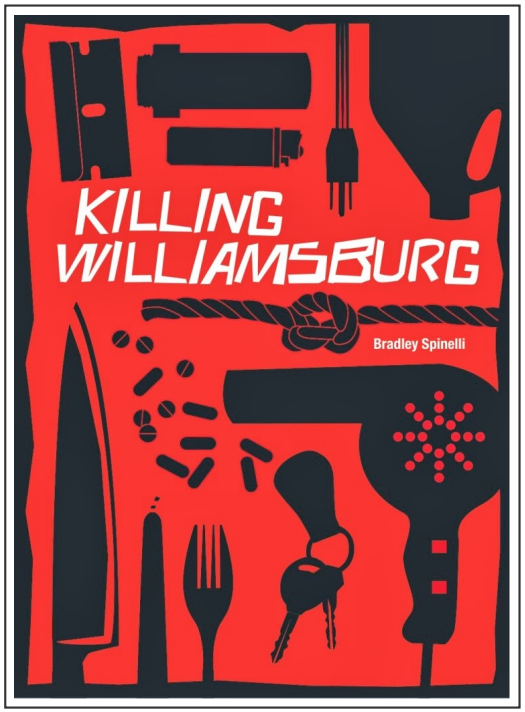
Writer on Writer: Daniel McCloskey Interviews Bradley Spinelli



Writer on Writer is a new interview series where I ask two small press writers to read each others' books and come up with interview questions for each other. In this second pairing of the series, I asked authors **Daniel McCloskey** (Pittsburgh) and **Bradley Spinelli** (Brooklyn) to participate. The latest novel by each author features a protagonist who finds himself enduring a suicide epidemic. McCloskey's novel, *A Film About Billy* (Six Gallery Press, 2013) follows Collin, a 17-year old trying to make sense (and a documentary) of his late friend, Billy; Spinelli's *Killing Williamsburg* (Le Chat Noir, 2013) is set

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in 1999 and narrated by a Gen-Xer, Benson, who has recently moved to newly-hip North Brooklyn.

As with the first pairing (Alex Kudera and Dave Newman), I am posting the resulting interviews in two parts. Stay tuned for Part II: Bradley's interview of Daniel, which I hope to post within the week. Please enjoy Daniel McCloskey interviewing Bradley Spinelli about *Killing Williamsburg*.

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Daniel McCloskey: *Killing Williamsburg* is about New York in so many ways. You describe the ins and outs of Williamsburg, the character of surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the history of Hart's Island and through it the city's relationship with death. The narrator, Benson, mentions the difficulty in scraping out an identity in a place where it's impossible to ignore that there are 6,000 people just like you, and in the beginning of the book many of those 6,000 are close at hand. He is surrounded by other struggling creatives who are relatively new to the neighborhood. His friends, his neighbors, the people he likes and dislikes that fill the many bars he occupies all share a particular demographic. By the end of this novel Benson's community is a kind of cross-cultural sample of NYC. In order to clean up the mess left behind by the epidemic, Benson is working side by side with Poles and Mexicans, hipsters and yuppies, friends with working class or service industry backgrounds, and even a "suit" from the uppity offices of Manhattan.

Is Benson living the myth of New York at the end of this book? The beautiful melting pot? Do glimpses into the empty apartments of all these different kinds of people make him feel closer to them or

is this just a case of differences falling away in the face of adversity? Could you talk about the separation of different communities in your city?

Bradley Spinelli: In New York, communities are separate but also right on top of each other. I think "melting pot" is a little off—it's more of a stew, because people retain their own cultural norms while getting seasoned by others. Fifteen years ago, Williamsburg was a very different neighborhood, and I learned a few words of Polish just so that the ladies at the bakery would be nicer to me. I think that the divisions are more based on class and finance than race or ethnic background, but even so, you always have the option of engaging with people in other worlds. There are so many people in such a small space, and any time you're in public there is a chance for lines to cross. A lot of New Yorkers have changed careers, or lived in other places, so it's surprisingly easy to find things in common with people who—at first blush—may seem very different from you. In Benson's case, I would argue for differences fading in the face of adversity. It's something we saw in New York on September 11th, and again with the blackout, Hurricanes Irene and Sandy. Differences do fade very quickly in emergency situations, and that's an intense binary flip in New York considering our necessarily thick skins. You can't be too sensitive to the people around you, day to day, when there are so many of them. We can be very distant in our own private worlds, but if, say, a subway line goes down, people will immediately share cabs with total strangers.

Daniel: One of the major turning points in your novel is when the deaths spread to Manhattan. A place where Benson escapes from his personal problems and drowns himself in work, sleeplessness, weed, and cocaine. Can you talk about why this was so hard for Benson? Is it because Manhattan became his personal sanctuary, or because the money and glamour that epitomizes a certain New York fantasy seemed to be enough to ensure the desire to live?

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Does it show the ultimate hopelessness of his current mission to stack paper and get ahead if the people that are "ahead" don't seem to be any better off?

Bradley: Back in 1999, Williamsburg seemed very far away from Manhattan. Yellow cabs would routinely refuse to take me home—now you can hail a yellow cab in Billburg. Back then, a lot of my friends lived in Manhattan and would never "cross the bridge." Remember what a big deal it was when the redhead on "Sex in the City" moved to Brooklyn? That was 2004. There was a much firmer division back then.

For Benson, it was an escape to shift his focus to Manhattan, especially after so many of his local friends were gone. And he certainly got sucked into the Manhattan cult—money and status, sure, but also the device of sex and drugs as pure escapism. It was a hopeless mission, because the epidemic couldn't be ignored. He felt it was chasing him.

I don't think Benson was ever really concerned about committing suicide himself. He fought his own demons, fought the effects of the epidemic, but… I was never worried about him. Not like that.

Daniel: In a way, your main character becomes the king of New York, or at least the top dog of Williamsburg. He becomes so known and respected that his identity is solidified. He is not one of 6,000, he is Benson the crew chief of Los Hombres--a somebody among somebodies. Do you think this is another one of the big New York dreams? Is this Benson's reward for sticking it out?

Bradley: No question—the New York dream includes recognition. Having "juice"—the kind of power that comes from notoriety, a currency that's better than money. Benson achieves a degree of this, but it would be a stretch to call it a reward. He suffers through some

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serious shit, and he'll be forgotten soon enough. It's noteworthy that he turns down more glamorous job offers in the "New" New York. He's looking for normalcy, not glory.

Daniel: Picking a main character in a suicide epidemic is a tricky business. You want to build a character that can survive long enough to illustrate the larger narrative. You and I both seemed to have the epidemic in our books travel in a kind of social way, that is to say it wasn't like *28 Days Later* where transfer of rage was via bite. Transfer of "the bug" was a little less obvious. Overwhelming sorrow, trauma, and the availability of an "exit" (like in real world suicides) seemed to be the triggers. Benson, I don't think it's rude to say, is a bit of a jag in the beginning of this story. Is his cold ass-holedom a kind of superpower which allows him to survive long enough to discover his talent for hard work and pragmatic thinking? Do you feel like the world needs some cold ass-holes out there? Were you concerned about alienating readers in the early chapters as you established this particular characteristic in your protagonist?

Bradley: Benson's kind of an asshole. It's true, and I make no bones about it. My wife says that Benson's—er, harshness? coldness?—makes him not only capable of surviving the epidemic, but capable of doing the dirty work of cleaning up the town. Yes, the world needs some cold assholes. Take our military, and the kids who come back from the Middle East after being trained and hardened, and how difficult it is for them to integrate back into society. Benson becomes a soldier, and a good one, because he was predisposed to a kind of detachment that is generally considered a hindrance in polite society. I recently read a fascinating book, *On Killing* by Dave Grossman, about humans' basic resistance to killing and how armies have developed methods to overcome it.

I didn't worry so much about alienating readers—with the graphic

violence, sex, and drugs in that book, there's plenty to put people off. But I held tight to Benson's character. I felt there was enough humor that some readers would enjoy his callousness, and some would be pulled along in spite of it, either because of the other characters, or because of the natural love-hate magnetism of assholes. It's important to the story I wanted to tell—if he's a nice guy at the beginning, where's the catharsis?

Daniel: This novel is particularly good at describing work dynamics. Your character comes out of his shell amongst co-workers in a way he doesn't for friends or lovers. Perhaps because he feels safe or invincible in the coked out semi-paradise of Manhattan. How do you think the value of work is integral to your character and his development? How do you construct work environments as an author? Do you draw off personal experience or do you grab a bunch of characters, put them all on the same team, and see what happens?

Bradley: The value of hard work, of rolling up his sleeves and getting dirty, is important to Benson. He doesn't deal well with idleness. Thinking got him nowhere, work was a kind of salvation. Ultimately, he had to do something because doing nothing was torture. This is very different from someone with more altruistic motives. It starts with personal survival.

I worked as a stagehand and lighting technician in New York. It was my introduction to a world where people easily spend 250 thousand dollars on a wedding or a bar mitzvah. I worked a bat mitzvah that cost over a million dollars, and that was almost ten years ago. The dancing girls and dancing boys in the novel—that's a real thing. Young, good-looking men or women are hired to spice up the dance floor. It's nuts. So I had a sense of the social dynamics in the techie world, and I liked the idea of using those kinds of skills to run a crew cleaning up dead bodies. It translates well: loading trucks, carrying

heavy stuff. Not a lot of sleep. And then it's wide open—you can recruit any kind of character you want.

Daniel: I know the release party was also an awareness event for World Suicide Prevention Day. Were there survivors of suicide at the release? How did you navigate the many graphic sections of this story in that social environment? Do you know anyone who has committed suicide?

Bradley: It was important to me to have the release party on World Suicide Prevention Day. The book has some very dark humor, but I wanted to go on the record as being anti-suicide. We got a lot of press because of DJ Questlove, and while I was concerned that people would find my "Suicide Set" idea morbid, I wanted to illustrate just how common suicide really is. Certainly I had some survivors at the event—both people who had lost loved ones and people who had attempted suicide themselves. I toasted to some people that I've lost. I lost a former scoutmaster, who became a friend and advisor when I was a teenager. And I lost two people in recent years who were in that gray area—drug abuse, and that questionable thing of was it on purpose or was it not. Which is not really much of a distinction. I quote this every chance I get: suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. *Homicide is sixteen.* (2010 data.)

Daniel: The point of view changes in three chapters of this book that really stand out due to technical authorial decisions: "Coney Island" p. 113 is a kind of unmarked flashback, the following chapter "Listless" is in 3rd person, and "Cold" p.142 is in 2nd person. The writing dork in me is curious about these decisions, especially the 3rd person section. Is "he" Benson, not himself, as close as he ever got to killing himself while in a past life daydream?

Bradley: In early drafts, I experimented with methods of documenting Benson's struggles with alienation and self-loathing. Later, the book changed a lot through cuts and restructuring—like shuffling a deck. "Coney Island" was originally told in sequence, but I thought it worked better as flashback—a sun-streaked, summertime almost-dream-sequence. "Listless" and "Cold" are about how you talk to yourself, especially in times of duress. Sometimes you address yourself directly—the second person—and sometimes you feel like things are happening to you as a third-person character. You can almost see it happening to you at a great remove.

In "Listless," I like how the third person winds down the second section and bridges into the second half of the book, when everything gets really heavy. It gives the reader a chance to get out of Benson's head and watch him wander into the post-apocalyptic landscape. I don't know if that's as close as Benson came to killing himself, but it's certainly the farthest he ever got from himself. And that's key. Once he gets completely out of himself, he's able to pursue something bigger than himself. It's almost like finding religion.

Daniel: Where is the best place to buy *Killing Williamsburg*?

In New York, the best place is Spoonbill and Sugartown on Bedford Avenue in the heart of Williamsburg. If you're outside of New York, check my website http://killingwilliamsburg.com/ for other options.

Daniel: What are you working on now?

Bradley: I'm working on a novel set half in Brooklyn and half in Bangkok. I've been to Thailand many times, and researched this book through two different month-long residencies in Bangkok. I've finally completed a first draft which means I have my work cut out for me. I'm also working on another screenplay—I've written several—that's been percolating for some time.

Daniel: Where will I find your new work on the internet?

Bradley: Recent stuff is an essay I wrote for Frontier Psychiatrist, and I also have a piece coming out soon for Mandy Boles. She asked me to write about "my first favorite book," so for anyone who read *Killing Williamsburg*, this will be something different.

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Stay tuned for "Part Two: Bradley Spinelli interviews Daniel McCloskey."

Find *Killing Williamsburg* here.

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Alex Kudera Interviews Dave Newman

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