

Where fact-ness rhythmically sways.

An Interview with Robert Glück • 23.10.2023



Two men, naked, sit on the ground in the foreground of the image, the image is cut off at their waists. The man on the left is East Asian and skinny, he has wet black hair and he is smiling. His elbows rest on his a-frame knees, his eyes almost meet the lens, but just miss. The man sitting to his right is white, he has auburn sideburns that poke out beneath a red bandana, tied around his head pirate style, he is propped against his arm that disappears out of frame. A small roll of furry tummy has formed as he leans slightly forward and gazes at the side of the other man's face. Bright, partial sunlight makes for hard, partial shadows – behind them is a body of khaki coloured freshwater. In the background a glossy rock formation emerges from the pool. Elements of a bygone surge; a length of orphaned branch balanced on the rocks top surface. A third naked man at the bottom of the rocks, back to us, far in the distance, is perspectively miniaturised. He is beginning to scale the rocks. Two vertical waterfalls in the background resemble pouring salt –

Hugo Hagger

they are the magical element – they are falling, they are ascending. One of the falls impacts the rock and we can see the misty splash it makes. The other perennially disappears, occulted by the man with black slick hair whose eyes, on closer inspection, now meet ours – he is still smiling.

Hugo

Hi Bob, would you be open to a correspondence starting next week? I also wonder if I might be able to ask you about *About Ed*, not sure how much you want to talk about its making before it's released.

'About Ed' is what Robert Glück calls his version of an AIDS memoir, but he is emphatic that the work also be described as a novel. He's been writing it for two decades. It is about the painter Ed Aulerich-Sugai who was Robert's lover in the 70's – they were both in their 20's. They eventually broke up and became very close friends. Like family, Robert says. The novel is about Bob and Ed, two gay men living in San Francisco. It moves deftly through their tender relationship, through its leaky classifications, Bob's boyfriends post-Ed, Ed's illness, and the rending effects of Ed's death in 1994. Robert collected Ed's rigorously kept dream journals for years – the journal entries appear at the beginning of certain chapters and are embedded throughout the book. Robert also seamlessly incorporates taped conversations he and Ed had before his death, as well as chapters containing notes Robert kept when making the novel.

Bob

Sure, ask about *About Ed*. I might be able to send you a digital copy if you swear to keep it to yourself and refrain from passing it around.

Hugo

I would certainly keep it to myself, you have my word.

Bob

Here you go.

(...)

Hugo

I just finished *About Ed*. I loved it. Very excited to ask you some questions about it next week.

Bob

You must be my ideal reader!

Hugo

I am very content with that idea.

(...)

Hugo

Can I ask you about horror films? One of my favourite passages in *About Ed* is Bob and Ed watching bad horror films for the “*lyricism for their failed effects*”

Bob

Although I went through an Argento period inspired by Kathy Acker – she showed me my first Argento film, *Inferno*— the love of bad horror was part of my relationship with Ed. I wrote a series of poems about them, just one line of description from the TV Guide and the actors' names. One film I remember fondly is *The Aztec Mummy*, a Mexican film that is completely outlandish. Mexican horror can be over the top of the top. A Japanese film, featuring a decaying mermaid, *Mermaid in the Manhole*, was amazingly outré, as this genre of Japanese films tend to be.

Recently I have been watching very early talkies. They are still basically silent films, with that kind of acting, close-up faces with six emotions washing over them, yet they have a freedom that is interesting, and of course the awkwardness that I love. One interesting thing about these films is that the actors sometimes chatter, and I think it's the kind of chatter they did when they were making silents – just marking time, keeping it going. *The Lady Refuses*, 1932, is a good example, and *Party Girl*, 1930. *Jewel Robbery*, 1932, with William Powell and Kay Francis is superb and perfectly amoral, not awkward at all. Kay Francis is wonderful, one of those big stars who is little known now.

I also went through a Gainsborough melodrama period. They are also jaw-dropping — *The Man in Grey* and *The Wicked Lady*, for example.

Hugo

I'm reading Kevin Killian's *Argento Series* at the moment.

Bob

Isn't it great?

Hugo

It is so good – he is always so surprising. *Mermaid in the Manhole*. I remember this from a boy at art school – the mermaid is just a hallucination? It's his "very normal human wife" that he brutally murders and cuts up in the bath (this seems to always be the trajectory).

Bob

I think my mermaid movie might be a different one?—she was in a barrel?

Hugo

Maybe the mermaid was in a barrel — neither are ideal. You mentioned awkwardness, I think that word is crucial. I aspire to awkwardness and obsess over it, but it's such a fine line — I panic if I'm *not* cringing at myself, but it can also be destructive. What made you really panic when reading an early draft of *Ed*?

Bob

Cringe worthy moments in my book. Well, the one I find hardest at a reading is when I describe feeling crushed when the Figures Press rejected a manuscript, it seems so tawdry emotionally. Yet that is one I kept in, because it's true, and others have this experience. Another is when I say, "*Ed was ill so long the catastrophe became who he is, and that is the worst I can say.*" But that is a true feeling as well, though one I am not proud of. There was another passage where I describe taking a bath with Kathy Acker, in the chapter *Bisexual Pussy Boy*. In the end I did delete that, because Kathy is a celebrity, at least in my world, and I thought it could be taken as bragging, which is a kind of distortion I don't want.

Hugo

I'm thinking about the title, about position. *About Ed*—'*About*' feels locative, as if the word could be substituted with an *Around*. What kind of freedoms, if any, are you setting up with the title?

Bob

I like the idea of looking at About's other meanings, especially circling Ed, getting closer and closer, say. In the first place I called the book Everyman, the name of the first section of the book (published as a long story ten years before I started thinking about a novel) and of the marvellous 15th-century morality play. But my book was taking so long that finally I grew tired of the name, and also I thought it might be a little pretentious. Meanwhile, when friends asked what I was working on, I'd say, oh, my book about Ed. Coming up with

titles can be an agony, but not this one. I recall the pleasurable moment when that reply became, oh, my book *About Ed*...

Hugo

You've been working on it for such a long time that I suppose those conversational shorthands reveal themselves to be essential. The dreams in *About Ed* are such a powerful device, they are a kind of bardo, they feel huge. In what way did dreaming change your approach to the novel, to its language?

Bob

Thank you for bringing the notion of bardo to the dreams. Of course the wonderful thing about writing is that it can mean different things at once. In the first place, I was thinking of this passage from the Thomas gospel: *Jesus saw some children who were taking the breast: he said to his disciples:*

"These little ones who suck are like those who enter the Kingdom."

They said to him: "If we are little, shall we enter the Kingdom?"

Jesus says to them: "When you make the two <become> one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the upper like the lower! And if you make the male and female one, so that the male is no longer male and the female no longer female, and when you put eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in the place of a hand, and a foot in the place of a foot, and an image in the place of an image, then you will enter [the Kingdom!]"

I love to think about "*Image in place of an image*." So yes, I wanted this to be heaven, the scrolling of images, each replacing the last, as opposed to Dante's heaven, where a life comes to a halt in a single image.

The third section of About Ed, 'Inside', is a poetic fantasia where Robert forms Ed's recorded dreams together in one text going backwards, as though they are all happening in one long night. Each dream episode is prefaced with "before that".

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I fretted over the dreams for years — I had to will the last section into a readable condition. By that I mean not boring, or casting the reader out of the book. I tried to ready the reader for what was to come. Ed is moving backward through one night and through his whole life and through one instant. I copied out about three hundred pages of dreams and reduced them to fifty pages, I could not go further, then I worked on the prose, condensing, hopefully not losing Ed in the process. Certainly I wanted to "*deliver*" Ed in this section in a way that no one has yet been delivered. To put him "*inside*" the reader. I was advised to parse the

dreams through the book, but in the end I could not, I wanted the reader to be lost in them. It's the risk of the book. I wonder if readers can get through it. Some of the weather in the novel is from the dreams, and a few other things as well.

Hugo

To put him inside?

Bob

Installing Ed inside the reader, I don't know what it means to a reader to experience this. It's an experiment. Is Ed welcome, oppressive, unpleasant, repellant? Are you lost in wonder or bored to death, or both? You have to tell me. I suppose I want to make you love Ed, as I do, but that does not rule out all these feelings.

Hugo

I've been reading a lot of early New Narrative works, and thinking about the role community plays — thematically and as a kind of device. The unbridling of queer Legibility within neoliberalism, inevitably comes inscribed with certain legitimacies; a kind of market place of identity-commodities. In 'Long Note On New Narrative' you wrote: "*Meanwhile gay identity was also in its heroic period — it had not yet settled into just another nationalism and it was new enough to know its own constructedness.*" Has the queer identity settled into another nationalism? How are you thinking about New Narratives founding tenets now, in the age of *pinkwashing*?

Bob

I am wary of responding to questions about relevance, the relevance of New Narrative to the present. I don't think I know enough about the present. And what I do know, everyone else knows. The battles of queer people are never over seemingly, at least in my country. The hysteria is aimed at trans people at the moment, how a trans woman using the bathroom will somehow strike a death blow to the nuclear family. In different states there are always new laws against us – we can't be teachers, we can't talk about being queer in different contexts etc etc. So that fight has not come to an end. Still, when I grew up, beinggay was a disease and a crime, and we have moved past that. Or have we? If Republicans get hold of the country, it will be goodbye to gay marriage. It might be goodbye anyway, with our corrupt supreme court. The queer teen on the playground is perhaps a bit less isolated? I hope so. Meanwhile the age of identity politics may be coming to an end, with its toxic dead-end manifestations. "*A marketplace of identity-commodities.*" Right you are. But the tenets of New Narrative are more process than subject, I think. How to climb

onto the stage of history, how to express the contradictions of the present, how to make apparent the reader's implication, how to write outside the expectations of form and genre, and of the culture generally. Could these be applied to writing about climate change? We will see.

Hugo

The photograph on the cover?

Bob

I like it because I am looking at Ed and he is looking at the camera, though that is our position in most of our photos, actually, and maybe in life? We were in Palenque, in Chiapas. We were looking at Mayan cities. Possibly we are on acid. I wonder where we got it? I had wanted the press to make the photo the entire cover, photoshopping the waterfalls to go up and up, surreally, darkness with two ribbons of white. But the press did not see it my way, my one defeat in publishing this book.