

A conversation with

R U F I T H O R P E

author of

THE KNOCKOUT QUEEN

Q: Was there anything in particular that inspired this book?

A: I think the germ of most novels is usually pedestrian, a speck of sand that lodges in the imagination where it accumulates subconscious goo pearl-style. In this case, it was just an errant thought. We were looking for a house, and I noticed that almost every house for sale in town was represented by the same realtor, and I thought: I wonder what it's like to be that man's daughter.

Q: The central relationship in this novel is the friendship between Michael and Bunny. Although physical opposites, where do you think their similarities—desires, fears, insecurities—overlap?

A: Well, most primarily they both have really unbalanced relationships with their parents and they both grew up inside the psychological maze of abusive marriages. Michael has trouble performing traditional masculinity and Bunny feels totally intimidated by the task of performing femininity. They are both faking it, and that bonds them together, though Michael is much more adept at this than Bunny. They both have complicated relationships to their sexuality and don't really know how to get the intimacy they want out of sex. They are both so hungry for love. That is maybe the most important thing they have in common: they need love and they have no idea how to get it.

Q: In what ways does their relationship change over time? Do you think there's something especially powerful about relationships born during the vulnerable, identity-searching years of youth?

A: When you get older, you tend to forge friendships that make sense. You have a lot in common, you like the person. You wanted to be friends with them so you became friends with them. But when you are young, you can become very close friends with someone almost by accident, leading to unusual and powerful combinations.

K N O P F Q & A

That has always interested me. Such friends do not always fit into our lives as we get older, rather our lives become odd shapes in order to accommodate the friendships, and that is the case for Michael and Bunny.

Q: Can you talk about what it was like writing from Michael's perspective. Why did you decide to tell this story from his point of view?

A: I think women often write as men as a form of wish fulfillment, and I am no exception. But the reader also approaches a young male character differently, which gave me more room to maneuver. For instance, I could explore the territory of anonymous sex without really having to deal with the concept of sluts.

However, I did not consciously plan any of that. I had been writing the book only about Bunny for about a year and it just wasn't working. She couldn't see herself clearly so she couldn't get the reader to understand the depth of what was going on either. Michael just sort of came to me, and right from the beginning he had that voice and that backstory. Anytime a character "comes to me" like that, it is usually some deeply repressed aspect of self, and sure enough, Michael started doing all sorts of things from my own life that I had never intended to write about. He just kept sort of wading out into the parts of the book that scared me, that I had been avoiding.

I worried about having taken the liberty of writing from the perspective of a gay man only after I had finished a draft. Did I have the right to do that? I thought about it and still do think about it a lot. And I don't think I do have the right. I would very much understand if gay men were angry or didn't like the book, and I would be surprised if I managed to capture anything uniquely authentic about the gay male experience.

However, I would also be surprised if the reader could not detect that Michael bleeds real blood and that the blood is mine. Whatever he is, as fake as he is, he's real. So it's a conundrum.

Q: The deterioration of Bunny's body—from a six-foot-three Varsity volleyball star to a boxer mentally and physically ravaged by the sport—is devastating. Was there anything in particular you were trying to explore here?

A: I guess I started thinking of it first because of professional football. All of the concussion research is very damning, and I don't think in fifty years football will be played the same way. To ask a young man, who knows so little of the world and himself yet, to make that choice, that trade: your body, your health and your mind, in exchange for a modicum of fame and money, seems deeply immoral to me. The devastation happens off screen after their careers are over, so that we can pretend the violence of football is safe and fun, the diet coke of violence. And the destruction of the bodies of these young men is a multi-billion dollar industry.

As much as we love violence and verge on the Roman in our craving for spectacle, we are also deeply uncomfortable with that part of ourselves, the ghosts of all our puritan grandmas yammering in our ears. (It doesn't matter if you don't actually have a puritan grandma, by virtue of living in America, you do now.) Instead of reconciling the two, we kind of just pretend it isn't happening.

At the same time, we are a culture obsessed with the surface of women's bodies (Victoria's Secret billboards, etc.) and yet uniquely squeamish about the reality of women's bodies (the number of senators who appear to be ignorant of basic facts of menstruation, etc.) So I wanted to see what would happen if I made those two habits of mind intersect.

K N O P F Q & A

Q: What was Michael able to see in Bunny that she could not? What was Bunny able to see in Michael?

A: Michael was always drawn to Bunny's lack of guile, her off-key whistling as she walks to school, the casual way she digs a wedgie out of her butt, and he can see a charm in it that she cannot. Bunny is alarmed by her lack of guile. She can tell that somehow the other girls always know how to pick the right lipgloss and make the right jokes, and she doesn't. She is involuntarily honest at all times, and this is the thing she would most like to change about herself. Michael is able to see that as beauty.

When Bunny first meets Michael he's hiding in her side yard to smoke a cigarette, and she always sees him like that, a kind of refugee she finds in her territory. He is hiding and she has no interest in doing anything but abetting him. She is unworried by his duplicity. It certainly never makes her think he is a bad person, as he sometimes worries about himself. Instead, she thinks he is probably right to hide and she thinks it is wonderful that he can slip away from the world. She wishes she could do that, and she thinks he is a little bit enchanted, the way he keeps his secrets, the way he can impersonate people, capturing their voices and body language so casually. He is magical to her.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from THE KNOCKOUT QUEEN?

A: Well, I don't believe books should have messages lest they collapse into propaganda, so I don't really have a moral or a fundamental truth I have hoped to impress. I don't know what the book means. But I really hope it touches you, and that you feel for Bunny and Michael, for Ray and Aunt Deedee, even though they are flawed and in some ways terrible, and yet so painfully loveable, and if you can stand to love them, then maybe you can stand to love your own terrible father, or your own train wreck childhood best friend, or perhaps most of all, maybe you can stand to love yourself. We all think we're so terrible, and maybe we are, but this is kind of it. You're you. You're not gonna get a new one. So you might as well dance.