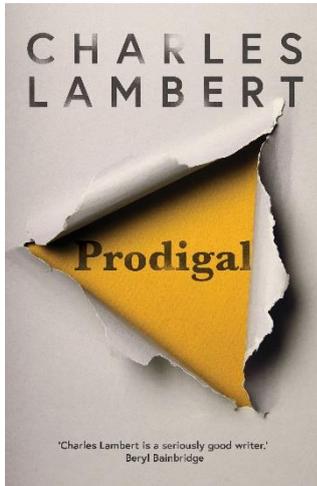


A Q&A with Charles Lambert, author of *Prodigal*



Describe your book in one sentence

When Jeremy Eldritch, aka Nathalie Cray, writer of SM erotica for women, is called back from Paris to the deathbed of his estranged father, he's forced to re-evaluate everything he thinks he knows about love, death, family and the whole damn business of living.

Why did you write this book?

The book was triggered by the death of my mother and the year I spent with her before she died. I wanted to look at what it meant to lose a parent, and to see the effect it might have on the surviving family members. This is with hindsight. At the time I think that what I wanted most was to exorcise the period as rapidly and completely as possible by making something from it that was utterly distinct from the direct experience of living with death. On a more conscious level, I also wanted to look at what I would call the myth of romantic love, exemplified by the quote from DH Lawrence that provides the epigraph

(And what's romance? Usually, a nice little tale where you have everything as you like it, where rain never wets your jacket and gnats never bite your nose, and it's always daisy time), and at the varieties of non-romantic love – both within and outside the family – that actually shape our lives. So it's a novel about love and death.

What kind of research did you do, and how long did you spend researching before beginning this book? I had to read some examples of the soft-core SM genre novels my protagonist writes - books with titles like *Bought for the Greek's Bed* and *Rawhide and Lace* - in order to produce a few pages in a similar style. I enjoyed doing this enormously, although I'm not sure I scaled the naughty heights of my models. If you ever read this, Meg Lacey, *chapeau!*

How do you select the names of your characters?

Names tend to arrive unbidden, with private associations I'm often only half-aware of. Sometimes they get changed halfway through the novel and even then I'd be hard pushed to explain why, other than to say that they just didn't feel right before and now they do. At other times, a passing detail confirms that I've made the right choice. There's a moment near the beginning of *Prodigal* when Rachel, Jeremy's sister, spots him before he has seen her, and thinks: "And here he is, trailing along like some teddy bear in the hands of a child he's too dim-witted to see." As soon as I'd written that I knew that Jeremy was the right choice, but I couldn't tell you why. Why is Rachel called Rachel? I don't remember but a little research tells me now that the name comes from the Hebrew word for 'ewe' and there is a stubborn sheep-like quality to her that I may have wanted to emphasise.

What do you owe the real people upon whom you base your characters? (if applicable, of course)

Unusually for me, none of the characters in this novel - with the exception of a Greek hotel receptionist - are based on real people.

What did you edit out of this book?

An earlier version of the novel had a long email written by Jeremy's alter ego, Nathalie Cray, to a fellow-writer of SM erotica, in the form of an interview. It was confessional, rambling, funny, and utterly self-indulgent. It's the kind of thing a writer absolutely needs to write - in order to understand his character more completely - and then, with enormous reluctance - to remove. And so, following the advice of three people whose judgement I trust, that's what I did.

Have you ever considered writing under a pseudonym?

Not really, although my work does tend to careen merrily from one genre to the next, winning and losing readers as it goes, and the idea of separating the books out and repackaging them in a more user-friendly way

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- thrillers, horror, literary, etc. - has crossed my mind. But the truth of my writing, if it has a truth, is that it doesn't repeat itself, and that's what makes it mine, so it seems wrong-headed to try to hide this behind a variety of brand names. As a writer I'm both promiscuous and unfaithful and these are qualities I value, although I'm neither, I hasten to add, in my private life!

What is the first book that made you cry?

I'm not sure, although it may have been *The Land of Far Beyond* by Enid Blyton (which actually gets a mention in *Prodigal*). As a young man I was reduced to tears by Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy* more than once, often in embarrassingly public places, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry broke me up one summer where my body was under a beach umbrella but my suffering heart was in India, and just the thought of Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* continues to make me weep. But the most recent books to bring tears to my eyes have to be Kent Haruf's extraordinary trilogy, *Plainsong*, *Eventide* and *Benediction*. The things that make me cry most are loss and an overwhelming sense of pity and the uselessness of pity, and unexpected acts of kindness.

What's your favourite under-appreciated novel?

This is an interesting question because it brought to mind James Purdy, a writer I loved and read everything of thirty years ago, when he was published in the UK by Gay Men's Press, but hadn't read since. So I picked up *In a Shallow Grave* and there it was, not only an extraordinary and extraordinarily under-appreciated novel by an under-appreciated writer, but also, with its disfigured hero, a precursor to *The Children's Home*; even more, it shares with that book its central concerns: power, love and, in an odd unsettling way, redemption. Purdy is dark, comic, vernacular, queer. Read him!

Name the book you've re-read the most

Probably *The Lord of the Rings*. That, or Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems*.

What are you currently reading?

James Purdy (see above)! And *The Secret Barrister's Stories of the Law and How It's Broken*.

The super power you wish you had

Invisibility. I *am* a novelist.

As a writer, what would you choose as your mascot/avatar/spirit animal?

A sloth. They see the same world we do, but differently, and they blend in perfectly with their surroundings. They also have few natural predators. What's not to like?



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