

Daniel Allen Cox Finds New Ways to Come Out

MATTHEW HAYS

THE FOURTH NOVEL of Montreal-based author Daniel Allen Cox, *Mouthquake* (Arsenal Pulp Press), has a confident swagger about it. This is somewhat unexpected, as the book is about an awkward, stuttering gay youth who struggles through the anguish of being an outsider and longs for another lad. "I had the stink of a kid with a past," says the never-named protagonist. Gay readers will immediately recognize the sometimes brutal relay race that is coming of age. But Cox injects his experiences and emotions with so much more, including the double lens of growing up in bilingual Montreal with a nagging speech impediment.

Followers of Cox, an ex-porn actor (and yes, that's his real last name) and a former Jehovah's Witness, will recognize his style, but *Mouthquake* takes us into unexplored terrain. Haunted by trauma, defiant in his various minority identities, the Stutterer with No Name guides us through a scattered mind and shows us a complex character managing, somehow, to survive the gritty streets of grungy Montreal. With one chapter titled "Penises I Have Loved and Not Loved," Cox reveals that his sense of humor is alive and well, even when navigating through some harsh emotional passages.

Cox sat down with me over poutine and beer to discuss *Mouthquake*.

Matthew Hays: This is your fourth novel. As I read it, I sensed a real shift in your writing. Am I right?

Daniel Allen Cox: In terms of structure, I've noticed since writing it—and a few other friends have noticed this too—that the structure of the book mimics a stutter. I didn't plan that. It's disjointed, but then so is much of my writing. But there are strong connections. It feels like I've made a building out of sentences. I've had periods of my life in which I've acknowledged my stuttering and many years in which I didn't. With the writing of this book, I'm embracing the odd way I speak. It's kind of building on the idea that there are different kinds of fluencies and rhythms. It's about being able to interpret each other's unique signals. Within a stutter there are gaps. Within a stutter there are links between words that are not always obvious, or sometimes indecipherable.

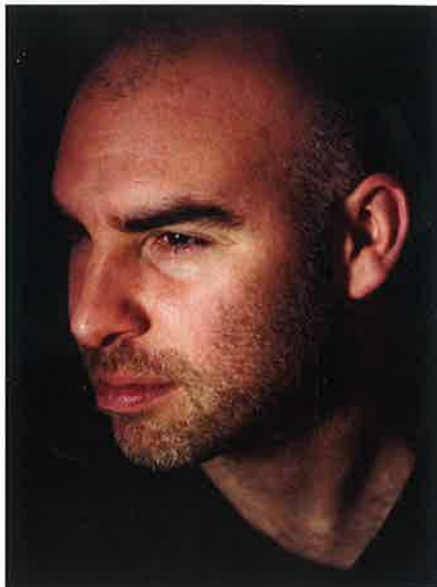
MH: The fact that you made the stuttering a part of your character's traits and identity suggests that you've been thinking a lot about it of late.

DAC: Yes. It's funny, I was recently inter-

viewed by a colleague, and they had it transcribed and sent it back to me. It included everything I said, including all the stutters, and how they morphed every word. I had never seen my speech on the page before, which was very illuminating. I wish it on everyone to have this experience. At certain places, they wrote "indecipherable," because they couldn't understand what I said. I hope with the book that people can come up with their own interpretations of what is written, rather than me explaining it. I wanted the rhythm of the book to be different, and as it turns out, I made it like a bit of an analogy for stuttering.

MH: Is there a gay connection to stuttering?

DAC: I don't use the term queer speech, I use the term bent signal, but it's all the same thing. Different ways of signaling you are gay to others. When I was doing a porn film



once, I was given these ridiculous lines to say, and I wanted to do a genuinely good job. The dialogue had something to do with the Brooklyn meatpacking district, and all the wonderful language that comes with that. I stuttered through them, and mangled the lines. I wanted to do it again, but they said no, and told me guys would get off on how I spoke. They left all of my stuttering in. So at the very time I was learning how sexy being gay could be, I learned that stuttering could be too, and empowering. I forgot about speech for many years after that but somehow felt that I wanted to write about it.

MH: Back to your novels: if there's a constant, it's that there's a stylistic tension in your work that's both otherworldly and strikingly realistic. It's quite the balancing act.

DAC: For me, realism is usually more of an

afterthought. I write mainly about character, first and foremost, to the point where I'll be neglectful of many of the important physical details. I'll often write a scene with dialogue, but I'll forget to say where they are, what they look like, what they're wearing. In my first drafts the interactions are most important. I find I'm often catching up with the realism aspect during the later editing process. I feel no pressure to be accurate with time, place, and history. I take a lot of liberties. Fiction allows you that convenience.

MH: In *Mouthquake*, the central character has had some kind of trauma that may or may not have caused his stutter, correct?

DAC: It can be difficult to address themes of suspected sexual abuse in a book that presents many other types of vulnerability. The main character learns that it's okay to approach the subject obliquely, because it can take different angles of lighting to get the right illumination, the right nuances in the shadows. He also learns that music helps with the discovery process, which doesn't stop when the album is over.

MH: Your upbringing as a Jehovah's Witness is also in evidence, including a scene in which Michael Jackson looms large. Significance?

DAC: I learned a lot about speech from the *Watchtower* publications, the magazine of the Jehovah's Witnesses. All of them are written in this super tendentious style with lots of leading questions, and in a very closed manner where every article references itself or other *Watchtower* publications. It's a form of fiction, really. I learned a lot of fiction skills by reading that Jehovah's Witness literature.

MH: The book has a strongly melancholic tone, though it's never mawkish. It's about remembering a painful adolescence.

DAC: I was working to describe about how my memory maps itself out. I did a lot of memory recovery while writing it. Our memories are often not entirely accurate, but they reflect our feelings about the past. We recall things in bits, snippets. So rather than write a book that somehow artificially fit together without seams, I wanted to leave the gaps in there. There are years that are missing. This was a conscious thing. So the book resembles a stutter, but it can also resemble how memories are recalled. And of course the character is mapping out his memories over music.

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