

LITCITY

INTERVIEW

Thomas Glave

>>>>> BY ALEXIS DEVEAUX



Author and humorist Tom Waters appears at Desiderio's on Broadway tonight (Thursday, Oct. 6) from 8-10pm to promote his new book, *First Person, Last Straw* (AuthorHouse, 2005).



A passionate writer and political activist, Thomas Glave is the author of the highly acclaimed collection, *Whose Song? and Other Stories* (City Lights, 2000). His work has garnered numerous awards and honors, including an O. Henry Fiction Award; and he is recognized as a dynamic, emerging voice in contemporary literature. Assistant Professor of English, General Literature, and Rhetoric at SUNY Binghamton, Glave describes himself as someone who travels between cultural and geographic spaces. He visits CEPA Gallery this Tuesday, October 11 (National Coming Out Day) to share his perspectives on democracy, imperialism, gay rights, and human rights struggles in the United States and abroad.

You've been compared to Richard Wright and James Baldwin. How do these comparisons sit with you? Have either of these writers influenced you? If so, in what way?

The comparisons are certainly flattering and very honoring, but I would be both foolish and naive to take them too seriously. People—critics and others—often seem to feel the need to say that one is “like” this writer or that writer, but they’ll say something else, or nothing at all, next week, as soon as the next interesting preoccupation comes along. I do like the idea of being considered part of a particular black/African diasporic literary tradition, but, pragmatically speaking, being compared with Wright or Baldwin isn’t going to help me write the next sentence. At least it hasn’t done so up to now. I would like to think that I’ve learned a great deal from both writers, and from many others as well. I especially love Baldwin’s elegant, precisely crafted prose, in which one can, incidentally, hear many echoes of Henry James, another writer whose work I have long loved. I also really admire Baldwin’s powerful use of African American sermonic language in his work, a language that clearly inhabited his blood as a preacher’s son. That particular language isn’t the tradition out of which I come, as someone raised closer to the

Anglican Church more common in Jamaica, but I’m fascinated by the rhetorical similarities.

Can you talk about how your identities as “Caribbean” (Jamaican, specifically), “gay,” and “black male,” shape your world view?

That’s an extremely complex question! I think I can most succinctly respond to it by saying that I recognize more than ever that I am what I call an “in-between” person: Someone who walks and travels constantly between cultures, geographical regions, types of blacknesses, and political/historical realities. In Jamaica, where the word “black” usually means, these days, “dark skinned,” I am considered “brown,” not “black,” but still of African descent. In the United

States I think of myself very much as a Jamaican American—that is, a person who claims the “American” because I was born and partly raised in the U.S. as the child of Jamaican immigrant parents, but who maintains powerful emotional, political, and cultural ties with the “old” country of ancestry and slave history: Jamaica. In my Jamaican American self identification the “Jamaican” is much more significant to me than the “American”, but the “American” is also important to me because I know that my parents migrated to the U.S. partly in order to provide their children with opportunities that would have been largely unavailable to us in Jamaica.

With your first collection, *Whose Song? and Other Stories*, what were you trying to achieve thematically?

I actually didn’t work on that book with a thematically cohesive project in mind. Along the way, I found that each story formed—required—its own distinctive path, technically speaking; I tried my best to follow that path, intuitively, but also with some awareness of technical considerations. When I began working on the stories that would ultimately make up *Whose Song?*, and even quite near the time I completed all of them, I didn’t look on the book quite as a whole book, but rather as the end result of a number of fictions I’d spent some years working on. I was always very interested in the particular themes that each story presented, and which I engaged with more deeply through consistent revisions of each story, but in most of the stories’ cases I wasn’t always aware of a specific story’s “theme” until I’d actually completed it—usually because I was very preoccupied with the technical writerly challenges having to do with characters’ voices, the particular narrative language that each story required, who the characters were or turned out to be, why they did the things they did and said what they said, and so on.

As someone who is deeply involved with words and expressive ideas, what do you think about the power or lack of power

of words like “revolutionary” and “radical?”

I think that the words are less important than the actions of those who claim to be one or the other, or both. I’ve known some people who would like to think that they are “radicals,” but who in fact turned out to be as capitalistic and narrow-minded as the very people they claimed were the “enemy.” I also think that some people, especially those who haven’t done political work themselves, attach romantic notions to those words. After all, it is somewhat “sexy” to be considered a bona fide “revolutionary” or “radical,” isn’t it? This “sexy”-ness and romanticizing might be two reasons why so many people adore Che Guevara’s photographic, iconic image, but know little about his actual life and work. I remain more interested in what people, myself included, are actually willing to do: are we prepared to put everything we believe on the line in order to achieve something in which we passionately believe? Are we prepared to assay a radical assessment of our prejudices in order to move toward a radical improvement of ourselves and the lives of others? I think it’s also important to remember that in a society like the U.S. today—one filled with notoriously short attention spans, a lack of commitment to scrupulous, conscientious language, and the reality that almost everything, especially language, can quickly be co-opted, appropriated, and commodified by those who exert power and influence—words like “revolutionary” and “radical,” in the wrong mouth, can quickly become both cheap and suspect.

Can you talk about the impetus behind the essays collected in your latest book, *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dis-sent*?

There are 17 essays in the collection, all of which emerged from very different places. Two of them were “commissioned,” I guess, as keynote addresses; several others came out of my political activism, especially in Jamaica, which was especially draining and painful at times, given the local population’s general hostility to homosexuality; one sprang up out of grief at the 2004 murder, in Jamaica, of a friend and fellow Jamaican activist, Brian Williamson; several others developed out of a sense of fury over the too-frequent elusiveness of this thing we call human rights. All that said, I also was very interested, as this book developed, in the ways in which, it seemed to me, nonfiction prose differed, structurally and stylistically, from fiction. I was curious about the possibilities of what I could achieve with nonfiction with the craft I had so far developed, as I wondered what I might learn, as someone who had previously written mostly fiction, about writing in general. I was curious, once again, about “breaking” some of the writer’s “rules” I had learned while learning new ones that might also be stretched, played with, experimented with, and, in pursuit of a new, yet unknown language and mode of expression, finally “broken” or discarded altogether.

Alexis DeVeaux is a poet, short fiction writer, essayist, educator, and biographer. She teaches at the University at Buffalo.

Thomas Glave at CEPA’s Flux Gallery (617 Main Street, 856-2717), Tuesday (Oct. 11) at 7pm. Free.

10/6

“If All of Buffalo Read The Same Book” events with author Paul Auster. 12pm, **book signing**, Borders Books, 2015 Walden Ave., Cheektowaga (832-5400). Free. 4pm, **book signing**, Barnes & Noble, 1565 Niagara Falls Blvd., Amherst (832-5400). Free. 7pm, **movie screening** of *Smoke*, presented by Auster with Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center and Just Buffalo. Market Arcade, 639 Main St., Buffalo. \$10

Comedy/Book Signing, 8pm. Official release party for Tom Waters’, *First Person, Last Straw*. Desiderio’s on Broadway, 5827 Broadway, Lancaster. (683-7767). Free.

10/8

Orbital Series, 7pm. Poet Michael Davidson. Big Orbit Gallery, 30D Essex St. (883-3209). Free.

10/9

Book Signing, 1-3pm, with Christine A. Smyczynski, author of *Western New York: An Explorer’s Guide From Niagara Falls and Southern Ontario to The Western Edge of the Finger Lakes*. Athenaeum Hotel, Chautauqua Institution, Route 394, Chautauqua. (800-836-ARTS) www.ciweb.org/ Free.

10/11

Creative Writing Workshop, 7-9pm. Through Nov. 29. “Playing the Fiddle While Rome Burns, or Writing Lyric Poems in the Age of Globalization,” with Michael Kelleher. CEPA’s Flux Gallery, Market Arcade Building, 617 Main St., First Fl. (856-2717). \$235, \$200 for members.

10/13

Contemporary Writers Series, 4pm. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Tracy Kidder. **Lecture and discussion** on his book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer*, in the Grupp Fireside Lounge. 8pm, **reading, book signing, and reception** in the Montante Cultural Center, Canisius College, 2001 Main St. (888-2662). Free.

RECURRING EVENTS

EM Tea Coffee Cup Open Mic Poetry Series, 7-9:30pm every Tuesday. EM Tea Coffee Cup Café, 80 Oakgrove Ave. (at Hughes). (884-1444) Free

Foot Notes Walking Tours, Every Sunday at 11am through Oct. 30. Literary tours of Buffalo literary sites. Meet at Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site, 641 Delaware Ave. Reservations: 826-0897 or literarytours@netscape.com. \$10

Just Buffalo Writers Critique Group, 7pm, meets first and third Wednesday of every month. Open to Just Buffalo Literary Center members; call 832-5400 for membership details. Suite 512, Tri-Main Center, 2495 Main St. (832-5400).

Northside Writers Group, 7pm, first and third Thursday of each month. Ascension Lutheran Church, 4640 Main Street, Amherst. (626-4204) Free.

Send weekly literary event info (name, description, location, date, time, and admission) to: editorial@artvoice.com, subject “In The Margins” or fax to: 881-6682. Listings must be received by the Wednesday before publication for consideration.

CALL FOR WORK

Artvoice Flash Fiction Contest

Artvoice announces the first-ever Buffalo Flash Fiction Competition. Flash fiction is fiction that says it in a flash—1000 words or less. For this competition, all stories must be about or contain some reference to the old Buffalo Central Terminal. Future contests will address other sites of interest in Buffalo. Send entries to editorial@artvoice.com, or mail to:

**ARTVOICE FLASH FICTION CONTEST,
810 Main Street, Buffalo NY 14202**

Make sure to include your name, address, phone number and email. Deadline is November 1, 2005. Winners will be announced in December and the top three will be published in “In the Margins.”