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Getting Characters into Bed

William Sutcliffe on The Love Hexagon

Elizabeth Michaelson

"I never really told anyone I wanted to be a writer," says William Sutcliffe, though his secrecy is a moot point now— *The Love Hexagon* is his third novel.

Communication (or the lack thereof) is the theme of the 29-year-old Londoner's book about the romantic permutations of three men and three women in their late twenties. The book's emphasis on talk makes Sutcliffe's previous disinclination to discuss his desire to be a writer both funny and appropriate.

At the swanky h2k bar in New York City, we sit amidst a well-heeled after work crowd. In honor of his visit, Sutcliffe orders a Manhattan. When our drinks arrive we clink glasses self consciously. "I was quite coy about wanting to write for a long time," Sutcliffe continues after an exploratory sip. "I didn't really read until I was about 15, when I suddenly discovered books. And ever since I started reading, I wanted to write. Although I never really thought it was a possibility until university ..."

At Cambridge, Sutcliffe wrote for and performed in Footlights, the comedy troupe that has launched the careers of many famous actors, including the Monty Python cast, Stephen Fry, and Emma Thompson. Although he didn't love performing ("I found it too scary, to be honest"), Sutcliffe enjoyed writing, and decided to try fiction. After graduation Sutcliffe took a job as a television researcher and began to write *New Boy*, which was published in 1996.

Our glasses empty, we hail the waitress. This time Sutcliffe orders a vodka martini. The waitress is unimpressed, and rattles off several vodka brands in response. "Er, yeah," Sutcliffe says, chastened. "I thought I was being sophisticated, ordering a vodka martini," he admits.



The Love Hexagon
by William Sutcliffe

"I think many writers are obsessed with seeming clever. I admire language that is transparent, that you can see right through. I admire writers who take a backseat, and allow the reader to communicate directly with the characters."

--William Sutcliffe

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The idea of six characters stumbling into and out of sexual entanglements—a love hexagon—came from Sutcliffe's search for a book with "sex and adventure": "Particularly when I was younger, I was looking for this book and I never found it. ... I thought, I'm going to write the book that I wanted to read, the kind of book where the characters all do sleep with each other," he smiles.

Novels by compatriots Nick Hornby (*High Fidelity*) and Helen Fielding (*BrIDGET Jones' Diary*) also served as catalysts for *The Love Hexagon*. Sutcliffe was impressed by the books' success, but found Fielding's and Hornby's characters bemusing. "The books are not about a world that I recognize at all. The attitudes of the people and they way that they think are alien," he says.

This disparity in outlook is generational, according to Sutcliffe. "I think that my generation, born in the 1970s, see things in a very different way in terms of gender. I thought the subtext of their (Hornby's and Fielding's) books are 'I'm a man: I don't understand women, I'm afraid of commitment; Or, I'm woman: I'm paranoid about my weight, I'm desperate to get married.' They seem like such outdated gender clichés, but for that generation that's how it is." Sutcliffe shrugs.

Social Embarrassments Waiting to Happen

"With the people I know, the world seems very different," he notes. "It's not that the opposite sex are impossible to understand: the opposite sex are your friends, but it doesn't make it any easier to get them into bed or to have a relationship."

"I know," I said glumly.

"Most people don't want to sleep with someone without establishing some kind of friendship," he continues. I nod. "But once you've established some kind of friendship, it takes a degree of mind reading to find out what the other person wants. That's why there's so many awful social embarrassments waiting to happen. ..." I down my drink in agreement.

With that in mind, Sutcliffe developed the plot and characters. Sutcliffe continues, "In my initial conception of the novel, Lisa and Josh were the baddies. But because of the style of the novel, where I had to get into the heads of each of the characters, I really learned that I don't think there are very many genuinely malicious people in the world.

Liking and Disliking Characters

"I think that's when the book began to work, when Josh and Lisa became on some level sympathetic. And by the time I finished it I couldn't tell who I liked or who I disliked anymore. They were all doing their best within the limitations of their intelligence and their decency and their ability to communicate.

"It's all about miscommunication," he says. "When you're in a good relationship, you're with a person you communicate quite well with. But the rest of the time, particularly when it's about sex, it's very hard to communicate."

"Huh," I said.

"Vast Fortress of Chat"

Which brings us to dialogue, or "the vast fortress of chat," that Sutcliffe's characters have constructed. Sutcliffe studies his vodka

martini. "I'm interested in writing about how people talk, the vernacular--"

I interrupt: "I like the line, 'You didn't tell me she was promiscuous. I would have tried harder.'" This refers to Graham's aborted encounter with Helen, the novel's funniest scene of romantic disaster.

Sutcliffe nods, "I always enjoy writing dialogue. I felt that like I knew how Guy and Graham felt and thought ... They were the easiest to write—two guys sitting and talking."

While the conversations meander realistically, the descriptions in *The Love Hexagon* are straightforward and evocative: "There was a certain thrill in being wronged-- an exhilarating righteousness which was pampered and fed by the guilt of Keri and Guy," Lisa realizes at one point. Sutcliffe works hard at the simplicity. "I think many writers are obsessed with seeming clever," he offers. "I admire language that is transparent, that you can see right through. I admire writers who take a backseat, and allow the reader to communicate directly with the characters. That's what I work at. I rejob the book again and again until it looks as though it was effortless. That's what I aspire to, where all the work [that goes into it] is hidden."

Sutcliffe adds that he has started his next novel, a media satire. But it's grown dark outside, and Sutcliffe has to go: "I'm meeting my girlfriend," he explains.

Elizabeth Michaelson is a freelance writer living in New York City.

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