



Interview with Bart Yates

By PJ Gray

From the award-winning author of *Leave Myself Behind* and *The Brothers Bishop*, Bart Yates offers *The Distance Between Us* (Kensington), his compelling new novel about a gifted yet dysfunctional family of acclaimed musicians torn apart by consuming grief and loss. Despite their tragedy, Yates successfully layers his strong, intelligent characters with elements of humor, compassion and humanity.

With the release this month of his new work, Yates shares his thoughts with ChicagoPride.com.

PJ: Your main character, Hester Parker, is a seventy-one year-old accomplished pianist with a very sharp wit. How difficult was it to find her voice?

BY: After I came up with the first line of the book, Hester's voice was easy. But I did spend a lot of time trying to find the right first line for her to say. I tried a lot of opening lines that felt wrong, but once I stumbled across one that I liked, her voice was ready to go.

PJ: How much of your personal experience as a musician was used in writing about a musical family?

BY: Quite a bit. I've been around a lot of virtuosos, and have always been fascinated by them, because many of them were so dysfunctional in their relationships and behaved so badly towards other people. But they were also brilliant, and funny, and capable of great kindness and generosity. I wanted to write about them because I felt like I could do it with authenticity and humor, but also with some compassion. My training as a musician also helped me to write about some of the music and the composers that I love.

PJ: You can't help but like Hester even when she is verbally cruel—due, in part, to her sense of humor. How do you compare to her? Do you cope with stress the same way?

BY: I don't think I'm as mean as Hester, but I'm definitely drawn to humor with an edge to it. She says things I'd never say, but since I put the words in her mouth there must be part of me that thinks along the same lines much of the time, even though I'm not consciously aware of that. As far as stress goes, I mostly cope by curling into a ball on the sofa and muttering to myself.

PJ: Another central character, Alex, is young and awkward and experiences a difficult and challenging coming out process. When it comes to sexual cues, what advice would you give a young person to help them avoid humiliating and/or traumatic mistakes?

BY: I don't really have any advice for anybody about anything. But Alex gets into trouble because he tries to force something to happen with another guy when he isn't sure what's going on between them. He probably would have done a lot better if he'd just asked if the attraction was mutual. He might not have liked the answer, but in the long term it could have spared him a lot of pain.

PJ: The story is set in the fictional small town of Bolton, Illinois. How do you see the coming out process evolving in rural America today?

BY: It's still not an easy thing at all to grow up gay in rural America. It's better than it was thirty years ago, but one of the sorriest aspects of the culture war in this country is about whether or not it's okay to be gay, and a lot of the bigotry directed at homosexuals is rooted in the small towns. I think

we've still got another generation or two to go before the worst of the anti-gay sentiment is behind us.

PJ: Your book deals with a family torn apart by the loss of a loved one. The heated dialogue between them is emotionally intricate. Were you inspired by any personal experience?

BY: Not really. The deaths in my family through the years have actually made the rest of us closer, thankfully, which is the exact opposite of how things go for Hester. But I think a lot of what happens to a family after a death is predetermined by how dysfunctional the family has been all along. Hester's family was just a bomb waiting to go off, and the death of one of them lit the fuse.

For more information about the author, go to www.bartyates.com.