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“STEAMING AND GROSS AND READY”

## AN INTERVIEW WITH NATHANIEL G. MOORE

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**NATHANIEL G. MOORE** is a Toronto author. His books are *Bowlbrawl* (Condondrum, 2005) and *Let's Pretend We Never Met* (Pedlar, 2007) His current editorial projects include *Toronto Noir* (Akashic, 2008). He is currently working on fiction and video art projects. He is the features editor of *The Danforth Review* and a columnist for *Broken Pencil*.



**The Puritan:** You've been generous enough to send us a piece of short fiction for this issue of *The Puritan*. In an interview with rob mclennan (2007), you mentioned a larger, longer work-in-progress entitled *Monster Ballads*. Is "Goodbye Horses" part of that work?

**Nathaniel G. Moore:** *Goodbye Horses* is now the name of what will go down in history (or future?) as my first official novel. It will be ready somewhere between late 2009 and January 2015. *Monster Ballads* was a working title, based on a CD compilation of mushy love songs from the 1980s (e.g. *Never Tear Us Apart* by INXS).

**The P:** In the same interview with rob, you briefly describe the plot of an upcoming novel, titled *Randy Savage's Moustache*. So far, this "coming of rage" novel seems to carry resonances of the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah. Will any of your upcoming fiction follow the transplantation pattern of *Let's Pretend We Never Met* (2007)? Do you plan on transplanting other past artists or mythical figures into your future work?

**NGM:** I'd love to get more transplants. Actually, yes and no. Again, I always talk about upcoming novels because I've never really had one, because I'm too shy. But I have reached the limits with "Macho Man" Randy Savage. I'm the same age he was when he fought Hogan at *Wrestlemania V* in 1989 so things have sort of come full circle. It seems you can't go more than 10,000 words in this story without feeling, as

a writer, font type or reader, a complete lack of resolve. I mean you know that Ricky or Delilah is just going to cut off his father's moustache ...Or is he? I smell a novella. A novella called simply "Savage".

I wanted to do a few stories based on Martial, the Spanish Catullus. I have a fiction manuscript in the works that is being put together in the same way as *Let's Pretend We Never Met* was, which was a bit of a flea market pull-a-part. Paul Martin is in it, but as himself. It's strange to revisit words and remix them. Unlike film, which you can't really re-shoot in the same way, at the same moment, words connect writers to their intent, and if you reread something and realize you had no intent, well, that's when it's time to delete.

**The P:** How has the "staged" spectacle of professional wrestling (or any other aspects of 'sports-entertainment') influenced the development or structure of your work?

**NGM:** Here in Canada it has done nothing but alienate people. And I'm not just talking about the Toronto language poetry community/Special Olympic team. I'm sure it's alienated interesting people as well. From other countries. I haven't really heard anything though. I hope it hasn't influenced my work too much because I would like to get laid. Like any industry, pro wrestling is a desperate money-grabbing bog of shallow fakes, people who have façades and go out of their way to portray themselves in certain realities or perceptions that are completely false. And Canadian publishing is no different. The only difference is these fakers are fighting over a five-dollar bill and a blog mention instead of a seven-figure pay-off and a blog mention.

Cindy Sherman's artwork has influenced my writing more than wrestling in that the viewer is invited to confront the physical possibilities of abject and post-cruel corporeal states of being. Wrestling simply rehashes mainly white homosocial (THAT IS A WORD) working class/suburban angst.

**The P:** Which authors are you currently reading and why are you reading them?

**NGM:** I am reading Ali Smith, Martin Amis, and Gil Adamson. Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2004) is astounding, controlled and maniacal. Slightly maniacal. I haven't quite decided. I read Amis all the time, this time it is *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), which is a bit of a mystery, he writes about vampiric skies and things of that nature, there are all these sinister lights in the air that do all these terrible things, and it starts out very bleak, like a bad bible film. And I mean bad as in dark, demonic, black sheep, bad ass, bedeviled. Adamson because one of my editors suggested I read her. *The Outlander* (2007) is amazing and she is Canadian, so we have that in common. The Canadian part. I'm also reading Sara Tilley's new novel *Skin Room* (2008). She writes with a poetic flare that never gets into (flare) gun territory. She is a master of perspective. I admire that; I admire people who can write true to their

intent. It's a great brand new novel that everyone and their sister should own.

**The P:** Can you explain your interest in the 'documentary' style of fiction of the type you've demonstrated in *Bowlbrawl* (2005) and *Let's Pretend We Never Met*, with its "found" cell phone messages, overheard conversations, and meetings with literary agents?

**NGM:** Do you know that in terms of narrative starting points in fiction, that consumer voyeurism or consumer vanity will be very popular as a writing perspective in a few years? This is a form of documentary fiction, which is an appropriation technique from meditation and focus group eavesdropping. Consumer perspective shoplifting in the first or third person. Everyone will be doing it, then they will get serious.

As for the instances you mentioned, the use of text messages was to use a modern narrative accent that didn't rely on a character's actual voice. Again it came down to being able to afford the rights to these methods of communications. Text messaging is relatively cheap, and easy to memorize. I liked how it made fun of those passionate textsters who send each other jingles at all hours, and I wanted it to be presented in sterile and technological objectivity, hence the art show scene.

The meeting with the literary agent and some of the quotes from editors were more or less actual quotes from interactions with editors along the way with the Catullus project.

**The P:** In "The Thief's Journalism", one of the first poems in *LPWNM*, the speaker is involved in a "subconscious reconstruction of: / an uninsured past". To what degree does literature thus, in some way, *insure* the past? Has your work been in any way an effort to preserve a version of Catullus that you want readers to remember?

**NGM:** If they even remember Catullus that is great. My version? Well, you kind of need to read the first version/person to understand mine. I enjoy talking about Catullus because when I listen to myself talk about him at readings, I feel like I'm inducting him to the AHBHF (Amazing Human Being Hall of Fame).

My past has definitely not been insured. It has been preserved though, in a negative light, through my eyes, and I feel the same has been done to Catullus. I wanted him to be explained and showcased as more than a Sappho cover artist, or some perverse brute who couldn't think past hedonistic necessity. I think he had deep emotional needs. He invented being tormented but also wanting to torment, and to move on, to share pain, and pay for sex.

**The P:** *LPWNM* is concerned with the various functions of the body. There seems to be a recurring oscillation between the preparation and eating of flesh, and the sensual joining of flesh through sexual intercourse. Several images such as Catullus'

infamous “meat sock” serve to bridge the gap between these two opposing ideas. Why in such an intimate treatment of Catullus, have you chosen to conjoin opposing functions of the flesh?

**NGM:** The flesh functions differently for all of us. Some of us claim to be vegetarian as well, but bread and cheese does not a vegetarian make. I wanted to exploit modern masculinity in some humiliating, non-linguistic way, and I thought a white gym sock full of cooked meat was as realistic a treatment. I’m sure you could convince a group of drunk idiots (men) to eat from a sports sock, not to say women are above eating out of socks, I don’t want to generalize.

Catullus struggles through this modern re-entry in the world, he’s a bit rusty. I would imagine he’d be starving as well. I also feel that, based on research, he loved to eat, and be domestic, and that somehow, modern life is against six hour meals. So I wanted him to protest somehow. I also felt of course that it was disgusting, and a way he could energize himself in between scenes in the creepiest way. People took great offense to the meat sock, but there it was one cold day in my psyche, steaming and gross and ready.

**The P:** You mention in the opening section of your latest novel, *Let’s Pretend We Never Met*, that you have been grappling with Catullus for twelve years. How much study of antiquity did a book like *LPWNM* require?

**NGM:** A lot. Towards 2006 I had narrowed my research down to a handful of books, but in my personal collection, I have about 35 Catullus/Rome books. It was originally a difficult novel written by an even more difficult human being, going back to the late 1990s and into the 21st century. So I turned it into a play, a poetry book or the ever rude ‘novel-in-poems’. But categorically at the end of the day, it’s a poetry book. To write this you take about 17 pages from the last draft of your novel, spread it thin over about 40 pages of any poetry manuscript you have in your house, that you’ve grown yourself, and you start getting these ideas.

Catullus’s arrival was key, and based on some strange Catullus literary criticism I’d been working on for about five years, trying to link his relevance into the impotent cannon of pop culture. Then I realized he was not popular culture. I saw this book as a way to finally unload Catullus, and because it was poetry, I figured if I had a poet living in the manuscript, maybe people would be a bit more interested than if it was just me holding a flashlight inside shrugging, saying “Well, this is it. Want some water?”

**The P:** How much of *LPWNM* was performed live, at various readings across the province? How much does the live reading of poetry shape the final versions we see in print?

**NGM:** A lot. I read one of the first pieces live and won a poetry slam in 1999. So Catullus was then given a bit of a higher ranking in subjects I would bore people with over the next ten years. I made a spoken word CD as well (don't worry none are in existence anymore, they have been recycled and are now part of a pull-out tray in a VIA rail train). And it worked, I mean, I found reading beside him, around him, through him, about him to be a great way of finding this really strange poetry voice. One that only a sliver of the population in Canada can actually hear.

**The P:** In *LPWNM*, historical figures from ancient Rome find new life in modern-day Toronto. This act of literary transportation is also one of translation, revising the obsessions and passions of Catullus for a radically different period. What elements of the Roman Catullus were most easily transformed and translated?

**NGM:** I don't really enjoy geography, but the elements of Catullus were essential for the project to have life as it were. His insane and suggestive passions for anything that his lovers touched, including birds and their own lips, his need for sympathy, cruelty, his need to conquer, or feel that he was conquering. When he gets upset in his poems it's not different than in his real life. I found him to be inconsolable, which made him real and likeable. And highly bathe-able. I think Casey Affleck could play Catullus well. Also his ability to make fun of his friends and politicians, and basically a morbid fascination with sexual betrayal, which I think is the (i)moral of the story. He's a pain-seeker, and then absorbs this pain and hopefully becomes "solved" instead of "stone."

**The P:** You've interestingly titled one of the sections of the book "Ill Familial". How does this reflect the dangers of transplanting a character too far from his particular time? Does this displacement serve to enhance a sense of what is universal, or does it instead rob both reader and character of the advantage of familiarity?

**NGM:** You can never be too far from your particular time. That section is all about family. My ill family. And Catullus is invited like Scrooge or a second string cousin to visit the meatloaf battlefields of the 1980s. In some poems, it feels like Catullus was there all along, watching me grow into this halftone that types before you.

**The P:** According to scholarship, with Catullus and his peers comes a revolution in terms of the relationship between the poet and his audience. Prior to the new, lyric poetry of Catullus, Roman poets were required to inform or educate the audience through the conjuring of collectively understood mythic or historical figures. Catullus begins to treat the subject matter of poetry in an elliptic, rather than didactic, manner, whereby the audience overhears or intercepts the poetic message. An elliptic treatment in many ways encourages an imaginative collaboration between poet and reader. Considering this, how much can *LPWNM* be called an imaginative collaboration between you and Catullus? Considering the relative difficulty of some of your poetry, to what degree does your poetry demand an imaginative collaboration

between the reader and the text?

**NGM:** I would imagine that I would like to read difficult poetry that isn't erasure poetry or the ESL poetry movement currently racing up the charts here in Canada, that sort of less is more but really it's less poetry, and repeating quotidian ironies that are no longer ironic like types of spaghetti or types of sparse stuff that just reads like lint lists from the law offices of Lint & Minimalism. If someone can convince me they've written poetry, and can entertain me, challenge me, and if they demand the same of me, well, then I don't mind dancing. I can respect that. I don't imagine an imaginative collaboration between reader and text. I believe the book is about the way we think about love and desire, the actual highs and lows of romantic purpose, the lines crossed between biological, physical, emotional and cognitive functions, and if that can be captured on the page. Maybe it's just the way I think, or the way I'd like people to think I think. But again, there is something very haunting about this book, like perhaps I was moved by tears to write it, my tears, or tears not yet shed. Or tears shed in a shed not yet built. My guess is no, but did Catullus and I collaborate? Maybe. Maybe we went to the well one too many times.

Again, poetry, no matter who is writing it, is from a person, whether it's first, second, third, and you can line up lip-tips and eye sockets and DNA, and sometimes it works, sometimes it is seamless and sometimes it is difficult. Sometimes it is silly and off-key. If someone reads my book, I believe collaboration has begun.

**The P:** In the "New Lesbia Cycle", there is reference to Catullus being led on, both "lexically" and "sexually". Given the distance between the average reader and Catullus, how much does your poetry lead the reader on? And, more importantly, does it leave them wanting more definitive answers to the questions you so elliptically pose?

**NGM:** Those poems were written from Lesbia's point of view, and are entirely imagined, even though she'll claim different. I think it sounded gentle, lexically / sexually, leading him on. She's explaining how she might have been cruel, or it might appear, throughout history and his poetry that she was being cruel to him, but what if it really wasn't all that big a deal to her? What if she resisted his literary construct, walked away from it? Isn't that natural? I think it would leave readers wanting to know more about Lesbia/Clodia Metelli. That's how I got hooked. You're only as good as your dancing partner, and those two were made for each other, for a time.

**The P:** If Catullus' thematic world is concerned, first and foremost, with a fetishization of, and obsession with, unrequited love, to what degree was the writing of *LPWNM* an exorcism or purgation of your own personal emotions or obsessions? Do you feel that your readers will feel a similarly personal response to your work, or, given the relative obscurity or elitism of your poetry, is the reader more likely to have a purely intellectual reaction?

**NGM:** My exorcisms have always been elite. Even if a reader has any sort of reaction, that means they have read it, but beyond my capitalistic goals, I feel that I wanted to intellectualize and also de-emotionalize (new word?) my own personal emotional obsessions and social cruelties and casualties. And yes, those casualties know who they are, and where not to find me (i.e. standing behind them in the mirror, caring about them, thinking about them, etc.).

**The P:** Your poetry seems to structure pain in a very mathematical fashion. You have chosen to catalogue and map this pain through scientific terms, referring to genes, chromosomes, and the staged predictability of an experiment. Do you expect the reader to engage with the characters in an equally scientific manner? If a lyric poem masks pre-meditation with the illusion of spontaneity, where does your writing fall between these two categorizations?

**NGM:** The process of or acknowledgement of a pain variable has yet to be recognized by the scientific community, despite the publication of my studies. The discovery of said gene within the reader, the poet(s), or characters in the book is sublime, I mean, they don't download them or interact with these scientific concepts. Since love is something that has happened and will happen and is infinite, then subjective and scientific appropriation spoiling the spontaneity or strengthening a predictability in the work actually is subversive in my opinion. I don't think that I overdo it with the science, no more than I do with the meat socks. Love is a bit of a pre-meditation, I mean, how impossible is it to really write about that moment you first kiss someone for the first time, when you break through your own space and time and enter into someone else's? I guess I just felt the biological stuff a lot more when I went to recast Catullus's first make-out session in thousands of years. I thought it would be a big deal for him, and it was. I would also suggest that I have nothing more to say about Catullus, that I haven't already whispered to you in my creepy voice.

**The P:** In *LPWNM*, you have deliberately juxtaposed the personal trauma of your transplanted characters with an ironical imprint or overlay of your own personality. Where do you draw the line, if one can be drawn at all, between the text as text (free from the poet's persona), and text that gains meaning from the inextricable presence of the artist? Is there a danger of involving one's own personality too deeply into a text?

**NGM:** Because the author goes out of his way to create an introduction and let the reader in on the con so to speak, I believe that even if I let characters breathe on their own, which I did, people would accuse me of imprinting and overlaying my own personality into the work, and I'd be tied up in small press court all day and all night.

I have to be present during my writing, but not in a narcissistic or annoying way

which you may or may not be alluding to. I enjoy working around the ember of poetry, and keeping it alit. I have concerns for poets who are craft-light and don't pack enough gauze for all the trouble they expect empathy for. The danger for me was being involved in the text at all. Just last night someone read a sentence from my book and turned to me and said, did you write that? I was shocked and felt like I was in the principal's office.

But I see what you mean. However, though I won't name names, a lot of the voices were never NGM-re-mastered. They remained as crusty and unaltered as the bar napkins on which they were spat out.

**The P:** Original Hulk Hogan (and the classic handle-bar moustache) or Hollywood "nWo" Hulk (and the cheesy painted-on Beard of Villainy)?

**NGM:** I would say the later because his face was/is more honest and less watery as a baddy later on (puffy because of all the steroids he was mostly water back in his prime) and also because he was voted most hated in 1996, and ended up becoming the centre of wrestling's counter-culture. But Terry is a Leo and don't even get me started on them.

*Interview conducted by Spencer Gordon and Tyler Willis  
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