

New Fiction from M.C. Armstrong: Excerpt from Novel 'American Delphi'

Note: M.C. Armstrong's new novel, 'American Delphi,' will be out October 15, 2022 from Milspeak Books. It has been hailed as "riveting, wise, and wonderful." Please feel free to [pre-order here](#), or purchase wherever books are sold.

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From 'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong

"How do you tell the world that your brother is a psychopath?"

"You don't," my mom said. "Get away from the screen and journal about it."

She took this black and white notebook out of her grocery bag and handed it to me like it was supposed to be the answer to all of my problems. So here I sit, notebook and pen in hand, being a good girl while Zach is standing in the kitchen literally jumping up and down about how the world is ending and how America has more cases of the virus than any other country on the planet and how he saw a video of somebody fall off a motor scooter in Indonesia and watched the guy's face go black before vomiting blood and dying right there by his scooter and you would think, by listening to my brother describe the story, that he was talking about a corgi or some Australian getting playfully punched by a kangaroo on YouTube. But this is somebody dying and for Zach it's like the best thing that's ever happened. It's like it's confirming all of his theories about apocalypse and totally justifying all of the whips, knives, guns, and fireworks he's been collecting in

the closet of his crazy-ass bedroom upstairs.

“Buck says the virus is the medicine,” Zach said, getting up in my face and breathing his hot breath all over me.

Buck London is Zach’s special friend. Buck’s an old man who just moved into Orchard Chase and smells like mothballs, and I can tell from Zach’s smell that he’s been spending way too much time with Buck.

“Get away from me,” I said. “You’re not practicing social distancing.”

“We are the virus,” Zach said.

“You are the virus,” I said.

“Nobody is the virus,” mom said, tossing a salad with a bunch of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and falafel (feel awful). Mom said we should use the plague as an excuse to go vegan, but there goes Zach behind her back, just standing, smiling at me as he’s shoving disks of salami into his mouth. It’s like he’s proving this psychopathic suicidal point by eating meat while mom is making a salad, and I said: “NINA!” because I call Mom by her name when she won’t listen. But by the time Nina turns around, Zach’s pretending like he’s tying his shoe and I’m taking a picture of this journal just in case he kills someone someday.

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Mom said her biggest fear is that I end up a “twentysomething grandma” like Tanya Purtlebaugh. Mom’s entire life seems organized around making sure that I don’t end up like Mrs. Purtlebaugh, but I said “seems” because Nicole, Tanya’s daughter, did just have a baby at seventeen and Nicole’s two years older than I am and her mother is exactly seventeen years older than Tanya which makes her mother thirty-four and that’s only three years younger than Mom which, if you do the

math (which I do), it's pretty clear: Tanya Purtlebaugh is not a "twentysomething grandma." In other words, Mom's entire mission in life right now (and she's succeeding) is keeping me from having sex so I don't basically have a ME which, if you think about it (and I do), is really sad and it makes sense why she lies and covers up by blaming it all on a "twentysomething grandma" who's not actually a twentysomething grandma.

Mom doesn't want me to see what she calls "the elephant in the room": Her biggest fear is actually another ME. I am the elephant. Mom is afraid she's like the virus and has passed on all her bad decision-making to me and when I told her, in the fall, that I didn't want to play tennis in the spring or take any "private lessons" with Pastor Gary, she flipped out because she basically wanted to ensure that I was constantly quarantined in clubs and sports and stupid boring activities where I was sweating and bickering with other girls instead of having "idle time" with boys, but look at everything now. What happened to the tennis team? Same thing that happened to track, soccer, drama, ballet, baseball, archery, karate, and everything else—canceled.

Everyone's in their room by themselves except Nicole with her screaming mixed-race baby, but guess who's used to being alone? The elephant in the room, that's who.

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"This is like a taste of being old," Mom said as we drove to the grocery store, Zach riding shotgun, me in the back.

"Nina," Zach said. "Please tell us exactly what you mean because I wasn't listening."

"Okay, Zachary," Mom said. "I mean this is what we've been looking forward to all day, isn't it? Our one chance to get out of the house, where nothing is happening, just so we can listen to some music in the car and see a few people at a

store. Think about how many old people don't have soccer practice, piano, or archery."

I'll give Nina credit: she made me see things differently for a second. There was an old black woman covered in a clear plastic bag in the produce section picking through apples really slowly, and I felt bad because the one place where this old woman gets to go is now invaded with danger, and we are the danger, and I wonder how long until she gives up and has some granddaughter teach her over the phone how to have groceries delivered to her front door by a drone?

"Off your phone!" Mom said to Zach as we passed by the meat shelves which were picked totally clean of everything except the meatless meats. So much for America using this crisis to wean itself off fossil fuels and diseased beef.

"Look!" Zach said.

Passing by a little mirror near the cheap sunglasses, I saw my stupid, long witchy nose. I hate my nose.

"Look!" Zach said.

"Look at what?" I said.

I put my palm up to my nose as if to smash it back into my head. We wheeled past the glasses and down the coffee aisle so Mom could get her "medicine" when Zach showed me a picture from MIMI of the socially distanced sleep-slots for the homeless of Las Vegas, a parking lot that had basically been turned into a dystopian slumber party for all these Black Americans who live in this city with a hundred thousand empty hotel rooms. But because we are America, we force the poor people to sleep in a parking lot, and there was this woman in a white hijab or bonnet standing over the homeless like she was some kind of monitor to make sure the poor were keeping their distance. Or who knows? Maybe she was nice and asking them if they were okay, or if they wanted soup. What was not

okay was the way psychopath Zach was grinning as he was thrusting the screen in my face.

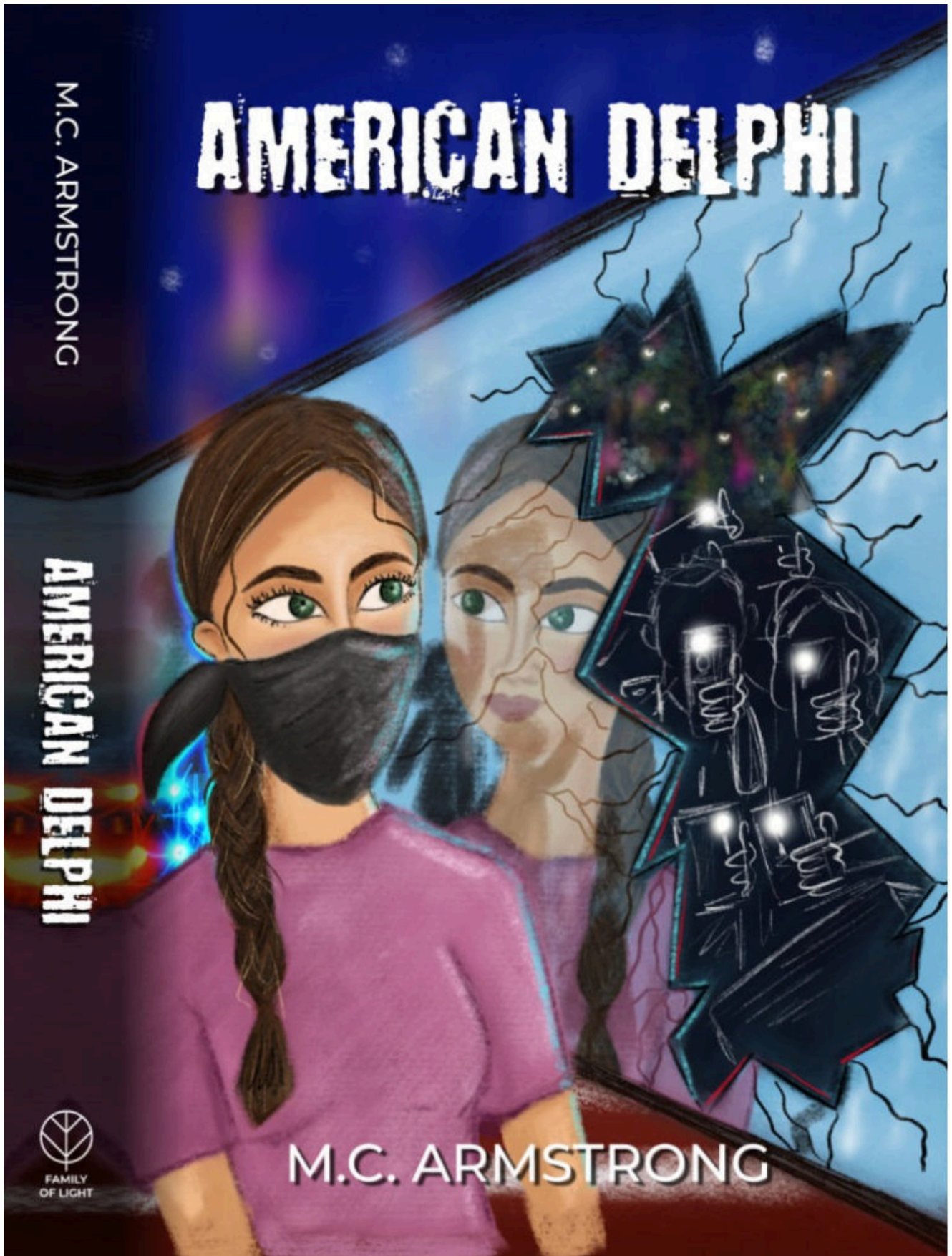
“Why are you smiling?” I said.

“He’s smiling because he’s alive,” Mom said, sweeping three bags of Ethiopian coffee into our loaded cart, and Mom’s answer would have been totally perfect if it weren’t for one thing: IT’S HER ANSWER. NOT HIS! MY BROTHER IS SICK!!!

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I have a wasp in my room because my window won’t seal. But a wasp is just a bee, so his brain is as big as a flea, which means he won’t fly through the crack, and there’s a yellow jacket on the other side of the window, and he’s just a bigger bee, so he’s dumb too. He doesn’t know he just has to fly in the little slit if he wants to see his friend or fly a little higher to show his friend where the opening is so he’ll stop going crazy and bouncing off the walls. Instead, the yellow jacket just hovers and buzzes while the wasp goes nuts and it’s actually kind of funny. I think the yellow jacket is pretty much watching TV, and the wasp is his show for the night, and I guess I am, too, and it’s like the birds have stopped quarreling and are now laughing like a sitcom audience, like the birds know everything.

What do the trees know?



'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong, October 2022. Cover art by Halah Ziad. Milspeak Books.

There goes my brother running through the grass. Wonder where

the psychopath is going with his big backpack. It's like a scene from a movie. The psychopath with his backpack loaded with knives and fireworks walking through this totally dystopian, suburban wasteland of saggy porches and American flags towards this half-moon that looks like a lemon wedge while Toast, the Kagels' new corgador, rams up against the invisible fence with his special red cowboy bandanna around his neck, and how can I tell my brother's a psychopath, you might ask? God. Just look at him baiting Toast by charging the invisible fence. You can totally tell Zach loves electrocuting Toast, and you know what they say about boys who are cruel to animals. Zach is totally toasting Toast so I open up my window and scream at him to stop and when I close it back up the wasp is gone.

Mom's right. This is what it must be like to get old. I have to take my sunset walk and "get my steps in." I walked by Aria's house and then the Kagels. I called Toast to the edge but I didn't taunt him like Zach. We just sort of looked at each other, mirroring one another. Toast blinked. I blinked. Toast tilted his head. I tilted my head. Toast looked right. I looked left. Then I noticed at my feet some magenta letters. Maybe they were mauve. I don't know. The words on the sidewalk were written in this pinkish chalk and it wasn't the first time I'd seen the graffiti. For the last two weeks the parents of all the little kids have been outside drawing pictures of daisies and birds and smiley sunshine faces with their kids, and Zach and I are too old for that, but some of the older kids have been using the chalk to say other things or to mark their times on their bike races since they're being forced to exercise outside for the first time in their lives and they're actually having fun with it, but this graffiti wasn't like that.

This was different:

Go Vegan.

I walked a little farther and read in yellow:

Media Lies.

A little farther in blue:

Big Pharma Kills.

A little farther in red, white, and blue:

Government Lies.

And then in white:

Black Lives Matter.

And after that it was back to magenta:

The Truth is a Virus. The Truth Leaks. Spread Truth.

And I was like, okay. How do you do that?

How do you spread truth?

I kept walking. Now, in purple, but with the same handwriting, they said *We Need Change*. And I'm like, okay. Duh. But then, near the turnoff from Cedar to Byrd—right where you could see this big stack of logs against the side of Buck London's house—there was one more phrase before I turned around and it said: *American Delphi*.

I was pretty much across the street from Buck's, staring at this dark green holly bush he has in front of his house and this stuffed armadillo everyone can see on the chipped paint planks of his porch, but because of the huge prickly holly bush, you can't really see anything else. I couldn't tell if he was sitting on his porch in his underwear smoking a cigar with a one-eyed cat in his lap, or if he was inside on his couch looking at naked pictures of girls. I have no idea why Zach spends so much time with Buck, and I have no idea what *American Delphi* means.

But I am going to find out.

A Review of Ruffi Thorpe's New Novel 'The Knockout Queen,' by Andria Williams

"Who deserves anything?" asks Lorrie Ann, one of the protagonists of Ruffi Thorpe's first novel, [The Girls from Corona del Mar](#) (Knopf, 2014). She's putting the question to her stunned-into-silence friend, Mia, who has so far known Lorrie Ann only as something of a saint, a martyr of circumstance, the golden child from a perfect family ruined by terrible twists of fate—until the two women meet up suddenly after years apart. Lorrie Ann pops a baklava into her mouth—she's a junkie now, to Mia's shock; she only wants to eat sugar, she's raving a little—and she demands, "Do we deserve the spring? Does the sun come out each day because we were tidy and good? What the fuck are you thinking?"

Even when the line is delivered by a young heroin addict whose husband has been killed in Iraq and whose father was a Christian rock musician, it's an important one to Ruffi Thorpe's writing. The question—"who deserves anything?"—permeates all three of her books, which also include [Dear Fang, With Love](#) (2016) and [The Knockout Queen](#) (April 2020). Her characters, sometimes taken far astray by life, puzzle over what they have done, or what has happened to them—has it made them good or bad, or is that a spectrum like anything else?—or maybe their worst fears really are true, and good and bad are terrifyingly, irrevocably definitive.

Lorrie Ann, former evangelical, junkie, cuts through all that with her blunt, manic aphorisms and her baklava-smearred fingers. She knows how the historical intersects with the personal. She's seen it herself. Still she wonders, Do we deserve the spring? What are we all thinking?

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In Thorpe's most recent novel, *The Knockout Queen*, our narrator's name is Michael. He is (at first, briefly, before we inhabit his teenage self) eleven years old, and his mother has been sentenced to three years in prison. Michael is looking around at a world that makes no sense:

When I was eleven years old, I went to live with my aunt when my mother was sent to prison.

That was 2004, which was incidentally the same year the pictures of Abu Ghraib were published, the same year we reached the conclusion there were no weapons of mass destruction after all. What a whoopsie. Mistakes were made, clearly, but the blame for these mistakes was impossible to allocate as no one person could be deemed responsible. What was responsibility even? Guilt was a transcendental riddle that baffled our sweet Pollyannaish president. How had it happened? Certainly he had not wanted it to happen. In a way, President Bush was a victim in all this too.

Perplexingly, the jury had no difficulty in assigning guilt to my own mother as she sat silently, looking down, tears running and running down her face at what seemed to me at the time an impossible rate. Slow down, Mom, you'll get dehydrated! If you have never been in a criminal courtroom, it is disgusting.

This is the lively, engaging, youthful, and astute voice we will hear from Michael throughout the rest of the novel. As a young teenager he is already aware that perceptible deviance will assign you blame. Women fare horribly in domestic violence cases, he knows, because no one expects a woman to be

the aggressor. No mind if she has put up with years of abuse, prior—there's just something that's not right about it. (But are we *sure* that we can place any blame on President Bush?) With his mother gone, he has been taken in by his exhausted Aunt Deedee and is sharing a room with his cousin, Jason, “an effortlessly masculine and unreflective sort...who often farted in answer to questions addressed to him.” Jason's also got a mean homophobic streak that only makes life harder for the closeted Michael. Finding it hard to make friends, Michael turns to a dangerous habit: meeting much older men online.

This is Orange County, California, circa 2010. Michael has the internet and a false sense of confidence, or maybe hope. He has seen how history intersects with the personal. Still, with the sun glaring outside his window, he aims for privacy in the darkness of his room. He reaches out. Maybe there's someone on the other side. His tension and longing are a tender thing, snappable. What will he find, or who will find him?

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Across her three novels, Ruffi Thorpe's characters share a common childhood in the sun-drenched, high-wash landscape of Southern California, often pre-or-mid-dot-com, when some normal people still lived in normally-priced houses. Michael, for one, does, now that he has moved in with his Aunt Deedee. But she's working two jobs—at a Starbucks and at the animal shelter—just to pay her mortgage and to provide some kind of future for that aforementioned, flatulent meathead son. Michael observes that she has a personality “almost completely eclipsed by exhaustion.”

Still. Still. It's California. A reader can almost feel that legendary warm air coming off the page, the smell of hot asphalt, car grease, stucco, sea salt, chlorine, oleander on the highway medians, bougainvillea; the too-prickly, broiled grass in small front yards. I've read that Thorpe's novels have the quality of a Hockney painting-turned-prose; they do,

the brightness, the color, the concrete, the sky—the scope and scale—but there’s also a nostalgia, a tenderness, and a cellular-level familiarity in her writing that’s capable of delving even deeper into that locale, and which can probably only come from having had a California childhood. I could almost feel my eyes burnt by the bright white sidewalks, the way, as a kid walking home from 7-11 or Rite Aid, you’d have to look at something else for a moment, glance at the grass for relief but still see the sidewalk rectangles bouncing vertically behind your eyelids.



Our teenage narrator, Michael, muses that he can’t believe anyone could live in a place with such terrific weather and not simply smile all the time. However, at this point California is already changing. “On either side, my aunt’s house was flanked by mansions,” Michael describes.

Poor house, mansion, poor house, mansion, made a chessboard pattern along the street. And the longer I came to live there, the more clearly I understood that the chessboard was not

native but invasive, a symptom of massive flux. The poor houses would, one by one, be mounted by gleaming for sale signs, the realtor's face smiling toothily as the sign swayed in the wind, and then the for sale sign would go away, and the house would be torn down and a mansion would be built in its place.

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Though she lives in one of the hulking new-construction mansions next door, things are not much easier for Michael's neighbor, Bunny. Bunny is the tallest kid in their class. Soon she grows taller, to her own horror, than all of the teachers and parents as well. This is not something that she can help. When she meets Michael stealing a smoke in her side yard—not knowing he's also been swimming in their pool whenever she and her father go on vacation, though she'd hardly care—the two strike up an easy and natural friendship.

Bunny lives with her father, Ray, one of those realtors "smiling toothily" from billboards, and perhaps the most ubiquitous of them all, having risen to the highest ranks of his toothy, hustling kind – his face plastered on bus stops all over town, attached to every holiday and parade, to the point that he seems to Michael a sort of local, B-grade royalty. Off the billboards, the real Ray is a somewhat fatter, puffier iteration of his entrepreneurial visage, and he has a bit of a drinking problem as well as a fixation on his daughter's future in sports. (This last bit will become important.) He will also be, under Thorpe's skill, an intermittently hilarious, bizarre, very deeply flawed delight to read.

Complicating factors, there's cruel gossip circulating around the death of Bunny's mother in a car accident some years before.

So life is hard for Bunny, too, and her friendship with

Michael becomes a once-in-a-lifetime sort of friendship, which will be forged even stronger when Bunny does something irrevocable, sending both of their lives spiralling. This is an often sad, and not an easy book, but I can say with confidence that their rapport, due to Thorpe's seemingly-effortless skill and sparkling dialogue, is a joy to read.

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Thorpe's novels grapple, frequently, with what it means to be "good" – for women, men, kids, parents. What happens to girls and women who aren't seen as "good," boys who are not tough enough? (What happens to the boy who cannot, in fact, fart on cue?) What happens when there are deviations from the strict masculine and feminine markers our species depends upon to send immediate signals to our poor, primitive basal ganglia? Some people – the unreflective sorts, maybe, the Tarzan wannabes like Jason, the ones who take solace in the bedrock of their own infallible outward markers—could get upset.

In Michael's case, his cerebral nature and his kindness may be nearly as dangerous, at least in high school, as his sexuality. "The people I had the most sympathy for," he thinks, "were almost never the ones everyone else had sympathy for."

Still, both Bunny and Michael want, the way most teenage kids want, to be good—to be liked, to be happy, to have positive relationships with their friends and parents; to be, in the ways that count, *pleasant*. Here's Michael:

[It] was a popular take when I was growing up, among the post-Will & Grace generation: Fine, do what you want in bed, but do you have to talk in an annoying voice? I did not want to be annoying, I did not want to be wrong, I wanted to be right. And yet I knew that something about the way my hands moved betrayed me, the way I walked, my vocabulary, my voice. I did not consciously choose my eyeliner and septum piercing

and long hair as a disguise, but in retrospect that is exactly what they were.

“As often as I was failing to pass as a straight boy during those years,” he later thinks, “Bunny was failing to pass as a girl. She was built like a bull, and she was confident and happy, and people found this combination of qualities displeasing in a young woman.”

Through the figure of Bunny we see, then, what qualities might instead be pleasing in a young woman. Contrast Bunny with her volleyball teammate Ann Marie, as seen through Michael’s eyes:

Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a “nymphet,” but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow she had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was.

Thorpe stays impressively in Michael’s voice: only a young man of his very-recent generation would speak so easily about lack of irony and “performing prettiness” in the same breath as “extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine” and “fuck.” Her mention of that “heterosexual male author” with a nymphet preoccupation is also a smart nod to a later scene in which Bunny’s dad, Ray, somewhat drunk (as usual) and sentimental (less usual), sits Michael down and strong-arms him into looking at an old family photo album, a socially awkward and therefore very funny situation several narrators across multiple Nabokov novels have also faced. It’s equally funny in *The Knockout Queen*. But Thorpe gives the monumental authority of the male gaze a clever twist, for Michael, unlike one of Nabokov’s middle-aged narrators, is not at all titillated by these photos of Bunny but instead empathetic, fascinated by his friend’s life before he knew her, before her mother died,

before her whole world changed.

I wished I could go back and really look at the divide in her life: before her mother's death, and then after. When she ceased to be part of a scene that her father was documenting and began to be posed artificially, always on her own. Was I imagining the sadness I saw in her smile? Or was it an effect of the camera flash, the glossy way the photos had been printed, that made her seem trapped in those images, sealed in and suffocating behind the plastic sheeting of the photo album?

"Thank you for showing these to me," I said.

Michael marvels at the loving photos he sees of Bunny's mother, decried as a slut by the gossips in town, her death whispered "suicide." Do these images tell the truth, or do they lie as much as any other, prone to the bias of the photographer, prone to distortion? Michael feels that the tenderness he sees in them is genuine, even though he knows how easy it is for a certain angle to tell it wrong. Where he feels the distortion has occurred is on the outside of this album, this family, in the crucible of group thought. (There's a joke both in Nabokov as well as here about the distorting power of the visual: in *The Knockout Queen*, a Facebook photo of the high school volleyball team goes viral because, due to perspective, Bunny erroneously looks fully twice the size of any other member of the team. In Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, the slim and attractive Armande in an early photo is given, "in false perspective, the lovely legs of a giantess"). As with Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things*, or Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the camera and the idea of a photographic memory eventually lose some of their stability, some of their complete control—and so, through Thorpe, does the male gaze and the historical power of the speaker, or of the loudest one in the room. There are hints of knowledge, Thorpe suggests, that evade group accusation, that dodge the iron maiden of a harsh mainstream and even the seeming authority of

daguerreotypic capture: like motion, or like memory.

It would be hard to write three California novels without the specter of Joan Didion hovering overhead, so Thorpe leans into this, as well, with the addition of a grisly, community-shocking murder that seems to come right out of the *White Album*—the sort of local tragedy Didion might have learned of while floating in her Hollywood rental home's pool. With this event, too, Thorpe challenges what we think we know from the outside.

There are real problems in this paradisaical California town. Racial inequality, homophobia, the fact that fewer and fewer people can afford their own homes. A salacious news story is a most excellent distraction. But Michael, young as he is, feels the sick appeal of the outside verdict and tries to resist it. Yes, everyone's talking about the murder with concerned gravity—so grave, so concerned— at every Starbucks you wait in line at, everyone whispering, *Can you believe it? It happened to someone from here? How could she have let that happen to her?* But he senses the *tsk* of judgment in their analyses. Why would anyone let violence happen to them?

We needed to pretend violence was something we could control. That if you were good and did the right things, it wouldn't happen to you. In any event, it was easier for me then to demand that Donna [the victim] become psychic and know how to prevent her own murder than it was for me to wonder how Luke could have controlled himself. It was easier for all of us that way.

Luke, here, the killer in question, is a sort of (pardon the comparison) George W. Bush, perplexed by his own power, almost a victim of society's forgiveness for what is already understood and comfortingly masculine and clear. (It seems intentional that the victim's name, literally, means "woman.")

Isn't it easier to cast your lot with someone who seems to

have control – even if they can barely understand it – rather than the weaker person, the one still striving?

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Bunny and Michael decide to play at “realness.” It’s a term they’ve gleaned from the drag queen documentaries and the reality TV they love to watch—RuPaul, and *Paris is Burning*—where Michael can practice at performing and Bunny, riveted, can “deconstruct” femininity, which still eludes her even as she longs to attain it. They crack each other up to the point of tears with their impressions of people they know, at which Michael is very good and Bunny just abysmally horrible.

One of the terms we stole from RuPaul’s Drag Race was the concept of “realness.” They would say, “Carmen is serving some working girl realness right now,” and a lot of the time it just meant passing, that you were passing for the real thing, or that’s maybe what the word began as. But there were all different kinds of realness. In Paris Is Burning, which we must have watched a hundred times, a documentary about New York City drag ball culture, there were drag competitions with categories like Businessman or Soldier. Realness wasn’t just about passing as a woman, it was about passing as a man, passing as a suburban mom, passing as a queen, passing as a whore. It was about being able to put your finger on all the tiny details that added up to an accurate impression, but it was also about finding within yourself the essence of that thing. It was about finding your inner woman and letting her vibrate through you. It was about finding a deeper authenticity through artifice, and in that sense it was paradoxical and therefore intoxicating to me. To tell the truth by lying. That was at the heart of realness, at least to me.

I loved this, as a fiction writer. The fun of pretending, how it can be an empathy, or a skewering. The wildness of that

ranging, creative, odd and hilarious act-trying on voices, affects, personalities, lives. Trying your hand at fiction.

To tell the truth by lying. What is “realness,” then, but a mission statement on writing fiction? On invention, on possibility?

And it feels so very Californian, in a way, adding gravitas to Thorpe’s chosen locale, to “[find] a deeper authenticity through artifice.” Ray laughs to Michael, “No one was born in North Shore!” There are plenty of people who were born in California and live there now, but also a huge number who were not. Isn’t that, in a sense, passing? What separates one kind of passing from another, makes it more or less acceptable? How could some transplanted midwesterner who adopted whole-hog the California lifestyle judge a gay kid for wearing eyeliner?

What is the line between authenticity and fiction? What do we do with what is given to us?

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At the end of the day, Michael and Bunny are two kids whose parents have royally screwed up, probably because someone also screwed up when *they* were kids. So it goes, on and on. *Amor fati*, reads the tattoo on Lorrie Ann’s slim shoulder, which, as Thorpe points out, is just another way of saying “embrace the suck,” and which Nietzsche re-purposed from the Stoics.

Why tell these stories, I wondered, if nothing is ever going to change? After all, *amor fati* seems a last resort. Lorrie Ann’s husband dies in Iraq. George W. Bush and Michael’s dad both get off scot-free. The outsider kids will always be bullied. In Thorpe’s second novel, *Dear Fang, With Love*, the narrator, a young-middle-aged college English professor named Lucas, who has been exploring both his family’s Holocaust-razed past and his daughter’s newly-diagnosed schizophrenia (and who sounds, here, influenced by T.S. Eliot) thinks:

Our family had been jumbled by history, by war, by falling and rising regimes, by escapes across the world, by drives through orange groves and trips to Disneyland and the slow poison of sugar flowers on supermarket cakes.

America was not safe. We would never be safe. The danger was within us and we would take it wherever we went. There was no such line between the real and the unreal. The only line was the present moment. There was nothing but this, holding my daughter's hand on an airplane in the middle of the night, not knowing what to say.

Thorpe understands the way trauma makes its way through society and through an individual life. Trauma is not always the blunt instrument; or, even if it started that way, it may not be, forever. It can be sly and nuanced. It can be both traceable and unknowable, brutal and delicate. Do we try to pass, within it, above it, until we are all okay? What if we know that not everyone will be okay, even though they try, even though they deserve to be?

There is a Bunny who exists outside the gossip against her, separate from her jarring appearance and possibly, Thorpe suggests, even separate from some of her own actions. "You don't have to be good," Michael tells Bunny. He means she doesn't have to be socially acceptable, she doesn't have to be fake-good, girly good. She already is good. They both are.

Thorpe, Ruffi. [The Knockout Queen](#). A.A. Knopf, 2020.

The Knockout Queen is [now available](#) anywhere books are sold.