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*The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* edited by Tom Léger and Riley MacLeod

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# ‘The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard’ edited by Tom Léger and Riley MacLeod

Posted on 30. Sep, 2012 by Rachel Wexelbaum

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## **The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard**

Edited by Tom Léger and Riley MacLeod

Topside Press

Paperback, 9780983242215, 364 pp.

It is difficult to estimate the number of transgender people in the United States. People do not indicate whether they are transgender on a Census form; they will check a box either for their biological sex or intended sex. Some transpeople simply identify as straight men or women, especially if they have completed their transition, and want no further discussion of their previous life. Other transpeople still identify as queer in one way or another, and may always identify as transgender whether or not they choose to transition. For other transpeople, their racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or professional identity will come before their gendered one. It is a matter of personal choice. For these reasons, while no one has determined the number of transpeople in the United States, if the American transpeople stood up to be counted, they would compose an extremely diverse group of people, impossible to categorize.

Brooklyn transmen Tom Léger and Riley MacLeod met in 2002 at New York University while taking English and Creative Writing courses. Nine years later, they founded Topside Press with the intent of publishing authentic transgender narratives. Their short story anthology *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* (Topside Press), coming to bookstores in October 2012, will be the inaugural publication of this independent press. Léger has observed that there is “a boom of transgender expression and culture...happening in the U.S. right now” and that “transgender people deserve great art.” For those souls living outside of New York City who may not have access to transgender theatrical productions, some really good books will do—books that present transpeople as whole, multidimensional characters that resist stereotype.

With that charge, Léger and MacLeod posted a call for short stories written by and about transpeople through GLAAD and other national websites and listservs.

Léger and MacLeod have been working with various transgender communities for nearly ten years; Léger with transpeople in the arts, MacLeod with transpeople in the prison industrial complex. Through their own personal experiences, their work together on the STAGES Transgender Theater Festival in 2003, and correspondence with diverse groups of transpeople, Léger and MacLeod struggled to carve out a space for the true stories of transpeople. Not only did they get resistance from others in creating such spaces, but it was initially difficult to get transpeople to come forward with their stories, especially in theater. The written word—especially fiction—can provide anonymity for those transgender writers who might not want to reveal their own identities.

We will never know how many transgender writers exist in the world, but *The Collection: Short Fiction from the Transgender Vanguard* showcases twenty-eight of the boldest and brightest, including Carter Sickels (*The Evening Hour*, Bloomsbury USA 2012), Ryka Aoki (*Seasonal Velocities*, Trans-Genre Press 2012), Everett Maroon (*Bumbling Into Body Hair*, Booktrope 2012), Susan Jane Bigelow (*Broken*, Candlemark & Gleam 2011), Casey Plett (McSweeney's), and Katherine Scott Nelson (*Have You Seen Me*, CCLAP 2011, Lambda Literary Finalist). Some anthologies contain one or two stories by big name authors to bring in sales; people read those stories and ignore the rest. The average reader might have no familiarity with the authors featured in *The Collection*, but it will make no difference. That person might start reading *The Collection* at the beginning, or at the story with the most eye-catching title...and they will keep reading until they finish the entire book. Without pedanticism or morality plays, all twenty-eight stories teach us something about the experiences of people who identify as transgender. At the same time, we may be so absorbed in the writers' use of descriptive language, plot, or what the main characters are trying to achieve, that we may actually forget that these are stories about transgender people and just might say to ourselves, *this is classic fiction, about people who we know, about things that we too have experienced!*

*The Collection* contains stories about Yankees, Southerners, Midwesterners, and West Coasters; all colors, religions, cultures, ages, and educational levels are represented, making this book a true American anthology. Recurring themes of acceptance, assimilation, family ties, and the pursuit of dreams weave in and out of each story. Heroes arise from the least likely of tales. In Red Durkin's "A Roman Incident," seventeen-year-old Charlie Eaglethorne of Hope Hull, Alabama becomes a professional speed eater because it is the only way she can earn enough money to leave her hellhole of a nowhere town. Durkin puts the reader in Charlie's skin, forcing the reader to gobble Buffalo chicken wings and smell the vinegary odor of human sweat, hot sauce, bleu cheese dressing and vomit while listening to the taunts directed at the fat girl, the faggot, the weirdo, the town pariah while she continues to stuff herself. Charlie has a choice—death by chicken wings, or death by the crowd. Midway through the competition someone hits her over the head with a green glass bottle; while blood, sweat, and Buffalo wing sauce blind her, Charlie keeps eating. She earns third place, but it is enough; she has won enough money—and

enough self-respect—to leave Hope Hull alive. The brutish sensuality of gorging on chicken wings in the sticky Alabama heat, the ugliness of the crowd, and Charlie’s determination—rather than her transgender status—are the focal points of the story. At the same time, Durkin makes the reader wonder, if Charlie were not a transgirl in this redneck town, but simply a bullied teen, would she have put herself through the same agony to earn her freedom? Such a story is worthy of inclusion in a literature anthology for an English class.

I will be telling everyone about *The Collection*; it is one big step for transgender visibility in literature, and clearly sends the message that transpeople defy stereotypes. I hope to see more great work from all twenty-eight of these fresh writers.

**Further Reading:**

Interview with writer / publisher Tom Léger. (2010, July 12). Bodies of work: Trans/gender variant artists, writers, and activists. [Blog]. Retrieved from <http://bodiesofworkmag.com/post/27061205139/tomleger>

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