

NEIL BARTLETT was born in 1958. His first book was the ground-breaking queer study of Oscar Wilde, *Who Was That Man?*, published in 1988, and his other novels are *Mr Clive and Mr Page* (1996), *Skin Lane* (2007) and *The Disappearance Boy* (2014). His fiction has been shortlisted for the Costa and Whitbread Awards, and in 2014 he was nominated as Stonewall Author of the Year. In 2000, he was awarded an OBE for his work in the theatre as a director and playwright. www.neil-bartlett.com

Praise for *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*

‘Brilliant, beautiful, mischievous; few men can match Bartlett for the breadth of his exploration of gay sensibility’ *Independent*

‘Tender, brutal, explicit, erotic and moving ... a fictional debut of staggering assurance and ability ... Stands head-and-shoulders above any British or American gay novel to have appeared in several years’ *Gay Times*

‘Profoundly moving and enriching. Bartlett has achieved what is almost impossible: he has written a novel about successful, happy love’ *Glasgow Herald*

‘As good a novel as you are likely to read this year ... A writer who can really change the way people think’ *Literary Review*

‘Exquisite ... a moving and erotic love story’ *Observer*

‘Sexual, elegiac, imaginative and powerfully written’ *Time Out*

‘A triumph both in its execution and in its intent’ *Sunday Times*

Praise for *Skin Lane*

‘A cunningly narrated story in a totally original milieu. A tale of the unexpected’ Judges of the 2007 Costa Novel Award

‘Neil Bartlett is a protean polymath of a creator, ceaselessly inventing new artistic worlds – and then conquering them. *Skin Lane* is a fiendishly taught little psycho-shocker that recalls Simenon at his most hardboiled and Highsmith at her creepiest’ Will Self

‘Original, disturbing and ... beautifully written, this is an always fascinating work’ *Literary Review*

‘A potent fable about the destructive power of lust and an unsettling psychological study in the manner of Patricia Highsmith’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Charting the outer limits of desire and personal rejection with compassion, made all the more striking because of the unsparing clarity of Bartlett’s vision, *Skin Lane* pulls off the triple whammy of being shocking, sexy, and tenderly humane’ *Metro*

Praise for *Mr Clive and Mr Page*

‘A strange, yet perfectly poised tale of male sexual longing and violent fantasy, with a chilling whodunnit at its core’ *Mail on Sunday*

‘Neil Bartlett’s second novel establishes him among English fiction’s fiercest historians of gay male suffering’ *Independent*

‘A curious and original novel that is compulsively readable’ *Observer*

READY TO CATCH HIM SHOULD HE FALL

NEIL BARTLETT



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... it is a contradiction, an anomaly, an apparent impossibility; but it is a truth. I am glad to have it doubted, for in that circumstance I should find a sufficient assurance (if I wanted any) that it needed to be told.

Charles Dickens, from the preface to *Oliver Twist*, 1837

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Nearly thirty years later...

I started work on this book in the summer of 1986, when I was twenty-eight.

At the time, I was living in a flat on the top floor of Grenada House, a so-called 'hard to let' council block on the Isle of Dogs in London. It was an extraordinary place to live, and an extraordinary time to live there. 1986 was before the glass and steel behemoths of the new financial district of Canary Wharf were even dreamt of, and prior to that redevelopment it was still just possible to trace – amidst the Isle's run-down council estates, empty warehouses and derelict docks – some of the last surviving traces of the queer life which had once been such a feature of this strange, left-behind part of town. Charlie Brown's, a pub notorious for having reputedly stayed open for the entire duration of the Blitz, was still standing at the dock gates, and in the extremely dodgy back bar there, and in the slightly more salubrious George IV over on Ida Street in Poplar – not to mention in the back steam room of the Crisp Street Market Turkish Baths – it was still possible to meet sea-queens who would share their stories of love, lust and survival in the old East End of the 1940's, 50's and 60's. I sometimes wonder if it was talking to these men made me start writing out my characters' lives as if they were from some kind of half-mythologised history, one that mixed hard fragments of fact with the glorious possibilities

of fiction – just like those queens did when they embroidered their stories after one drink too many.

At the same time as I was searching out stories of an indomitable queer past, I was also making forays into the narratives of contemporary gay London. My two favourite haunts were The Backstreet, the city's first dedicated leather bar, which was just twenty minutes away from Grenada House up the Mile End Road, and The London Apprentice, a cheerfully notorious den of iniquity opposite Shoreditch Town Hall which somehow managed to combine the pleasures of club, bar and back-room within a single building. Further West, and usually on Saturday night, there was the aptly-named Heaven, which was the first room I ever walked into that contained a thousand other gay people, all of them strangers, and all of them dancing. My nights out were late, and in the 1980's night buses were infrequent creatures; often as not, I would end up making the journey home to my bed on foot. It was on these long treks home through a deserted late-night city – sometimes accompanied, sometimes alone – that much of this novel was sketched in my head, and on my makeshift trestle-table desk on the top floor of Grenada House, in the ensuing hours before dawn, with the river whitening outside my window, that much of it was drafted.

Those nights out were inspiring – but the solitary walks home were foolish. London, in 1986, was not a safe place for a visibly gay man like my twenty-eight-year-old self to be out alone after dark – or even by daylight, for that matter. The cresting of the first wave of the British AIDS epidemic had been accompanied by an extraordinary outpouring of hostility towards us both in the media and on the streets, and although I was having the time of my life on those nights out,

the atmosphere of vindictive violence which surrounds the characters of this novel reflects very closely the daily experience of myself, my friends and my lovers at the time I was writing it. The final assault in the book in particular is very closely based on one particularly surreal incident. when I had to run the gauntlet of a small crowd of hate-filled strangers just ten minutes away from my front door.

For all its story-telling, some of the book now reads to me like a personal eye-witness report on those years. My hero Boy's flat in the book is my flat in Grenada House, no more and no less; the funeral parlour and newsagent that flank the bar where he gets picked up by O, the love of his life, did indeed stand side by side on the Commercial Road just as I describe them, and the men who bear witness to their glorious affair there are all more-or-less portraits of my own night-club acquaintances and pieces of trade – though their names are all borrowed from two of my favourite collector's items in the pre-history of British gay fiction, Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile* (1953) and the screenplay for the film *Victim* (1961). AIDS itself is never mentioned by name in the book, but (for me at least) it is there on every page – in the rattled buckets, in the safe sex advice, in the condoms, in the memorial candles which are held aloft in Trafalgar Square in the book's finale. Most of all, it is there in the fierce tenderness with which all characters in the novel habitually – and without question – care for each other. That tenderness and care are, I think, the most important things that need remembering from those often-terrible years.

When the novel was first published, I received more than a few letters claiming to have identified the originals of both the bar at the centre of the story and of Mother,

the woman who runs it. Though she has elements borrowed from several of the mother hens (of differing genders) who took my younger self under their sheltering, sequinned and wisdom-spangled wings while I was out on the town in those years, she is in fact my own creation; and while her kingdom borrows details from just about every gay bar I ever walked into in all the different cities besides London that I spent time in while I worked on the novel – Ghent, Newcastle, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Toronto and Amsterdam – it is very deliberately not based on one place in particular. As it is for Boy in the novel, it is the bar my younger self dreamt of finding, the bar to end all bars, the one that could provide me with everything that I, hungry as I was to discover both my own self and my own culture, could ever need – be that hints on interior decoration, a working guide to sexual good manners, suggestions as to appropriate evening-wear – and love.

The book makes much play with the mingling of the past and the present, but there is of course one thing about it which is now very definitely history. That is its central premise, which is that a marriage between two men could only ever be a romantic fiction. Hard to believe as it may be for younger readers, only thirty years ago such a public partnership was a legal and social impossibility in this country, one that not even the most radical amongst us believed could ever be a reality, and one that could only be written about as it is here, as a heavily qualified fantasy, part of the mental and emotional dressing-up box of a largely hidden subculture's rituals and inventions. In the absence of equal civil rights, marriage, for gay men, in 1986, was always 'marriage'. However, 'marriage' is a ritual that has been dreamt of and played with by just about every queer

subculture down the ages in this country, and if gay liberation has taught us only one thing, it is that all that dreaming and all those games were not a substitute for radical social change, but their fuel.

I am proud to have documented the mental furnishings of my younger self with such candour, and I hope the book will give younger readers at least a glimpse of the hopes and fears that characterised a chapter in our history which is now fast being forgotten. But lest any of them might think that this book was written as some kind of campaigning tract or documentary – than which nothing could be further than the truth – I would point out that although the legal context of our affections and desires may have been transformed (in this country at least), just exactly what love for another man might or should be is still a subject that requires daily re-imagining, whether that love lasts for a kiss, a night or a lifetime. In that respect especially, I hope my story can still inspire and provoke.

In addition to those larger hopes, I also have a very personal reason to be glad that this book is being re-published. In 1990, I dedicated *Ready To Catch Him* to my grandmothers, two people who I loved dearly but who I never had the chance to come out to, and with whom I consequently never had the chance to swap notes about how their narratives and rituals of love and marriage might compare to mine. I am happy to let that dedication stand, but now I would like to add another. In May 1989, this Boy met his O – and we've been together ever since. In March 2006, seventeen years later, we formalised our relationship in front of witnesses in a civil partnership ceremony – but ever since the day we met, what my younger self could only write as a future-imperfect fantasy, I have lived as a daily reality. So,

nearly thirty years later, Mr. James Gardiner, my darling, it is only right and proper that this book is now dedicated to you too.

Neil Bartlett, 2017

Single

This is a picture which I took of him myself. He was so beautiful in those days – listen to me, *those days*, talking like it was all ancient history. It's just that at the time it all seemed so beautiful and important, it was like some kind of historical event. *History on legs*, we used to say; a significant pair of legs, an important stomach, legendary ... *a classic of the genre. Historic*. Well it was true, all of it.

I know that though I've shown you the photograph you still want me to describe him to you, this Boy of ours. *What was he like*, you say, and what you want to say is *what was he really like then? Tell me something that no one else knows about him. Tell me something that will prove all of this*. I understand; I mean, you want to know that someone isn't just making the whole thing up when they talk about a man being that special to them. But what can I tell you? That '*I knew the moment I saw him*'? (People do say that about their men, more often than you'd think.) I could tell you that he had white skin, black eyes, and black hair, but you can see that from the photograph.

I could tell you that the eyes were so beautiful they could actually make you feel giddy when he suddenly looked up from the floor and straight at you.

That the white skin bruised easily (you could write your name on his back with your fingers, they said). And that the

hair was black all over his body, a shiny, animal black, even on his back, at the base of his spine.

But then I don't suppose that would be enough for you, and after all this is Boy's story mostly, he is after all in a proper sense my hero, and you have to have this Boy clearly in your mind before we can proceed. The best I can say is that Boy looked something like, or had something like the feel of, Paul Newman when he's playing the character christened Chance Wayne in that Tennessee Williams' film. There's a moment when he looks away from the camera and down at the floor and softly says, '*Nobody's young any more...*' Boy often made me think of that particular moment – it was the way he looked down. Except of course that Boy was young, really young. He was nineteen when he came to us.

When you see that film you want to say, *God, he was perfect*, and it was the same with Boy.

And you wanted to hit him sometimes and ask him if he knew what he was doing. He was so young some nights, I mean he looked so young and so quiet, and I was scared for him, you see, so scared that he'd get it wrong, that he'd waste himself. Sometimes when I was drunk and I'd see him standing there looking all quiet and black and white and gorgeous, waiting for someone to take him home, I'd get all teary and want to go up and slap him and shout in his face: *How can you possibly understand what it means! You're nineteen.*

So he was young; but his body wasn't smooth and gold, *pure hard gold*, which is what the woman says about the body that you see in that scene of the film. Boy's was white, and furred with close dark hair from the root of his cock to the perfect black, flat fan on his chest, and at the base of his spine like I said. It was not golden; but it was precious. It was a perfect body. A perfected body, not an adolescent one,

which was odd, because the rest of Boy was unfinished, and that's what this whole thing is about.

And Boy was as handsome as Chance Wayne, and he smiled as easily. He could smile to order or smile for real, with real pleasure, and it came out just the same, it came out so beautiful that you were sure not to notice the difference. He moved as easily; and like Chance Wayne at the height of his beauty you, or I, would just, well, would just have died for him, stopped in our tracks for him, stopped the car for him, fallen silent if we saw him cross the street or across a crowded bar. Like Chance Wayne when you watch that scene in the film, he made you just want to wake up with him in the room, wake up with him in the bed beside you. You wanted to wake up with him right there in the room and to turn to him and quote the next line of the film right back at him, to whisper it to him, *Make me almost believe that we are a pair of young lovers without any shame*, and I don't mean that in some tragedy-queen way, but in order to say of Boy that truly I do think that it is a beauty like his that makes it all worthwhile, and I do feel that if we are fighting for anything, and if I was asked in a questionnaire what it was I was fighting for (and believe me I do feel like I am fighting, more and more I think that), then I would answer, beauty. Beauty or whatever you call it that makes you feel that you have no shame any more, none left at all.

One thing Boy never said, the line of Newman's he would never have used, was *Don't call me Boy*. He loved to be called Boy. He smiled whenever the name was used. He loved it that we had christened him and he knew that he was special to us.

And if you still can't quite see him, and this is not your ideal

Boy at all, then I'm sorry. Perhaps you think that Boy does not sound too beautiful to you, by which you mean he does not sound your type. Well, I have to say that much of the impact of this story depends upon your being able to see and think of Boy as beautiful, admirable and even adorable in the true senses of those difficult and dangerous but nonetheless precious and necessary words; I suggest therefore that you amend my descriptions of Boy and his lover – but I anticipate myself, that was not to be for several weeks yet; that 'Great Romance of Our Times', as it became known amongst us, had not yet begun, its theme tune had not yet been composed on Gary's piano, its scenario was not yet subject of our daily gossip and speculation, we were not yet auditioning for a place in the credits – The Friend, The Admirer, Blond Man in Bar, Second Guest at Dinner Party. But do go back, and amend my description of Boy so that he is, in some way, if you see what I mean, your type. Make him fit the bill; imagine for him the attributes that you require. I don't mean that you have to imagine him as your lover or prospective lover; this story does not require such strict identification, and I don't see that any story does. After all, just look round any bar and you'll see that everybody there, myself included (you too if it's your kind of bar), has in their time been both The Boy and The Older Man, both Banker and Domestic, Ingenue and Other Woman, booted Prince and stirrup-holding Groom – but I don't mean either that you should have complete licence to make him look just how you wish; I don't want to think of anyone hearing this story and grinning and thinking of Boy as some permanently, conveniently smiling blue-eyed blond, because he was not that in any way and that is not what he meant to us. For instance, don't make him shorter than you are, so that his eyes must always be looking

up at you whenever you think of him. You might surprise yourself one night by wanting to feel his arm around your shoulder. You might want that to happen one night. And I would ask you, whatever changes you make, please keep him strong, as strong as he was. When I think about it I'm not sure it makes any important difference how you imagine he looks, I mean who am I to say whether this Boy you are seeing has blond hair or dark; but I am sure that it does matter what he means to you. Keep him strong, keep him young, and, whatever his colouring, keep him gorgeous. I apologise if this description of Boy sounds to you like some fantasy and not a real person, a real young man; and worse still, if this looks like a photograph from that kind of magazine which you wouldn't even buy, let alone be seen reading in public, on public transport, for instance. But the truth is, if you had ever seen this young man, naked or clothed (and I have seen him both, and halfway in between), then you would admit to the accuracy of what I've said. There are such men in this city, and even to see them, never mind to touch them or have them kiss you, or see them just before dawn, or to have them as one of your dear friends, is one of the great pleasures of our life, and it is commoner than most people think. In the part of town where I live I see strangers who I would call truly beautiful at least once a day.

Boy was truly beautiful, when he came to us. I can see him now standing there in the door.

I have this postcard depicting an allegorical figure of Strength. He is naked like a statue, with one knee bent and the other leg straight. He has strong, agile and indeed superb hands; in the palm of his raised, right hand he holds out to you a miniature city, complete

with dome, bridges and towers, the freedom of which he is offering you and which he has promised to protect. Now place around the head of this statue angels; place in his left hand a sword; and light in his realistically enamelled eyes a welcome and a promise such as I had never, never in all my years seen. On this figure depends the rest of our story; it is on those white shoulders that all our hopes rest. He is the most beautiful of us all. It is at his feet that we throw ourselves like the bound figures which form the pedestal of this statue (one captive looks upward with adoring eyes). It is him who will attend our funerals; it is him who will be strong when we are not.

Actually, I am not sure that I was there on that night of his arrival, and I don't claim to remember all the details or to have been as impressed by his appearance, framed in the doorway, as some people I drink with do; I think they just want to talk about their witnessing his first appearance that way – as if he was an angel or something extraordinary – because of what went on to happen later. But I don't say that doesn't make sense. I'm sure you have men you think of in that way too, people you see from a distance and you think they are angels, or at least heroes. I think that's a proper feeling. But anyway, one day he found himself walking in our street, which was different to how it is now, because not only was The Bar there, which as you know is gone now, but also there were different kinds of people living in that part of town then. If someone was looking for The Bar in those days – because there was no name written up or sign for it, no lights at all, and not even a number on the door, Madame liked to keep it that way even when she didn't have to any more – I mean when she opened up we may all have been in a sort of hiding, and not many people knew about The Bar

and our life there, but it wasn't that way later, and now you know we can have lights and advertising and you see boys queueing up outside every night, very public, and I like to see that – but in those days, in those days if somebody arranged to meet you for a date there, and it was their first time and they weren't sure how to find us, you'd joke with them, and you'd say, well, first there is a wedding, and then there's a death, and there's the news, and then there's us; meaning, first there's the shop with the flowers, the real ones, and next door to that is the undertaker's with the fake flowers in the window, china, all dusty; and then the newsagent's and magazine shop, and then right next door to that is The Bar. You can't miss it.