

Q&A with T.M. McNally, author of *The Goat Bridge*

T. M. McNally's *The Goat Bridge* is a beautiful, aching, yet ultimately uplifting novel of love, loss, and redemption.

It's the story of American photographer Stephen Brings, who is running from the past. Brings has fled a troubled relationship in Chicago and the painful memories of a kidnapped and still-missing son to travel in the Balkans during the Croatian War of Independence.

While other foreigners are there to document the war, Stephen drifts through the ruined countryside without purpose, beset by the indescribable pain of losing his son, and, along with him, perhaps the very meaning of life. Holed up at night in the home of a Croatian smuggler, during the day Stephen wanders the bombed-out streets bringing oranges and water to a woman he has taken it upon himself to protect.

Here, McNally offers his insights on *The Goat Bridge*; how he writes; what he writes; why he writes; and what keeps him putting life to paper.

University of Michigan Press: How or why did you become a writer?

T. M. McNally: All the vocations I considered—music, the priesthood (I was raised Anglican), writing: they all have in common I think the wanting to contribute. A sort of expression of gratitude for being here however briefly. Other occupations do that, too, but these were the areas in which I felt some calling. And so by the time I was twenty, I knew in my toes I wanted to be a writer. The conveyance of passion—I wanted to try and move others in the same ways that I have so often been moved while reading a novel or a poem, watching a film. The best stories, the ones that pump the blood in my heart, always remind me how grateful I am to be alive. So writing, like reading, while solitary in nature, is a way for me to participate in the makings of this world while sharing in that larger connectedness with others. Like teaching, which I also do.

UMP : Without giving anything away, give us an idea of what *The Goat Bridge* is about.

TMM : Love and War. Civil War, which is the worst. True Love, which is the best.

It's about a man recovering from a tremendous loss, the loss of his young son, though he doesn't know that he's recovering—that there really is a distant rainbow even if he cannot see it. Instead he's wandering in his own bitter landscape of guilt and self-recrimination and this wandering leads him inexplicably to the Balkans in the early 1990s. And there he meets a woman who helps him to locate and to save and to regain himself.

I think War puts into relief not only the complications of Love but also the tremendous capacities of the human heart. For years I've understood this operating thesis which goes "all the grand love stories are set amid a backdrop of war." *Casablanca*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The English Patient*. When set in a theater of mayhem and chaos, love always seems to convey some increased visceral agency—especially that dizzying rush one feels when one is permitted to love and be loved back.

UMP : Was there anything in your life or an event out in the world that gave you the idea for writing *The Goat Bridge*?

TMM : After my second novel came out, I was teaching in Germany and started looking for my next subject. I was thinking I'd write about WWII, the War of the Century. Then one of my students, shortly after the U.S. began retaliatory bombing for the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, asked for an extension on her paper. Apparently her lover had been shot that weekend in Kosovo.

A brief example, but one of several which illustrates how the subject kept visiting me. Calling. The fact I was in Germany to begin with. I know this sounds terribly flighty, but that's how it felt. And traveling abroad, living in a foreign country with my own young son, I lived in constant fear of losing him. Everywhere, people are making kids, and everywhere people are losing them. So I decided that instead of writing about the War of the Century I'd write about the Century of War, and that led me straight into to the heart of Sarajevo. The first time I saw the bridge, I knew I'd found my book.

Shortly after I started the novel, my father died, unexpectedly, and which affected me in ways I never could have imagined. I was writing about a father who had lost his child; I, once a child, had now lost my father. So there was a certain kind of emotive engine at work here: I mean, it's one thing for a father to lose a son. But when the son loses a father? It's the other side of grief's coin I'm not certain I would have been able to look at had I not experienced the loss of my own dad while writing this.

UMP : Is there a significance to the war setting of the novel? It's interesting that the book is set during a war that is now a part of history, and yet it's not a historical novel.

TMM : This century past, this century coming up: how not to repeat? Given our collective and increased means of expressing our distrust and greed, this it seems to me is the existential question of our time: a flick of the switch, and poof. Certainly it's the chief concern which led me to write the book. I was a parent now. World War I began in Sarajevo, which led to the afterthought of World War II, and in the 1990s at the end of the century here we were back in Sarajevo—a modern city under siege for five years. On the one hand, it's a particular city; on the other, it is everybody's city. It belongs to all of us. As does Berlin, say, or Paris, or Rome. Or Chicago.

UMP : This seems to be a novel of such contrasts: light and dark, love and loss, forgetting and remembering. Are these themes you pursue in other things you've written?

TMM : Love and its transcendent power is I think a recurring theme in my books—in my earlier work I’ve explored these subjects closer to my backyard. So the canvas of *The Goat Bridge* is larger, perhaps, but it’s also a natural destination given the paths I’ve been on. You know, each book leads to the next. In earlier work I’ve explored moments of the suicidal in individuals; here I think I’m exploring the suicidal in relation to the larger body politic and those it houses. And so the world in *The Goat Bridge* is filled with love and with loss; forgetting, and remembering; sorrow, and also great joy.

These contrasts like light and dark, or love and loss, for my purposes they are more like notes on a scale and what these ordering elements allow me to do is to describe a theme or melody by striking various notes. So you can take say three notes, or four, and play something terribly haunting, or lively, or tender, or playful. Love, loss, light, dark—it’s the arrangement of the notes that makes the melody, or song.

UMP : *The Goat Bridge* is an interesting title. Could anything be inferred from that title; that is, does it mean something outside of the book itself, or would it only have meaning if one read the book?

TMM : Well the function of the title becomes more and more clear as the novel unfolds. Any bridge per se is an object which unifies or divides or does both. Here it’s an object around which everybody must interact, if not cross. As for this given bridge, it is enduring. The history of the U.S. goes back two hundred years or so, which is the length of a mosquito bite on a pinky in relation to the tombstones of the Bogomils or the paving stones in Sarajevo’s old town. It’s also, the bridge, a marvelous object to behold. It has lasted and in that lasting I think it evokes a suggestion of our collective promise. I mean, nobody knows who *built* it, that’s how old it is, and there it stands.

UMP : How do you write, if we may ask? Long hand or on a typewriter or computer? Do you write whatever comes to mind, in a rush, then go back later and painstakingly edit? Think of it all in your head first, then write it all down, Mozart-like? What time of the day do you like to write?

TMM : I work differently for each project. Once I found the subject, which took a couple years, *The Goat Bridge* was written over a course of several more years in longhand—the first pages, the first of the night’s work; and later, in the early morning, a recopying of those pages into a cleaner draft in a legal pad: a very deliberate and long-haul sort of approach. Because of the kids that kept on being born along the way the only way I could find enough quiet was to work at night. I mean I started this book with one child and finished it with three—T, C, & O.

UMP : Do you have any authors you particularly admire?

TMM : I like books better than writers. Dreiser, and it probably shows, and I know everybody loves to bash him for his tin ear and manhandled prose, though I really do like *An American Tragedy*—the kind of novel I don’t think it’s any longer possible to write. Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* and Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* and

Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I like novels that aren't afraid of reveling in the expertise of a subject foreign to my experience, that celebrate the life of the mind. I like the kinds of books that aren't afraid to say what they know.

I like a lot of the living poets. For a long time I thought I might be a poet first. My wife Sally Ball is a poet, and so I receive some additional instruction on the matter. And I am a great admirer of many of the contemporary literary novelists.

UMP : An author who inspired you when you first began writing?

TMM : Emily Dickinson when I was in high school. Later, Theodore Roethke. I always felt somehow oddly he was sort of talking to me when I read him alone in my dormitory late at night. Probably he's a sophomore's poet, though of course I was a sophomore. I think more than the actual burly figure of him was the fact of the poem. To be moved so.

UMP : What is your next book project?

TMM : Well, I've been working for a while now on a project about Music. I wanted to write about Light and Music and am modeling it after a sort of *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*. Serious, and about Love like everything else I do, but very bright and sunny. Mozart to some of my more previous Beethoven.

And stories. I'm always working on stories. A linked series of novellas. And there may be something in the pipeline for my kids which is very exciting to think about. Let's just say I have three kids now and I'd like to write something I'd be willing to let them read while they still might want to. So that's what I'm thinking about, too. Something for the youngsters.

T. M. McNally is the winner of the 2004 Michigan Literary Fiction Award for short fiction. He is the author of a collection of stories, *Low Flying Aircraft*, which received the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, and the novels *Until Your Heart Stops* and *Almost Home*. Recipient of a Smart Family Foundation Award from the Yale Review, he also has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Howard Foundation at Brown University. He teaches at Arizona State University and lives in Scottsdale with Sally Ball and their three children.