

Readers who became immediate fans of New Englander Stephen McCauley following the 1987 publication of his popular first novel, *The Object of My Affection*, had to wait until 1992 for the release of his second, *The Easy Way Out*. Now, four years after that, comes *The Man of the House*, to be released this month by Simon and Schuster. Since McCauley admits that writing is the center of his life, I asked him

## Books

about the long interludes between his novels.

"I confess that I don't find it easy to write," he replied. "I'm very critical of my own work. I'm slow in my writing."

McCauley also admits that accepting lucrative assignments to ghostwrite business books and teaching writing at Harvard University, the University of Massachusetts in Boston, Wellesley College, and Brandeis University have hindered his creative output.

"When I'm doing these things like ghostwriting or teaching, I tend to get very absorbed in them," he says, "and will use virtually any excuse to put off [fiction] writing, because when you're writing, you spend most of the time sitting alone in a room, confronted by all your demons and insecurities. Who wants to face that?"

Born and raised in the Boston area, McCauley, now 40, has lived in northern Vermont, the south of France, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Provincetown. He currently resides in Cambridge, Mass., and in a small town in the Adirondacks with playwright Sebastian Stuart. His fiction, reviews and essays have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Details*, *Harper's Magazine*, *House and Garden*, *Travel and Leisure*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*.

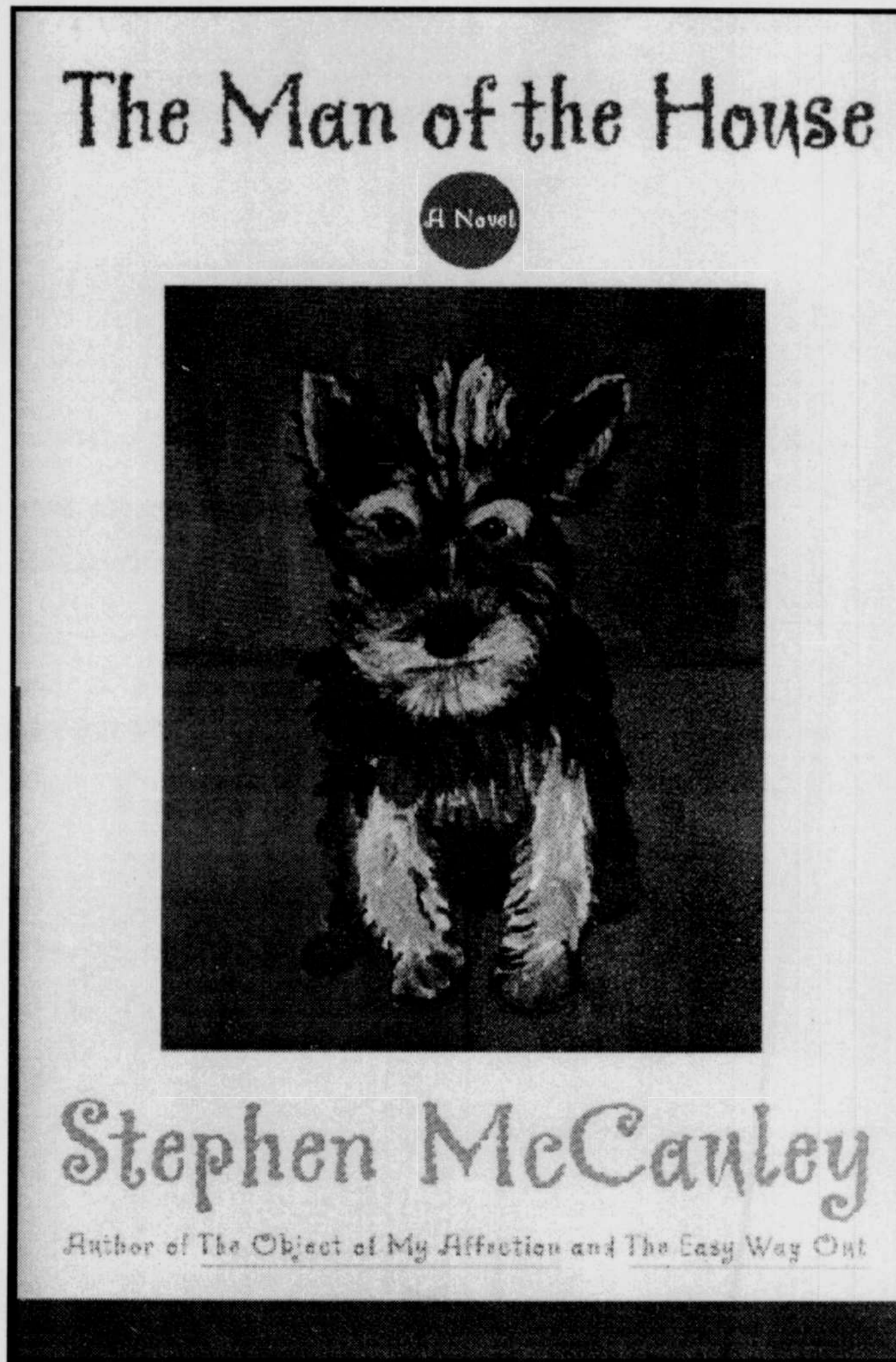
In *The Man of the House*—as in his two previous books—McCauley focuses on what he describes as another disastrously dysfunctional family. This time the battleground is new territory: father-son relationships. McCauley's cast of characters includes narrator Clyde, a gay adult ed teacher; his peppery father (who remains nameless throughout the novel); his anxious sister, Agnes; his straight roommate, Marcus; his old friend (and ex-lover of Marcus), Louise; her son, Ben; and their neurotic stray dog, Otis.

"The main theme of this novel is the importance and impossibility of father-son relationships," McCauley has stated about *The Man of the House*. "I began writing it shortly after my own father died. He was a kind, complicated man, but we had a rancorous and difficult relationship. He was sick for a long time, and in his last months I was eager to resolve our relationship. I thought of resolving it as putting aside all of our battles and struggles. Alas, his last words to me were, 'Get a haircut,' and my last to him was, 'No.' For a long time, I was haunted by this, and took it as a sign that neither one of us had been willing to put aside petty concerns for the sake of reconciliation. But then I began to realize that our relationship had been resolved for at least 20 years. I simply hadn't been able to accept the resolution."

More from McCauley follows.

**Vaillancourt:** Prior to writing *The Object of My Affection*, you worked as a yoga instructor, vitamin salesman, gardener, kindergarten teacher, travel agent and apartment cleaner, among other things. Tell me about your big break.

McCauley: I had been fooling around with writing fiction for a while; it had been pretty much of a secret desire of mine. I'd been doing a variety of odd jobs, some of which you've [mentioned]. In my late-ish 20s, I decided to apply to some of these writing programs as a way to force myself to take it a little more seriously.... I knew that [writing] was something that was buzzing around in my head and really preventing me from settling down into anything else. And so, I went



## CONFRONTED BY DEMONS

Author Stephen McCauley talks about the writing life and his new novel, *The Man of the House*

by Daniel Vaillancourt

to the writing program at Columbia. It was there that I began writing *The Object of My Affection*, and really found what seemed to me like my voice as a writer. And I figured out a way to incorporate my own experience—and my world view—in my fiction. Because a lot of the stuff I

Boston because I could get a job in a travel agency at which I'd worked previously. And so I was doing that, and then I finished the book, and it got published. And really, the big break for me was that it was optioned by the movies. I didn't make very much money off of *The Object of My*

*"The main theme of this novel is the importance and impossibility of father-son relationships," McCauley has stated about The Man of the House. "I began writing it shortly after my own father died. He was a kind, complicated man, but we had a rancorous and difficult relationship."*

was reading about the gay experience, like [Andrew Holleran's] *Dancer from the Dance*, which I absolutely love and think is a sensational book, certainly didn't reflect the world that I was familiar with.

When I graduated from Columbia, I was still pretty much unemployed, and I moved back to

*Affection*—certainly not enough to live on for more than a couple of months. When it was optioned for the movies, that gave me enough money that I could quit my job at the travel agency and take some low-level teaching jobs teaching writing. I was able to get enough experience to formulate this other career for myself.

**What is the current status of the screen adaptation of *The Object of My Affection*? Have either of your other two books generated interest from Hollywood?**

Well, *The Object of My Affection* is the only one that's been optioned, and that was in 1987. Various producers and directors have expressed interest, and as far as I know, it's still a somewhat live option. But it's just been batted around for so long that I don't know what the chances of it actually being made are.

**Why do you think the theme of family is so predominant in your work?**

I guess it's a theme that's concerned me a lot in my own life. I have very close relationships with my family of origin, but it's fraught with a lot of difficulties. I have two brothers. They're both married; they're rather reactionary, politically. And so I've spent a lot of time thinking about those relationships and trying to sort them out. Because as gay men—or gay people in general—we don't have any real models for our relationships; we have much greater flexibility in how we're going to design our relationships. Particularly lesbians, but gay men as well, are beginning to have children. So you really have to define these relationships from the ground up. And that takes a lot more thinking about it, and a lot more work. And also, frankly, I tend to be a somewhat reclusive and isolated person. Surrounding myself with friends that I trust and consider family—creating some kind of family for myself—is important to me.

**Have you and your partner, Sebastian, ever discussed having children?**

No.... You know, if I look at especially the first and this most recent book, I think, "Gee, I must want kids," because I write about that. But if I do, it's really subconscious. [Laughs.] I mean, I don't consider it an option for me. And frankly, it's not something I would consider doing.

**Is the relationship between gay men and lesbians something you would like to explore in future novels?**

Well, you know, I try to focus on characters, and then let issues like that come up naturally. I guess I really haven't written about that, have I? I don't know. I have to say it's not something I have planned or anything. So, I'll have to think about that one.... I mean, I certainly have lesbian friends with whom I spend a lot of time. I'm not sure why [I haven't written about that]. It's funny, that should be such a fundamental thing, yet I haven't really considered it. [Laughs.]

**AIDS is at the core of much of gay fiction, yet that's not so in your work. Have you made a conscious decision to not focus on AIDS?**

I wouldn't say it's a conscious decision. I feel as if I haven't really figured out a way to write about it. There's something about the tone of my books, the comic tone, that, I don't know.... I've never really been able to write about AIDS comfortably in that comedic tone.... It seems to me that that's not an appropriate approach.

**Are you already at work on your next novel?**

What I'm trying to do is become more disciplined as a writer, and spend a portion of every day doing some writing and letting it lead me where it will. So, I'm writing. I'm not sure if I'm writing my next novel yet or not.... The interesting thing is that, just in terms of fiction alone, the possibilities for gay writers are just so much greater now. I don't have any particular interest in writing about "the gay community" in capital letters, because I think it's impossible. [The community] is just too varied and too inclusive, really, [for any one writer] to do a good job of that. And so, you write about [your own] corner of it—even if [you're] an outsider clinging to the edges. And then the picture gets filled in by all the other work.