

INTERVIEW

Rodger Larson met with me in his backyard in Southeast Portland, where bamboo and roses tumble together in a kind of garden that is tended by writers and teachers. Larson, a teacher at Metropolitan Learning Center, shares the roses and a home with his partner, Andy Simon, a philosophy professor, and their dog. It is a comfortable, wildish garden, and Larson is a comfortable, funny, heartfelt man.

Books

The setting was appropriate, as Larson's new (and first) book, *What I Know Now*, has at its core the building of a garden by a man and a boy during the summer of 1957. The principal character and apprentice gardener is Dave Ryan, a 14-year-old who is verging on self-discovery and manhood, even as his family is in the process of falling apart. As the book begins, Dave and his mother are leaving his dad and brother—leaving the family ranch to make a new beginning.

As we talked, Larson and I moved like the garden's bees from the challenge of balancing a social and a writing life to images of fatherhood to the quality of morning light in the central California valley, where Larson grew up in the 1950s. He shares his roots in that place and time with Dave, and the book thrums with an intimate knowledge of the valley's rolling hills, walnut groves and dusty soil that springs to life with the anointing of precious water.

The master gardener, and the man who tends to Dave's need for fathering during a summer of outward tumult and inward searching, is the gentle, perceptive Gene Tole. Readers will realize early on that Tole is gay, from bits of information dropped by other characters, but Dave himself does not know this at the time. It is one of the things he knows now, looking back from his undisclosed present life onto these finely etched boyhood days gone by.

Your book is being billed as young adult fiction. Did you intend that originally?

No, I didn't. My agent had sent it to quite a few different publishing houses—like 20. It kept coming back with comments like, "We love this, it's poetic, it's lyrical; we like the characters, but we don't know who the market is. And then a proposal came from Marc Aronson at Henry Holt that they publish it as young adult fiction."

It took me a while to adjust to that idea, because unfortunately when something gets categorized for young adults, then adults will dismiss it. And I feel some regret around that, and some frustration.

It's kind of a double bind for me, because I wish that there had been such a book when I was growing up. But I wish there was not quite the division in the marketing strategies. I hope to address that as I promote the book, as I talk about it with people.

When you knew that the book would be sold as young adult fiction, did you alter what you had written at all?

No. My editor said, "Never reduce what you have here, and never write down to the audience." And I really agreed with that. I think young adult readers, if we want to categorize them, are very sophisticated, and they don't want to be talked down to.

A fear that I had when I was writing it, is that it would be categorized as a gay novel and that I would be pigeonholed as a gay writer. I think that I am a writer who is writing fiction and incidentally I'm gay. And this novel is really a story about a family that doesn't communicate: They don't talk about anything. They don't talk about money, they don't talk about feelings, they don't

Growing pains

Rodger Larson's *What I Know Now* tells how one difficult summer points a boy toward the man he will become

by Kelly M. Bryan

talk about sexuality at all. And Dave's questioning whether he's homosexual, so there's no place for him to go with his questions.

I was struck by the fact that Dave, even by the end of the book, isn't clear what being gay is. And how maybe that wouldn't ever happen again, that a kid could grow up and not know that that life exists.

I think you're absolutely right, the amount of information that young people have, in this country anyway, has just changed. People could be in the middle of Kansas or Arkansas, or where there is no gay scene, but still be connected up to a satellite dish or on the computer or whatever.... [Yet] although young people today have all kinds of more information, I think they still have the same questions. And they could be just as confused by having all that information and not knowing what in the hell to do with it.

In the book you depict Dave's father and brother as so pent up. Their inability to deal with their feelings almost drives them into hostility.

One of the things I wanted to do was explore the range of masculinity, what it means to be a man. So the father is really on one extreme, and Gene Tole—as caring, sensitive, sweet, kind of cultured, intelligent—on the other extreme. There are those two scenes that Dave remembers when his father was sweet to him, held him, and was nice. But then the overriding thing is the "silent treatment" from the father. He pretty much totally rejects the whole family—for whatever reason—to bring them into shape, to do what he wants.

The mother seems very accepting.

One reviewer caught the fact that the mother knew that Gene Tole was gay, and still allowed her son to do things with him, even to take a trip.... I think she feels that Gene is a trustworthy and wonderful person, and she feels like Dave needs a man in his life, a model. And I think she might wonder if her son is gay. She's a pretty tuned-in person. I really like the mother [laughs]; I like them all. I want to have them over for dinner.

Even the father?

[Laughs] Well, no. The father, he can have Campbell's!

While he might not want to cook for Dave's father, Larson has portrayed this hard man, frozen into silence by anger and yet clearly broken somehow in ways he cannot

express, with tenderness. Larson doesn't shy away from the cruelty, but he also shows the wounds and the emotional prison that the father's repression leads him to.

What I Know Now is a sweet, almost innocent, book. And yet its candor brushes it against topics that even in the '90s are complex and sensitive. Larson and I talked about the stereotype our society has perpetuated about gay men and children: that such men are predators, only capable of a sexual interest in young people.

As evidenced by issues raised in the men's community as a whole, both the traditional picture of fatherhood and what we call mentoring are due for an overhaul. But in particular for the gay men's community, there is this giant hot spot, this societal red flag that haunts any discussion of relationships with youth.

I suggested that the book provides another model besides that of a boy bravely opening his mind to a path his heart shows him. It also offers a portrayal of a gay man who forms a friendship and a bond with a young man, who sets limits on that relationship and yet is warm, available and supportive. At first Larson balked at the idea, laughing, "I don't want to go there." It is an issue that hits close to home.

Dave is pretty shocked when he finally gets the idea that Gene is gay.

He's kind of in denial. He feels those things, but he denies them completely. There are a couple of references—it's in the fantasy stuff—to like, Gene Tole was Batman and I was Robin. I think there are homoerotic qualities to Batman and Robin, and the Lone Ranger and Tonto. I don't know where I was going with that [laughs], but those images are in our culture, and he picked up on those. And I think kids and other people do pick up on them, and use them as models in a way.

I was very concerned though, that people not see it as any sort of man/boy thing. And one person who has worked counseling gay youth who have drug and alcohol problems, said that [a lot of this behavior was] the result of exploitation by older men. And he took one look at the book—I mean he just looked at the cover and read the tiny blurb—and got this sort of panicked feeling. And it was real for him. But the book is totally not that.

I would say if there is a person who's more interested, it's Dave who is more interested in Gene Tole. And that feels accurate to me. In our society we think that young people are sexless and have no sensuality, and that's bunk.

I really liked your depiction of Dave's awakening sexuality. It's all so fluid at that point—you show his sexual thoughts being triggered even by the sight of wide, rolling hillsides or the texture of a filmy window curtain. And you describe this pretty frankly in a few scenes. Do you envision the book being in school libraries? Do you foresee any problems?

I think the way it's being marketed, the book probably will mostly be sold to schools and libraries. And definitely, it could get banned or blacklisted in certain parts of the country. And that wouldn't be totally bad, if it developed some controversy it might be good.

You also raise the notion of simple, innocent touching. How Dave has never seen a man touch another man until he sees Gene hug a friend, and how Dave's father just abruptly stops any physical contact with his sons.

It's like the idea that "if it feels good we should feel guilty about it" or if there's any sort of touching and it's nice, then there's something wrong.

I'm kind of a touchy-feely person, but boy, I guard myself a lot more than I used to, or really more than I want to. I don't hug young people. Or I say "would you like to," which is appropriate, I think. But I've been teaching at the Metropolitan Learning Center, and it's a very huggy place. I mean it's very friendly and warm and alternative, but I don't touch anyone there. And in some ways I think that's too bad.

You seem uncomfortable with the idea that the book could help heal how gay men can be around children.

I was married and I have a child, who is now a grown young woman. I had been involved in PTA, and at her school a lot; I used to swim over at Buckman Pool and a lot of her friends would be there, and after I came out, when I went to the locker room I just completely changed how I related to those kids. I thought, I can't afford to be friendly to children anymore.

And I lose tremendously, but so do kids. Kids need to know adults who are friendly and safe. And I'm safe, but I always thought, well, it could be misinterpreted. Any sort of interest in a young person.... It's a loaded situation.

I think that gay men would have a hard time getting from my book how to relate to younger people, but maybe they would. Maybe Gene Tole is a good model in that.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

Hemingway said that the best writing came out of a sense of injustice. I never want to be preachy; I never want to say, Yoo-hoo, this is the message. But if you tell a story where injustice is done, and you're just telling about the person's experience, then the reader has to see that. They just know that isn't right.

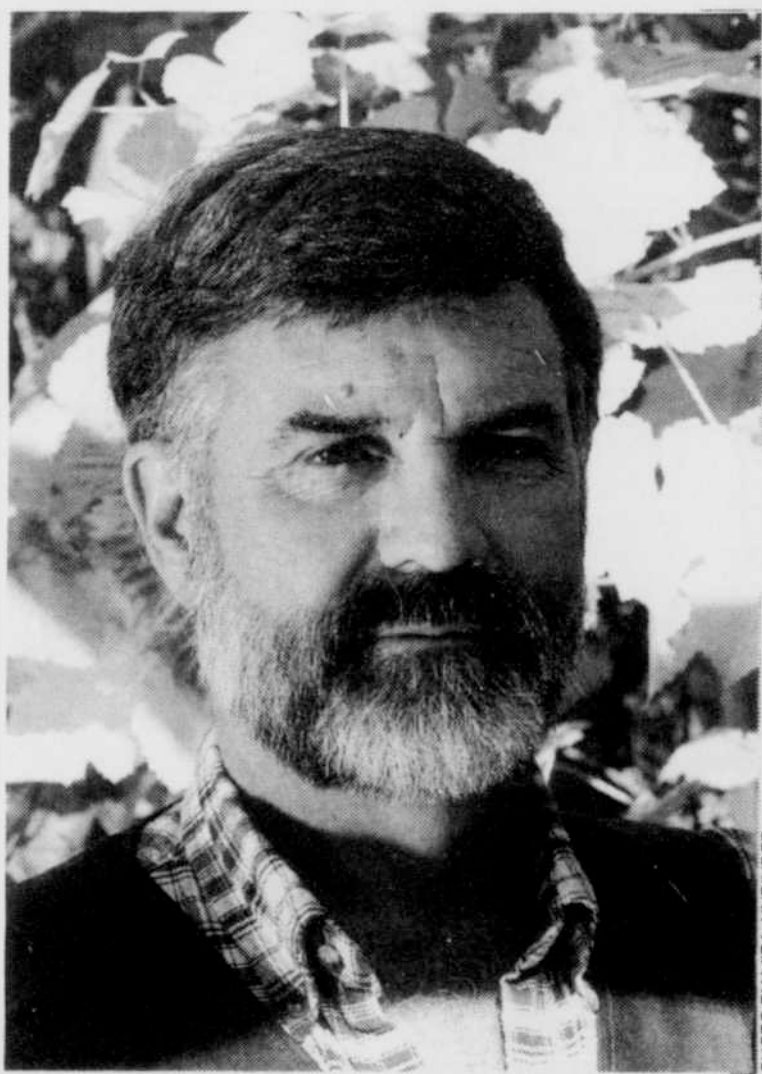
Part of what happens in the book is not just. That kid doesn't need to feel so confused. He doesn't need to be so alienated from his father. In the scene where he says, at the end of the silent treatment, "It went on for seventeen days and nights, and by the time it was over it was never really over," that breaks my heart, because that kid is sort of scarred by that experience for the rest of his life.

And I have to say that that's accurate, my father did that sort of thing. And when I look back on it now, as an adult, it was incredibly awful and alienating for him.

What I Know Now by Rodger Larson.

Henry Holt, 1997; \$15.95 cloth.

Larson will read from his novel at Twenty-Third Avenue Books, 1015 NW 23rd Ave., at 7:30 pm on Wednesday, July 23. The book won the 1997 Andrés Berger Award for fiction.



Rodger Larson

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