

Love, Protection, Loss, Recovery

Cai Emmons' second novel delivers on several levels

In the middle of my second year in the UO's literary nonfiction program, I took a break in the form of a fiction writing class taught by the creative writing department's Cai Emmons. The information and insight she shared about first-person writing forever altered the ways I write and read.

Yet in neither of her books — *His Mother's Son*, the 2003 novel that won the Oregon Book Awards' Ken Kesey Award for Fiction, and her hot-off-the-presses *The Stylist* (Harper Perennial, \$13.95) — does Emmons write using that point of

view. "I frankly am not that comfortable working in first person," she tells me, though *The Stylist* began its life with that perspective. But "the story needed to widen out," Emmons explains, so she made a move to third person. She could then add the point of view of another main character, which meant, she said, "the consciousness doubled."

That other character made Emmons' mother ask her, "What am I supposed to tell my friends your book is about?" She's not alone: the book's protagonist, Hayden Risley, a young, tattooed and self-centered hair stylist in Hoboken, shares that confusion. So what is the book about?

One blustery winter New Jersey day, Emory begins work at Hayden's salon, but Emory isn't quite what Hayden expected from a new coworker. This salon space gives the author a canvas; the reader can feel her reveling in a variety of descriptions that make the hair salon a purely female preserve, a sanctuary away from the multitude of concerns that otherwise occupy a busy woman's brain.

But does Emory fit in this safe space of lotions, shimmering purple capes and glamorous magazines? Hayden feels uncertain and then aggressively disturbed by her new coworker's identity — whatever that identity might be. Hayden's own identity seems up in the air; she's unmoored, a deracinated young woman trying to live her life the way she thinks adults live. And Emory's uncertainty troubles Hayden, stirring up emotions about her own issues.

The Stylist investigates gender expression for a while as Hayden gets to know Emory, but that's a gentle thread in the larger tale of Hayden's tenuous reconnection with the family she abandoned just after her mother died. Again, Emmons shows her strength at scene-setting with her flashback depictions of the Risley domestic life — or rather the life of the Risley girls and their mother; their father, who wrote himself up from the working class, hardly ever comes home. When he does, all he seems to care about is the girls' intellectual development. That's odd considering that their mother earned a doctoral degree in art history and rarely uses her knowledge. When Hayden tries to interest her distant father in his fragile wife's internal trauma

and chaos — she's depressed, possibly suicidal — he patronizes Hayden and ignores her concerns.

The book, set soon after 9/11, also focuses in its first half on the fierce love and protection Hayden feels for the wounded Manhattan. She lives in Hoboken and works there, but she adores the city she can see across the water; like her mother, however, it's too big and vulnerable for Hayden's love

to protect.

In the second half of the book, a now-bonded Hayden and Emory head to Costa Rica, where Hayden's father has injured his ankle and needs help getting back to the U.S. Both Hayden and Emory soften away from the States, and as Hayden begins to learn how she has affected other people, the book's perspectives open up as well. Suddenly, we hear from Hayden's father, from people first seeing Emory, from a housekeeper, from pretty much anyone encountering the main characters. That lends the tropical half of the book a panoramic lens for major plot development and the denouement.

Not to focus too much on the technical aspects of the writing. Will you, dear readers,

enjoy the book? I think so. The honesty of Hayden's mistakes and her stumbling toward rejoining her family, combined with the glimpse of transgender issues, show Emmons' strength at depicting rounded characters. And Emmons interweaves those narratives with an achingly beautiful love letter to New York and a description of gorgeous, surreal Costa Rica. A stranger comes to town, some strangers leave town — and everyone gropes in fits and starts toward forgiveness and reconciliation. That, Cai Emmons can tell her mother, is what this book is about. **EW**

Cai Emmons celebrates the release of The Stylist with a reading, signing, reception and raffle at 5 pm Saturday, Oct. 20, at Tsunami Books.



Taking the Music to the People

Alex Ross on the highs and lows of the 20th century

When classical music writer Alex Ross started contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1996, the magazine didn't have any kind of music critic. Now both Ross and popular-music critic Sasha Frere-Jones provide gorgeous, solid and fascinating writing about all kinds of music history, theory, sound and impact. But Ross also just published *The Rest Is Noise* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$30), a heavy but fascinating tome about the oversized personalities and historical clashes of 20th century music. We had the opportunity to speak with Ross the day before he flew off on his book tour.



Alex Ross

Tell me about the process of writing the book while writing for *The New Yorker*. How did you find the time to produce such a well-researched work?

It's two jobs, a day job and a night job, and I spent three years writing and two years cutting. The trick was to produce a book that would have a narrative for general readers who may not know a lot about the subject. There's so much drama inherent in the subject, but it's a really amazing cast of characters to work with in the 20th century itself. Shostakovich, Schoenberg, Strauss, Britten — they're all extraordinary people, and you have them in this seething context of politics, history, social change and technological advance. At every turn, there's some unbelievable situation to recount, these moments where you can tease out strands that lead in all different directions instead of seeing this music as something separated from society and completely isolated.

In your famous 2004 *New Yorker* piece "Listen to This," you say, "I don't listen to music to be civilized; sometimes, I listen precisely to escape the ordered world." Why do you think so many people associate the idea of classical music with an order and civilization that we must rebel against?

A lot of people very deliberately cultivated that attitude within classical music over the years. Orchestras were conceived as bastions of civilization that hold a common culture of vulgarity at bay. Rituals and codes of behavior became ingrained in concert experience — no applauding between movements, for instance. These are codes of conduct invented in the early 20th century that are foreign to what the composers originally had in mind.

It's just a tragedy because, you know, the great composers, Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, Wagner, this is music that does not stand aloof from some kind of mass society, the life of the street. This music is shot through with folkish melody and earthy emotion and primal rhythm. That could not have been created in the classical culture we have today, the self-consciously high-falutin' kind of world. Without just vulgarizing the concert experience and making it purely silly, I think we can loosen up a little bit in terms of concert dress or this really inane focus on when to applaud and when not to applaud.

Sometimes I wonder about the interaction of cinema scores with our experience of listening to classical music. It seems nigh-on impossible to hear the music without being tempted by visual accompaniment.

It's an interesting phenomenon which I've thought about in terms of how classical music is perceived in America particularly. In the '30s and '40s, movie scores were written by gifted or leading composers. This late Romantic musical language, and a lot of modern languages too, became embedded in these iconic music images. When you hear a big string section swelling, Bette Davis weeping appears in your head. When you hear atonal chords or flashing Bartok figures, they make you think of *Psycho*. It's a stumbling block for people who have to dissociate sound from the movies in order to get at music itself. But the music came first, and the movies came later.

Why should people who think the symphony is only for old, white people start listening to [classical] music? And where should they start (other than getting your book as a holiday present)?

It does have that image, and the concerts aren't super diverse in terms of age or race, although sometimes when I go see indie rock outfits, I tend to see a lot of white people there too — but that's another matter. The new music audience looks quite different and is composed differently; there are a number of boisterous music ensembles. Maybe don't start with going to hear Beethoven at the symphony. Get a symphony of Stravinsky's *The Rites of Spring* or Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*, classic 20th century pieces, and work back from there, rather than confronting mainstream classical music repertory.

But it's not one thing, not one [single type of] sound; classical is a thousand years of music covering the spectrum from pure avant-garde noise literally to John Cage's silence to medieval chant to 19th century Romantic opera to Baroque dance pieces to minimalism to every conceivable area. The sound you desire, you can find it somewhere in the classical canon, no matter what it is. I'd encourage people to be open to the possibility that classical music is still here after a thousand years for a reason: It has something incredibly important to say. — Suzi Steffen

Alex Ross reads from The Rest Is Noise at 7:30 pm Monday, Oct. 22, at Powell's on Burnside, Portland.