

Just in Time for Christmas

A Review of Greg Johnson's Novel *Sticky Kisses*

By Robert X Weaver

As a writer, Greg Johnson is clearly accomplished. His short fiction has been honored in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*, *New Stories From the South: The Year's Best*, and (my favorite) *Men on Men: Best New Gay Fiction*. He has published several volumes of literary criticism, and he gained international acclaim as Joyce Carol Oates's authorized biographer.

Of his debut novel, *Pagan Babies*, the Southern treasure Anne Rivers Siddons said, "Greg Johnson writes with uncommon clarity and beauty about the many faces of love and the price of living honestly and flat out." The prize-winning playwright Jim Grimsley said that Johnson is "one of the best writers we have...a quiet artist with a clear vision of his world."

But calling Greg Johnson a writer, even an accomplished one, is like calling Champagne a beverage. Greg Johnson's prose is exquisite, effervescent at times, and, like fine Champagne, Johnson's words seemingly tingle, excite, and then evaporate into the senses, leaving only the faintest and most delicious hint that they were ever there:

Outside her window, a young man in shirtsleeves ascended through the whirling snow.

Long-haired and slender, he looked like an angel, Abby thought. She blinked, frowning, as she always did when something failed to make sense. Along with the other passengers on this side of the plane, she

watched as the man lifted a silver wand. . .

With this vivid and haunting hallucination, Greg Johnson begins his long-awaited second novel *Sticky Kisses* (Alyson Publications, \$24.95). Abby Sadler has not spoken to her gay brother Thom in over four years; an unexpected phone call from this "lost brother" pulls Abby away from her staid life in Philadelphia, where she works as a school teacher and serves as companion and caretaker to her possessive widowed mother.

Thom, grappling with the death of his lover Roy, has been newly diagnosed as HIV-positive, and Abby braces herself to face her brother to "let him have it." But once Abby arrives in Atlanta, Abby quickly warms to Thom's eclectic group of friends—particularly Thom's new young boyfriend Chip, Thom's beloved friend Carter, and the affable Connie. She is drawn deep into Thom's often-chaotic world, gaining a new understanding of her brother's struggles with complex issues with identity, gay life, and a potentially life-threatening infection.

Episodes from Abby and Thom's past help delineate the narrative, adding both depth and insight to the present. Never has a portrait of two siblings been more perfect, complete with the secrets and revelations that only close family members can share.

As Abby and Thom tentatively move toward reconciliation, Abby and Thom's



people. Johnson has gained a literary reputation by building convincing characters out of the important details; even the omissions are not accidental. When reading Johnson, it is almost impossible to believe that one is reading fiction, so engrossed one becomes in the very real lives of his characters.

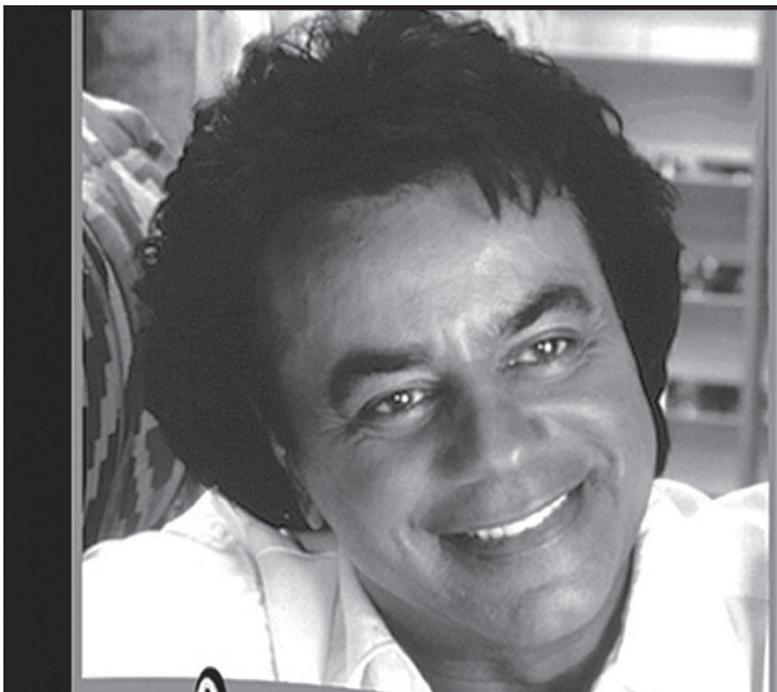
As such, *Sticky Kisses* is coincidentally painful and satisfying in its realism. As I read this novel, experienced the lives contained within, I often found myself holding my breath, gasping in astonishment, crying out in anger, and wiping my tears away with my shirtsleeve. True, this is a novel of hope, but it is hope often checkmated by death, making clear the realization that we don't have forever to make our peace; as the clock runs out, so does hope. But we're also shown that, in the absence of mortality's finality, it is never too late to be surprised by the power of change and growth.

By fearlessly delving into the complex and irrevocable ties of family and blood (a purposeful allusion to the catalyst of Thom's phone call at the beginning of the novel), Johnson allows us to delve deep into these intrinsically familiar but all-too-baffling human complexities and the connections that bind us all. *Sticky Kisses* is a masterful novel about human connection with all its frailties, strengths, and blameless faults, and, above all things, *Sticky Kisses* is a staggering testament to the healing power of love.

mother Lucille arrives—a bitter woman who once alienated Thom by suggesting that Thom somehow contributed to his father's death.

Like the snow in the novel's opening sentences, these relationships swirl and dance—mother, daughter, son—often with dizzying poignancy against the backdrop of a larger family of friends and newfound lovers. Yet *Sticky Kisses*, like all of Johnson's writings, remains clearly focused on its subjects, proving Johnson's talent as a careful, precise observer of life—or, as has been said about Johnson's writing, a careful, precise creator of life.

When Johnson is at his best—and *Sticky Kisses* is Johnson at his best—the reader becomes imbued with the undeniable sense that these are real, living



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