

Angst and Isolation

Award-winning author enters the psyche of the angry young queer

by Glenn Scofield Williams

A pissed-off, alienated queer teenager. A lost and lonely gay young man with homicide on his mind. Blair Mastbaum is not an angry young man. He just writes about them.

"I'm really not like these characters," Mastbaum laughs. "I almost don't know why I write them. I'm really not like the angry guy."

The author of two novels and editor of an upcoming anthology of fiction by young gay

writers, 31-year-old Mastbaum has a real talent for portraying the psyches of young, obsessive gay men, even if he's not one himself. The constant ticks of agonizing memory, the habit of an ex-lover, the burn-in-the-gut longing—he captures well the torture that comes with obsession.

"I could so easily be like that, but I never had to be," Mastbaum says. "Well, maybe in high school with straight friends."

A Vermont native, Mastbaum recently moved to Portland with his longtime partner, actor and filmmaker Scott Coffey, after several years in Los Angeles and New York. He did some modeling for Calvin Klein and Versace, acted in a small role for Coffey's 2005 film *Ellie Parker* and eventually fell into writing.

"I never thought I'd be a writer," Mastbaum says, "but I was always writing. I was writing *Clay's Way* off and on for like five years, never really serious about it. Then in L.A., a couple years before we moved here, I met the writer John Rechy, who did *City of Night*, and I started doing his writing

workshop, which he just did in his apartment. And he believed in me and helped me get my first book published."

That first book, *Clay's Way*, was a coming-of-age story about a misfit skateboarding teen living in Hawaii and exploring first love with a closeted surfer dude. The novel is naked in its depiction of gay love, young lust, drug use and violent teenage anger. It rightfully garnered a Lambda Literary

Award for Debut Fiction, and the New York Public Library named it one of 2005's "Books for the Teen Age." Although the protagonists were young men, it came as a surprise to Mastbaum that the book's audience was largely teenagers.

"I was amazed that some librarian would choose that book for teenagers to read," Mastbaum smiles. "But I think gay teenagers still feel isolated. A lot of gay boys don't associate with the stereotype gay representation out there anymore

than they would associate with Carol Brady—you know, like *Will & Grace* or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. It's a stereotype. Most gay guys are not like that. That's why some kids, I think, feel just as weird now as the kids from 30 years ago."

Mastbaum's newest novel, *Us Ones in Between*, is a nerve-wracking roller coaster through the life of Kurt Smith, a 25-year-old gay writer whose youth is fast unraveling and whose boundaries are as thin as a subway token. Ass-over-teakettle ob-

