

Only the Lonely

Wordstock author writes about gay Arab American

by Glenn Scofield Williams

Asim, a young gay man from Lackawanna, N.Y.—born in the United States to Egyptian parents—receives a package at the movie theater he's inherited from his father. The package is from his militant Islamic brother. In it is the skull of a Jew, filled with ashes. The date is Sept. 4, 2001.

Lambda Award winner Gary Zebrun is a master of plot and character. His first novel, *Someone You Know*, is an intense growl of a novel in which we watch a serial killer stalk a married, closeted gay man. Similarly, his newest book, *Only the Lonely*, does not let up the intensity for one page.

This novel couldn't be more stuffed with drama and beauty. It is a rich dive into the tempest of family, the cold depths of loneliness and the rip-tide of fundamentalism. It is a passionate poem to the power of movies and the inevitability of both sorrow and joy. It is a haunting look inside the mind of loneliness and the desire within all of us to escape to something better.

I had the pleasure of sharing a correspondence with Zebrun, 53, in anticipation of his visit to Portland.

Glenn Scofield Williams: What was the impetus for *Only the Lonely*?

Gary Zebrun: For a long time I had wanted to write a novel about the Abbott Theater [a movie house in Lackawanna], which my father managed. When I was a kid I used to spend weekends watching films there. A year after 9/11, when the Lackawanna Six were arrested as a suspected terrorist cell, that rundown steel town captured my attention again. To my surprise, I was writing about two Egyptian Americans, one gay and the other a militant Muslim, who had inherited the local movie theater in Lackawanna. Memories of my boyhood at the movie house provided me a way to get into the mind of the three main characters in *Only the Lonely*: Asim, the younger gay brother; Tarik, the wannabe terrorist; and Sonia, the longtime mistress of their dead father. The one thing they all share, as I do too, is an obsession with movies.

GSW: In both *Only the Lonely* and *Someone You Know*, the gay character, through the fact of his sexuality, causes trouble in the world around him, particularly in his family. Do you think this is inevitable?

GZ: Most gay men of my generation spent at least part of their lives hiding their homosexuality. That secret life does hurt everyone close to you.

Lies almost never bring anything but pain and sorrow in the long run. Just look at the last eight years of George Bush's presidency. These days, young gay people can be open about their sexuality, and that openness is good for everyone—family, friends, neighbors, the entire country. But in some intolerant cultures, including many in the Arab world, being gay is still fraught with fear and danger.

GSW: *Only the Lonely* allows us into the mind of a woman with Parkinson's. How difficult was this to write, and why did you find it important?


GZ: My Russian grandmother, who died before I was born, had Parkinson's. My father's relatives used to tell me stories about her. Apparently, she was fairly lonely here in America, and according to family stories, she loved the movies: musicals and film noirs, happy-go-lucky and grim. If I were going to write about the Lackawanna movie house, I wanted to find a way to imagine her in it. So in my novel, she becomes the mistress of the father of Asim and Tarik. In fact, she and her husband both become lovers of their father—a threesome, which allowed me to complicate the lives of the two sons. But at the



Boyhood memories helped Gary Zebrun get into the mind of his characters.

heart of her character is my attempt to imagine the grandmother I never knew, and in a way make her more personally engaging to me than just family lore.

GSW: When and how did you come out?

GZ: I came out late, in my 40s. *Someone You Know* was, in a sense, autobiographical and my coming-out novel. Of course, unlike the protagonist, Daniel Caruso, I've never been married or stalked by a serial killer. But like him, I was closeted for decades. In the novel, living a secret life has terrible consequences for Daniel. For me, being closeted didn't destroy me, but it did leave me with a sense that I wasted so much of the life I was intended to have. 

Wordstock 2008 presents GARY ZEBRUN noon Nov. 8 in Room D-136 at the Oregon Convention Center, 777 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. For a complete schedule visit www.wordstockfestival.com.

GLENN SCOFIELD WILLIAMS writes poetry, prose, plays, periodica and porn in Portland.