

Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* as an Insight into Male Teenage Same-Sex Desire in the American South

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses two opposing interpretations of Jim Grimsley's novel *Dream Boy* (1995), a "southern" one and a "gay" one. Because of the ambiguities of the novel, the story of two teenagers, Nathan and Roy, can be considered primarily in its southern setting and understood as an insight into same-sex desire in the South, which often exists outside the categories of gay identity. At the same time, it can be seen as just another coming-out story, this time one set in a rural area and ending prematurely with the violent death of the main protagonist. While the author of the article would subscribe to a "gay" interpretation, he admits that the "southern" interpretation, suggested by Grimsley, may provide a valuable insight into same-sex desire in the American South.

KEYWORDS

American literature, gay literature, southern literature, Jim Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, rural South in literature, teenage sexuality

Jim Grimsley remains one of the most under-researched major contemporary authors from the American South, even though there can no longer be any question about his status as a canonical writer. In 1999, after his first four novels had been published, Lisa Howorth acknowledged Grimsley as an author who was "on the cutting edge of contemporary Southern fiction, where he [had] carved out a place for himself as literary chronicler of the Southern gay experience,"¹ and in 2002 Bob Summer called Grimsley "one of the South's most notable younger writers."² Grimsley's firm position in southern literature was established by Jody Brooks's entry on him in volume 9 (*Literature*, edited by M. Thomas Inge) of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (2008).³

At first sight, Grimsley's characterization as the "literary chronicler of the Southern gay experience" seems to be justified, as he explores the various and diverse forms of same-sex desire practiced in the South. His second novel, *Dream Boy* (1995), explores the relationship between two teenage boys living in a rural area of North Carolina, *Comfort & Joy* (1999) deals with the relationship of two southern men belonging to different classes, and *Boulevard* (2002) reflects a boy's experience with the New Orleans gay subculture at the end of the 1970s.

While the protagonists of *Comfort & Joy* and *Boulevard* identify as gay or homosexual, the matter is much more complex in *Dream Boy*, the winner of the ALA Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual Book Award in 1996. The novel explores same-sex relationships, both consensual and abusive ones. Its teenage protagonist, Nathan, moves to a North Carolina community with his parents. Nathan becomes close to Roy, an older boy from the neighborhood from whose parents Nathan's family rent the house. An intimate relationship develops between the boys, even though at the beginning Roy

1 Lisa Howorth, "Jim Grimsley: Tales of Southern Courage," *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 1999, 39.

2 Bob Summer, "Grimsley's Talents on Parade in 'Boulevard,'" *Orlando Sentinel*, July 21, 2002, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2002-07-21/news/0207190496_1_grimsley-newell-novel.

3 See Jody Brooks, "Grimsley, Jim," in *Literature*, ed. M. Thomas Inge, vol. 9 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 295-297.

is shocked by Nathan's technical proficiency in sex. It gradually becomes apparent that his family has been moving around for some time because Nathan is being sexually abused by his father, an alcoholic. Nathan soon has to hide from his father again in order to prevent more abuse, and Roy, who starts to understand the situation, helps Nathan avoid his father. Moreover, Roy is gradually beginning to include Nathan in the circle of his friends, Burke and Randy. During a hunting trip the boys decide to explore a dilapidated mansion on a former plantation. In the darkness Burke and Randy catch Roy and Nathan engaging in sex; they depart but the drunken Burke returns later, raping Nathan and crushing his skull with a chair. At the end, Nathan gets up, returns to the campsite and then to a church, in which he finds the crying Roy—the boys then leave together. However, these last scenes are a mere dream going through Nathan's dying mind.

Gay literature scholarship will be interested primarily in the same-sex relationship between the two boys, as well as the incestuous same-sex sexual abuse. However, such "gay" readings, which may include an understanding of the novel as a coming-out story in the broadest sense of the word, often contradict a "southern" interpretation of the novel. When Jim Schumock summarizes *Dream Boy* as "really the story of a gay teenage love affair between a boy named Nathan, who has just moved into the small town, and another boy named Roy" in his interview with the author, Jim Grimsley replied: "[The boys] would both *hate* that description you just gave and I think Roy, in particular, would deny it. He would say this is not a gay love affair at all—'It's just me and my buddy, Nathan.' The reason I'm making that point is that that's very much the shape of that kind of boy-boy sexuality in the South that I knew. Nathan would be the queer, and Roy would not."⁴

Authors' own interpretations of their works have traditionally been frowned upon and rejected as examples of what W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley called "intentional fallacy," when they argued that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art."⁵ Still, Grimsley's remarks urge a closer look at the text and a possible reconsideration of the situation in the context of southern culture. Does the novel offer a view into fundamentally different conditions of same-sex desire and/or teenage boy-boy sexuality in the American South, or is the mainstream coming-out and/or gay interpretation of the novel's story fully justified? The present article endeavors to substantiate both of these lines of thought.

Various interpretations of the novel, even opposing ones, are possible because *Dream Boy* is a highly ambiguous novel. The main source of ambiguity is the novel's narrative technique, as the narrator uses a limited omniscient point of view, looking at events through Nathan. This makes it possible to access Nathan's mind, and yet, on the other hand, it makes it difficult to judge other characters, primarily Roy. And, as I will demonstrate, understanding the character of Roy is vital for any interpretation of the novel.

A "southern reading" of the work may be based on the assumption that the American South is different in many ways from the other parts of the United States. This can be taken as a fact, confirmed by the existence of a long line of Southern Studies scholarship. For example, the

4 Jim Schumock, *Story Story Story: Conversations with American Authors* (Seattle, WA: Black Heron Press, 1999), 155–156.

5 W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468.

twenty-four-volume *New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* (2006–2013), assembled under the guidance of Charles Reagan Wilson as the general editor, explores in its individual volumes various and diverse aspects of southern culture. It is also a well-established fact that (the perception of) Southern culture is more often than not laden with prejudice, stereotypes, and misunderstanding—and the situation of same-sex/homosexual relationships in the region is no exception.

There can be no doubt that *Dream Boy* is a southern novel, as it incorporates all the elements Fred Hobson rather stereotypically considers “central in the most notable southern fiction of the first three-quarters of [the twentieth] century,” i.e., “place, family, community, religion, and the past.”⁶ *Dream Boy* is set in a rural North Carolina community; it opens in a church and the church plays an important role in the story; it explores the issue of sexual violence within families; it is preoccupied with the past, when the history of a slave-holding family is mentioned and important events take place in the local graveyard and in the former mansion of the slaveholders. Add to that ghost stories told by the campfire, as well as the gothic atmosphere in the graveyard and during the boys’ exploration of the mansion, and we have a southern novel *par excellence*.

Moreover, as the story seems to be confined to a closely-knit southern community in the 1970s, its members are unacquainted with the hedonistic lifestyle of gays in the large cities of the United States during the short carefree period between the symbolically liberating Stonewall Riots in 1969 and the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic at the beginning of the 1980s. This, of course, does not mean that the South has ever been completely devoid of inhabitants with same-sex desires. John Howard comments on the situation of LGBT southerners in the following way:

LGBT southerners have demonstrated extraordinary daring and ingenuity in building networks and crafting relationships. The nominally conservative institutions of small-town and rural life—home, church, school, and workplace—have been the very sites where queer sexuality has flourished. For rural southerners, these mainstream community institutions have served as the key sites for meeting friends and sex partners: at house parties and church choir practice, in school gymnasiums and on the shop floors. Though usually clandestine, same-sex relations have been enabled by the distinctive qualities of rural landscapes and social structures. Though they may publicly denounce homosexuality, many southerners practice a day-to-day, quiet accommodation of difference.⁷

As this informed description shows, even today same-sex relationships may be more veiled in the rural South than in large cities and people may not accept a gay/homosexual at all, even though rich networks of those accommodating them and their difference do exist.⁸

One of the most significant features of *Dream Boy* is that, unlike in most of the literature published in the same period that deals with same-sex desire, its characters do not operate in the established categories of sexual identity. Words like “gay,” “homosexual,” and even “queer” or “fag(got)” simply never appear in the story,⁹ even though it is clear from the very beginning of the

6 Fred C. Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 8.

7 John Howard, “Gays,” in *Gender*, ed. Nancy Bercau and Ted Ownby, vol. 13 of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 123.

8 Moreover, as I demonstrated earlier, the rural South has often served as a haven for those gay men exhausted by the hectic life in large cities, both in the North and the South. See Roman Trušnik, “The Rural South as a Gay Men’s Haven in Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* and Jim Grimsley’s *Boulevard*,” *American and British Studies Annual* 9 (2016): 99–107.

9 “Gay” actually appears once in the name of a flower, “gay feather” (*Liatris spicata*).

novel that Nathan is attracted by the same sex, when, in the opening scene during a church service, he “thinks about the body of the son of the farmer who owns the house Nathan’s parents rented three weeks ago. Jesus has a face like that boy, a serene smile with dimples, a nose that’s a little too big, and Jesus has the same strong, smooth arms.”¹⁰ This desire is, of course, completely separate from the sexual abuse he has had to suffer from his own father.

The situation is much more difficult for Roy. The closest description of their relationship Roy gets to is his admitting to Nathan, “Now we’re buddies,”¹¹ and yet he feels a need to set firm boundaries: “I’m not your boyfriend. [...] I have a girlfriend. And I don’t need to do this if I don’t want to.”¹² Regardless of the way Roy characterizes his relationship with Nathan, he cares for him deeply, as can be seen later in the novel, when he provides Nathan with a refuge from his father, or when he introduces him to his friends. The strong emotional connection between the boys is also important, as the term “buddies,” a word for “friends” without any connotations in the South, may falsely remind some modern readers of the concept of “fuck buddies” (or, in a more polite version, “friends with benefits”), a type of relationship focused on physical relief without the burden of emotional involvement.

However, Roy’s effort to set boundaries with the label “buddies” does show that their relationship exists in a certain social context, even though it may not be the context of homosexuality. As the term “homosexual” or “gay” is applied to a great diversity of same-sex relationships, David Bergman, in his study *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (1991), decided to come up with a working definition of homosexuality, which he described through four terms: otherness, genuineness, permanence, and equality. According to Bergman, “the homosexual suffers a categorical, perhaps even ontological, otherness since he is made to feel his ‘unlikeliness’ to the heterosexual acts and persons who gave him being.” By “permanence” he means that “[h]omosexuality, unlike other intramale sexual states, is a lifelong condition,” by “genuineness of experience” that “[h]omosexuality is not a passing fancy or a substitute for heterosexual contact,” and by equality he does not mean to indicate that “in individual relationships the partners are equal [...] but rather that the institution of homosexuality does not assign specific roles to specific individuals. In Sambia, ancient Greece, or in parts of Africa, roles are rigidly polarized. [...] In Euro-American homosexuality these roles are not proscribed; indeed, homosexuality has developed a remarkable fluidity of roles and role-playing that cuts across racial, social, and cultural boundaries.”¹³

Seen through the prism of Bergman’s criteria, Grimsley’s southern interpretation of the relationship, in which “Nathan would be the queer, and Roy would not,” as not “a gay teenage love affair” would be fully justified. The actual story covers a period of several months and any speculation about the permanence or genuineness of Roy’s relationship to Nathan would hardly be supported by the text. Grimsley’s commentary even suggests that the relationship is not based on equality but on a strict division of roles, with one partner being queer and the other not. This is confirmed when Nathan and Roy are caught having sex by Burke and Randy, who are not

10 Jim Grimsley, *Dream Boy* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1995), 1–2.

11 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 27.

12 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 29.

13 David Bergman, *Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 30–31.

disgusted so much by the actual sex between Nathan and Roy but by the fact that Roy performs fellatio on Nathan. Randy asks in disbelief, "Jesus, Roy, you do that to him?"¹⁴ implying that if the roles were reversed, the situation would be much more acceptable. This point is brought home even more strongly when Burke later returns to Nathan and rapes and kills him. Again, as long as they stick to the roles of queer/not queer, and Burke is the penetrator, sex with another boy is no problem for him.

A southern reading of the story, arguing that the relationship between the protagonists of the novel is not a gay affair and the boys are not gay/homosexual, is thus perfectly possible if we accept that the "day-to-day, quiet accommodation of difference," as Howard put it, includes activities and relationships which place it outside the realm of modern Euro-American homosexuality, as defined by Bergman.

However, a "gay reading" of the novel is equally possible and can be plausibly argued, considering the ambiguities in the novel. Such a reading could thus bracket the southern elements in the novel as mere local color. While the novel's setting in southern culture contributes greatly to its success, the basic story of an affair between teenage boys in which one of the partners is beaten to death can be convincingly transferred to any rural setting in the United States. A fate similar to Nathan's even has a parallel in American history: three years after the novel was published, in October 1998, a 21-year-old student, Matthew Shepard, was beaten by two men in Laramie, Wyoming, and left to die. Though still alive when he was found, Shepard died several days later of head injuries. This event entered American literature permanently, through *The Laramie Project* (2000), a play by Moisés Kaufman, as well as the American legal system, when, in 2009, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act was adopted.

Once again, the interpretation of the Roy character is more important in the discussion than the interpretation of Nathan himself. Nathan struggles with the fact that he is abused by his own father but he does separate this experience from his own desire for the same sex. Even though he does not identify explicitly as gay, he seems to accept his longing for boys. He does not have to protect his public image, either, because, as a newcomer and a gifted student who has skipped several grades, he is on the margins already. He thus fears more that people might have heard about the real reasons why the family left their previous home than about his relationship with another boy.

Roy's situation is quite different in this respect. He was born into the community and is closely connected with it through a family history going back for generations. His status within the community is quite high and thus he has much to lose. As the narrator notes, "Roy is famous for having a girlfriend at another high school, an achievement of real sophistication for a boy his age,"¹⁵ and he also possesses "the added prestige of being a school bus driver and a member of the baseball team."¹⁶ Furthermore, he lives in a network of long-time friends, which includes Burke and Randy. These friends are confused when Roy starts to invite Nathan, a boy two years younger

14 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 164.

15 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 8.

16 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 3.

than himself, into their circle; they would hardly be interested in Nathan on their own, but now they are forced to accept him (or at least to pretend to) because of Roy.

When one looks at Nathan's and Roy's budding relationship, apart from the abuse of Nathan's father, which is revealed to Roy only later, there is nothing unusual that would make the relationship significantly different from the first relationships of many boys who later identify as gay/homosexual/queer. In other words, it is not unusual that boys who fall for each other are not able to explain their desire, or they consider it just a phase or part of growing up—they may realize only later that their desire for the same sex is genuine and permanent, and may incorporate their difference into their identities. In this context Grimsley's own remark that the boys would hate their relationship to be described as a "gay teenage affair" may simply mean that they would hate this label at the point of the story, and it by no means prevents them from developing a gay identity later.

For the time being, they may just feel that what they are doing is not approved of by society, which is especially true in religious rural areas where there are no role models in the community—in addition to this, in the 1970s the media did not show so many role models as today, either. Fear of rejection by society is obviously what Roy felt when he demanded that their relationship remain secret: "When we do this, you can't tell your parents. [...] You can't tell your friends either. This is a secret."¹⁷ Because of such pleas, Nathan is subconsciously aware that the development of a fully-fledged relationship with Roy will hardly be possible in their rural community. Even in his last thoughts, when he lies dying, Nathan dreams of Roy saying "I guess we could go up north somewhere,"¹⁸ after which they stand up and go and never look back. Any kind of development would be possible if the relationship had not been interrupted by Nathan's violent death.

This interpretation of the relationship as pure love between the boys, in which Roy is taken aback by his new emotions that he still cannot name, is certainly possible, and yet the text offers another interpretation, which would see Roy as a closeted gay. The key element would be the character of Evelyn. Roy may be renowned for having a girlfriend at another school, yet his purported girlfriend never appears in person, so she may as well be just a rumor. When Burke asks Roy, "You going out with Evelyn?" Roy "shifts uncomfortably," and when Burke persists with a further question, "She running around on you?" Roy acts with visible irritation: "Hell no. We ain't going out tonight, that's all." Grimsley importantly adds to this reaction of Roy: "His tone is meant to warn Burke off the subject."¹⁹ Roy is irritated again later, when Nathan asks about his girlfriend's name, and once again when Burke teases Roy about his girlfriend being at home, or perhaps finding someone else to go out with her: "Roy studies his hands, attempting to control his expression. 'She's home with her parents where she belongs.'"²⁰

Roy's persistent anger whenever Evelyn is brought up in conversation suggests that his girlfriend may only have been invented in order to protect his public image. To take the point further, Roy may have invented his girlfriend in order to escape the scrutinizing eye of the strict social control in the community and to ward off any suspicion that his lack of a girlfriend may actually be caused by his self-sex desire.

17 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 28–29.

18 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 195.

19 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 69.

20 Grimsley, *Dream Boy*, 119.

The goal of a literary article is often to cope with the ambiguities of the text and offer an interpretation of the work. Yet Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy* is a novel with an appeal that is based on the very ambiguities a literary scholar is supposed to clarify. In other words, it is a text so ambiguous that the points mentioned in my article could lead to several other papers offering opposing interpretations of the novel, ranging from "southern" through "budding gay" to "self-aware closeted gay" ones.

The author's narrative technique allows access only to Nathan's mind, but when one tries to come up with an interpretation of the nature of the boys' relations, Nathan is paradoxically the less ambiguous, and, in a way, the less interesting character. Moreover, the fact that the story takes place over a period of months makes it impossible to follow the development of the protagonists for a longer period in a situation in which a teenager's (possible) coming to terms with their difference often takes years; while Nathan finds peace in his final thoughts, readers will never learn the destiny of Roy—they cannot even guess the direction in which he is headed.

If I am forced to come to an interpretation, the conspicuous absence of Evelyn, supposedly Roy's girlfriend, as a real character in the story would make me lean towards a "gay" rather than exclusively "southern" interpretation of the novel. Yet Grimsley's remark shows that things are more complex in the South, as usual.

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