

The inimitable Patrick Gale talks about writing as a teenage girl, and the outcome of schoolboy-teacher crushes

HOME FIRES

"Institutionalised" is not the word that springs to mind on first meeting Patrick Gale, 43, the biographer of Armistead Maupin, and the writer of *Ease*, *The Aerodynamics of Pork*, and, most famously, *Rough Music*. Dressed neatly in autumn colours with a corduroy jacket, brown suede brogues, and a foxy silvering to his hair, he looks every inch the fresh-faced country gentleman that he's become, living as he does with his partner of six years, a Cornish cauliflower farmer.

In spite of living the farmer's life, he says that he feels "a bit institutionalised". His father was the Governor of, among other prisons, Wormwood Scrubs and as a family, the Gales lived in houses within the prison walls (occasionally lifers would baby-sit him), and he was sent to Winchester Cathedral and College and then onto Oxford, where he was one of a rarefied group of choristers. "It's a truism that people who went to boarding school would cope well in prison. You never forget those survival instincts that you get as a little boy dumped among strangers. You develop this knack for working out who's scary, who's weak. Horrible, really."

His new novel, *Friendly Fire*, revisits these schooldays, with many autobiographical elements, but one crucial difference. The central character is a teenage girl, Sophie, who's been raised since a baby in a children's home. She has elected to stay in, rather than allow herself to be fostered, and is thor-

oughly institutionalised – a rootless character, adrift from her background, in search of a family and her adult self.

Gale has been praised for writing strong, female characters before, and he convincingly writes from a teenage girl's viewpoint. "It's amazing what happens when you write a male story from a female perspective. It sets it free from your own inhibitions and obsessions. It's like putting fancy dress on, and you're not you anymore," he says. "It's liberating, especially when you're writing about something which therapists might say were... issues. It's like having a surrogate: if you don't want to go in the room where something nasty is lurking, send her instead. My agent says that he is terrified of the idea of his clients going into therapy, in case they stop writing." But luckily for his agent, Gale says, "Fiction is my therapy."

In the book, Sophie wins a scholarship to attend a Church school, and there cultivates a group of gay boyfriends. They plot together, form shifting allegiances, fall in and out of love, and become embroiled in a scandal that results in the suicide of a teacher.

Gale says that he's accurately modelled the school on his own experiences at Winchester. "If anything, I've toned it down so as not to make it too salacious. I had a lot of gay friends at school, and a totally gay adolescence. I knew I was gay at about 13, and was pretty much out of the closet then." At the time, he had a gang of friends who were in the same position. "We took turns to betray each other – suddenly so-and-so's not your friend any more, and you're not talking to them. You try things on for size at that age, and, unfortunately, sometimes those things are your friends. You don't know who you are, so you don't know what you need."

Like one of the boys in his book, Gale wrote love letters to teachers, and claims to find it amazing that he didn't get into more trouble than he did. He professed his love and lust for them – "The different ways they responded was fascinating".

One of the more 'cowardly' teachers handed the notes to Gale's housemaster. "He sent me to the chaplain, who said, 'You really mustn't write love letters to your teachers; it scares them witless. You can have enough fun when you leave school'. Winchester, at that time, was very civilised."

Another teacher invited him to his house, fed him biscuits, played him opera, held his hand and said, "I'm touched and flattered, but you must realise that I can't do anything about it."

In *Friendly Fire*, we see this scene played out, but a scandal erupts. The teacher is fired, and kills himself. Gale says, "A version of this story was true. There was a wonderful teacher at school who got very close to one of the boys – I think he was in love with him – I don't think anything happened." The parents complained, and the headmaster told him that the friendship must stop. However, the boy was obsessed and kept going round to the teacher's house. On the night the teacher was fired, he threw himself under a train. Like in the novel, a crow was trapped in the church and sat by the coffin throughout the service. According to Gale, one of the undertakers murmured ghoulishly to a choirboy, 'six plastic bags'. I think that funeral will have left a deep impression on a lot of the boys who were there." ■

Friendly Fire is published in April by HarperCollins, £10.99

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