

The writer and reviewer Patrick Gale (left) was born on the Isle of Wight in 1962. His novels include “Tree Surgery for Beginners” and, most recently, “Rough Music”. He has also published a biography of Armistead Maupin. He lives in Cornwall.

The novelist Armistead Maupin was born in Washington in 1944. He is best known for his “Tales of the City” series set in San Francisco. His latest novel, “The Night Listener”, was published earlier this year. He lives in San Francisco

Patrick Gale: The first time I saw Armistead was at a London book launch for *Significant Others*. I’m hopeless at dates, but it must have been 1988 or 1989 – a little over 10 years ago, which is weird, because I feel I’ve known him three times as long as that. We hit it off so immediately that he said “You must come to another party tomorrow”, and I thought I’d died and gone to gay heaven. Not only was I meeting Armistead, who was the godfather of gay liberation, but I then found myself at this party he was giving, in David Hockney’s studio.

I was very newly in love and it was the most impressive thing to be able to say to your boyfriend, “Oh yes, come along to this party, it’s at David Hockney’s studio, it’s being given by Armistead.” It was very Armistead, very wild, a lot of dope flying around. I took him a loaf of bread that I’d baked; I’m a very keen baker, it seemed a suitable Anna Madrigal gesture.

Armistead had already been really nice about my novels in print, and vice versa. Though we have very different styles, we both write about the same territory, we’re both obsessed with families,

Interviews by Hester Lacey

with relationships, extended families and friends of families. So we knew there was a sympathy there even before we'd met.

We tend to be like twins separated at birth – once we're reunited we cannot stop talking. You can get his instant attention. With some friends it takes about three hours when you meet them to get calm and communicate, whereas with Armistead, it's immediate. He has great emotional generosity. He's a combination of Mrs Madrigal and Michael Tolliver – he doesn't hide his emotions at all.

It's quite extraordinary: when I look at how often we meet and how much time we've spent together, it's not much more than about once a year. But then it's the same with almost all my friends, because I live in darkest Cornwall: it makes no difference whether they live in London or Sydney. Most of the relationship is on paper or on the phone. I write a lot of letters to Armistead. He's a hopeless letter writer, he never writes back, but then there'll be a wonderful phone call that lasts about an hour and a half. He's made one visit to Cornwall and I think he was absolutely horrified. He's not a country boy, he's quite urban. It was midwinter, there were gale force winds, and I don't think he'd ever been so cold in his life.

A while ago I was commissioned to write a biography of Armistead for a series on gay icons. These weren't like standard autobiographies, they wanted them to be intensely personal. It was only in the course of doing the hours and hours of interviews for the book that we realised just how many similarities there were. We both had immensely old-fashioned fathers, and both our mothers were fairly theatrical. We both got a tremendously heavy inheritance of family history dumped on us. There was a kind of strange synchronicity when we were working on the biography. I think it helped both of us enormously.

We can be completely ourselves together. He can be a complete monster with me, and vice versa – we know it'll go no further.

Armistead Maupin: We met in a very crowded party at the Terrence Higgins Trust to celebrate the publication of *Significant Others*. I'm pretty sure it was 1988. It was a touchingly sweet party because they had created a sort of Barbary Lane motif and I think it was the first time I was really aware how culty the whole *Tales*

thing was getting. I knew that Patrick was going to be there because my publicist arranged it – I'd already read his *Kansas in August*, and I was hugely impressed. I knew from Patrick's book jacket that he was a pretty dishy guy, but he looked even better in person. It was hard not to regard him as a bit of a wunderkind because of his looks and talent and age.

We knew each other from our work so we had some anticipation of what we'd be like. We hit it off right away and we yammered on into the night. He has a marvellous sense of humour and a great self-effacing quality that makes his looks and his talent forgivable.

I think we're more alike than we're different. We were both raised to be good little boys, and we're still awfully good at that impersonation. So we're able to let off steam in each other's presence in a way that makes me very comfortable.

Patrick's one of the most modest men I know. He's not an angel, but we can share our wickedness in a lovely way. We occasionally engage in mutual *schadenfreude* at the expense of others. He's the best house guest on the planet. He's a marvellous cook and a great gardener, and he professes to love both, so you feel no guilt whatsoever when he takes those duties over.

When he was writing my biography, I'm not sure if there was another writer on the planet I'd have entrusted with that information. Our friendship freed us to be comfortable and conversational, and I knew he wouldn't betray me, though he did take me to task several times about my failure to confront my family about important issues. That prompted a lot of healthy self-examination on my part and facilitated the writing of *The Night Listener*. There are places in which the novel and the biography intercept. He was the best shrink I had all year.

We've never been entangled romantically or fought over the same man, so there's a kids-in-the-schoolyard feeling about our friendship. Most of my friends are not writers. But I've never felt a moment's competition with Patrick, only camaraderie. I can pick up the phone and call him and 45 minutes will fly by.

He's deeply domestic and so am I. I place great value on people who can make me laugh, and that's a constant with Patrick. He's also a very generous and loving person. He always makes me feel as if I'm at home. Even in Cornwall. ☺