



Steve Kluger

Almost Like Being in Love
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Q: Family and what makes people a family is theme that appears in *Almost Like Being in Love* and in some of your previous work. What are the qualities that make people family to each other? Why is this a prevalent theme in your work?

A: Growing up with three brothers in a home beset by multiple divorces automatically gives you a sense of what family is, isn't, and should be. Growing up gay in a world where you're beaten up as a kid and relegated to second-class citizenship as an adult pretty much offers you the same perspective. So presenting families in as many forms as possible is a way of both fixing the past and giving people ideas on how to repair the present.

Qualities that make people family: encouragement, support, loyalty, unconditional love, trust, and perpetually being there for one another. My own extended family reflects many of those families I've created in my work. A year and a half ago, I stood beside a 13-year-old boy as he was Bar Mitzvahed, in an almost uncanny echo of virtually the same scene in my previous novel, *Last Days of Summer*, between a fatherless Jewish kid and the baseball player he idolizes. Similarly, whenever I run into one of life's many seemingly insoluble dilemmas, I always turn for advice to my fifth grade teacher who's been an anchor to me since I was ten.

Families rock as long as you know how to put them together the right way.

Q: Why did you choose to write *Almost Like Being in Love* in the form of letters, journals, faxes, e-mails, and other nontraditional narrative devices? Is it more freeing for you in the writing process? Were you nervous about presenting your narrative in such a different way? What storytelling challenges do you face by using this format?

A: One of my three all-time favorite novels is Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase*, which I discovered when I was 15. What impressed me most about it was Bel's style in telling the story of a young schoolteacher caught up in the administrative red tape of New York's inner-city school system. One chapter would consist of her students' contributions to the classroom suggestion box; another would be comprised of inter-school memoranda sent back and forth amongst the characters; a third would be the teacher's long narrative letters to her best friend, etc. It struck me as a high school sophomore that Ms. Kaufman had hit on the perfect way to tell a compelling story and when I began writing professionally, I took the same concept and expanded it. My first novel, *Changing Pitches*, was essentially a journal being kept by an aging major league pitcher, interspersed with news clippings, fan mail, mound conferences, and clubhouse bulletin board notes; *Last Days of Summer* was largely made up of letters between Joey (the kid) and Charlie (the ballplayer), along with similar types of narrative interjection; and *Almost Like Being in Love* follows the same trend established by the first two. It's most certainly more freeing in the writing process and helps to establish an intimacy and an immediacy that you just can't get with traditional narrative. The only real challenge is coming up with the storytelling devices peculiar to that particular story and making sure that they cover all bases.

Q: You take comic pokes at Hollywood and the movie-making process throughout *Almost Like Being in Love*. Have you experienced some of the screenplay highjinks described?

A: Everything Gordo experiences in the film industry is something I went through at one time or another: romantic comedies turned into slasher films; deals made by executives who only read coverage of synopses of readers' reports of scripts; producers' assistants who cancel meetings ten minutes after they were scheduled to start, with the excuse that the producer has gone duck-hunting, to Cannes, or back into rehab; a story editor who confesses she always thought that the Iwo Jima flag-raising photo came from Vietnam; a star who won't take a script home with him to read because, according to an aide, "he doesn't like to carry things"; and nineteen-year-old development people who tell you that the Kennedy assassination doesn't have enough of an "edge" which is code for not having the slightest idea who Kennedy is. Before I left the film industry behind me, I discovered that the only way to deal with these people was not to play by the rules. So I invented my own phony manager Keith who had his own letterhead and his own telephone number and who got me my first book deal, my first stage offer, and my first film option. When I finally decided, after nine years, that movies were definitely not for me, I still had Keith to dispose of so I killed him. In fact, I wrote the most moving obituary imaginable and sent it off to the trade papers. Two days later I discovered, to my absolute astonishment, that they actually ran it and in the leadoff spot, ahead of fifteen other people who were genuinely dead.

On second thought, the screenwriting highjinks in *Almost Like Being in Love* don't even come close to scratching the surface.

Q: Numerous storylines cross paths in *Almost Like Being in Love*. Did you have the various storylines worked out in advance or did they develop as you wrote? How difficult was it to tie up so many dangling threads?

This one was easy. *Almost Like Being in Love* actually started life in 1988 as a screenplay (ironically, as had *Changing Pitches* and *Last Days of Summer*), so the plotlines, character developments, and story threads were well blueprinted already. From there on, it was a matter of organizing the elements into chapters and then just sitting back and having a great time expanding and developing them to my heart's content. Of all the people I've ever written, this group is my favorite and the idea of getting to spend 347 manuscript pages with them was a sheer joy. Sort of like going on a long vacation with all of your best friends.

Q: From your author bio, we know that musicals and baseball are your passions, much like Travis's. In what ways are you Travis, or any of the other characters for that matter, in your own life?

A: Characters always own a particular piece of their author, and in this case Travis and Craig both represent who I used to be and who I became: Passion is Travis' middle name, but sometimes he's a little too afraid to take a risk. (The story about faking a pain in an upper left molar in order to go in for a root canal he didn't need just to stare up into the big brown eyes of the dentist he has a crush on is pure Travis. It's also no fabrication; it happened in July of 1991, my dentist's name is Craig, and he's the reason that I've never since then everything I've written has a Craig in it.) Craig McKenna, on the other hand, is absolutely fearless: he'll take on any

adversary who gets in the way of an injustice he's determined to correct—but sometimes he's a little shy of his own feelings. (Twenty years ago, I began fighting for Japanese American internment redress, and after the reparations bill was passed, I segued to lobbying for a permanent internment memorial at the Manzanar relocation center site. Once this too came to pass, I went head-to-head with the Department of the Interior to have them restore Manzanar's baseball diamond—which had been left out of the restoration plans—as the single landmark that represented the heart and soul of every one of the displaced Americans imprisoned in those camps between 1942 and 1945. I still haven't forced a surrender out of the federal government, but—like Craig—I intend to continue being a pain in the ass until they do what's right.)

Most of the time I tell my characters what to do, and they listen—but once in awhile, they actually teach me.