

Sam Lipsyte Pans Out

I read Sam Lipsyte's *Home Land* during one long, heroic bowel movement. I was spending a year in Rome and had just returned from Milan where a weekend of gorging on risotto had utterly stuffed up my beleaguered gastric system. It sounds medically improbable and not too aesthetically pleasing, but Lipsyte's work helped purge me. I laughed something stupid. I bounced up and down on my Roman bowl, until my backside was indented with the seat's ceramic crescent. "Comedy's hard, man," Lipsyte told me when I met him for an interview at the Bohemian Hall & Beer Garden in Queens recently. It's hard, I think, because ultimately comedy has a closer relation to tragedy than any other genre. Hence the success of the Jewish comic novel. Lipsyte's *Home Land* is that most improbable of things—a book about high school you simply can't do without. In fact, after *Home Land*, there will be no need for high school novels ever again. Lipsyte has just the right view of our country (nightmarish, that is), but his writing is oddly generous, too. There's a camaraderie to his sentences and an odd feeling that through laughter and companionship we just might outlive the seeping wasteland around us.

-Gary Shteyngart

Loggerhead Reading Series: I'm interested in your evolution as a writer. How old were you when you wrote your first stories, the ones that went into the short story collection *Venus Drive*.

Sam Lipsyte: The bulk of them were written when I was around 28, 29. Some earlier.

LRS: Were you a student of Gordon Lish?

Lipsyte: Yes, I studied with him. He published a couple of stories of mine in *The Quarterly*, after many rejections. They had that great form letter when they rejected you—it was about five hundred words long.

LRS: I was studying writing at college and then this professor showed up, a disciple of Gordon Lish, and we operated according to the Lish method. You start reading your work and then as soon as you hit a false note she made you stop.

Lipsyte: Yeah, Lish would say, "That's bullshit!"

LRS: That process completely derailed me. Took me years to recover my voice. But for you it actually seemed to have some kind of benefit.

Lipsyte: I think the process for me was to unlearn a lot of the sloppy habits I had. I learned a lot of new stuff from Lish. I struggled for a long time, but what you find out at the end is that there's no "method," it's just a way to get to your own thing.

LRS: I'm thinking of the sentence in *Venus Drive*, "Gary's mother calls Gary." That's a Lishian sentence and you don't find those kinds of sentences in your next book, the novel *The Subject Steve*, which I think is such a vast improvement, just a big leap forward.

Lipsyte: Yeah, I don't like to use too many cheesy phrases like "finding your voice" but...these stories, some of them I'm still proud of, but they were demonstrations of certain kinds of writing. "Gary's mother calls Gary"—I'd still maintain there's strength to that. You're riding a line and the trick is just to not tip over into something too mannered.

LRS: Like I said, for me the jump from *Venus Drive* to *The Subject Steve* was amazing. And I enjoyed *Venus Drive* a great deal. There's not a sentence out of place.

Lipsyte: Thank you. I think I became aware of my own behavior, my own tics, and when I come across a sentence that I think I've done too much, I stop myself.

LRS: And I'm envious of the brevity of your books. Me, I just never know when to shut up.

Lipsyte: [laughs] I'm usually self-conscious about the fact that my books are too short, that there's a lack of gravity, literally. Usually I get off on a certain kind of compression. Doesn't mean I don't labor over all the sentences and the story, but I guess I don't think in terms of a huge canvas.

LRS: Are you ever going to attempt the big canvas, do you think? Although, when I think of *The Subject Steve*, there's so much going on in terms of narrative, topically, morally...

Lipsyte: Well, I guess it is a pretty big canvas. Maybe it's not a valid way to think about all of this anyway. Look at a writer like Camus—very short books that packed a lot in. I think that writers have natural lengths. There are sprinters and marathoners, and maybe I'm more like a middle-distance runner with these last few books.

LRS: "I didn't pan out." That's Teabag's [the narrator's] cry in *Home Land*. And a beautiful line. The line I remember most from *Subject Steve* is the credo "I am me." How did you go from "I am me" to "I didn't pan out?" I mean, in some ways, *Home Land* is almost a coming-of-age novel whereas *Subject Steve* is a middle-age novel.

Lipsyte: *The Subject Steve* was my first novel and I was very aware that I didn't want to write a coming-of-age novel. I didn't want to fall into that kind of trap and so I really went out of my way to write about a guy who was older than I was, and he was divorced with a child, and I had none of those experiences. But when I came to *Home Land* I thought it might be okay to delve into some of these coming-of-age...morsels.

LRS: That's a juicy word.

Lipsyte: [laughs] Because I had already done *The Subject Steve* and I was now middle-aged anyway.

LRS: Forty-eight is the new thirty-seven...

Lipsyte: Good, good...

LRS: I love your work on a sentence-by-sentence basis. Let me just drop a few of your best lines here. Let's see, there's "stick figure diagrams of abuse...." You make child abuse really funny, you know that?

Lipsyte: I have a little bit of guilt about that.

LRS: The book has a weight to it, a kind of balance, and it's provided by the mother character. The mother dies of cancer and there's a mother who dies of cancer also in several stories in *Venus Drive*.

Lipsyte: Lacking imagination, I drew a lot of that from the death of my own mother. Not necessarily in the event. The autobiography is usually more in the feeling than in the event.

LRS: I think *Home Land* wouldn't have been the same without her. And I think the child abuse part...

Lipsyte: Yes, they balance.

LRS: I think there are some similarities in the work that we both do...

Lipsyte: Yes.

LRS: What we both have to deal with is balancing humor and pathos.

Lipsyte: Comedy's hard, man. [laughs]

LRS: But pathos isn't!

Lipsyte: It's very easy! I see a lot of pathos out there and not a lot of good comedy.

LRS: And there are some great funny political references in your work. "Dreadlocked anarchists who follow the G8 like it's a legendary acid band."

Lipsyte: I remember this editor was trying to nominate *Venus Drive* for this Jewish book award. I asked him what was going on with that. And they said it's not Jewish enough to consider. And I said, "Dude, I think it's the most Jewish book out there." By the same token, I thought this [*Home Land*] was also a very political

book. I didn't try to trumpet it as my 9/11 novel. I'm glad you picked up on those threads.

LRS: But Jewish novels are pretty hot in the literary world...

Lipsyte: I think they're hot, but not if you're an American Jew with the kind of typical American Jewish experience. That's kind of done. But it's always about the how, not the what. That's kind of what I love about your book [*The Russian Debutante's Handbook*]. You took on some of these themes and you did it with humor, brio, and you wrote a real book. You didn't try to just pimp your heritage.

LRS: Thank you. The funniest line in all of your work, I hope you won't disagree, is from *Home Land*. This is Teabag speaking to his principal, Mr. Fontana: "Some nights I picture myself naked, covered in napalm, running down the street. But then it's not napalm. It's apple butter. And it's not a street. It's my mother."

Lipsyte: I do like that one.

LRS: What was going through your mind when you came up with that line. Do you stand in front of the mirror and practice these kinds of dialogue?

Lipsyte: I just get into these schizophrenic states where I have the conversation with myself. That line, I remember, I started with that napalm image—obviously we all know that photograph. Vietnam, or representations of Vietnam, warped a lot of people of my generation, watching *Platoon* over and over.... So I think I played around with that for a while and finally got in with that line.

LRS: That jump from "It's not a street...It's my mother." We're so SAT-trained to think of what comes next after 'street' and then you just blow it out of the water with "It's my mother."

Lipsyte: You do want to take that strange leap that destroys the purity of a simple analogy.

LRS: Which contemporary writers do you like?

Lipsyte: I'm a big fan of Gary Lutz. There's *Stories in the Worst Way* and *I Looked Alive*. I really like Ben Marcus's stuff. Chris Sorrentino's book was really good. It's called *Trance*. It's a Patty Hearst novel. Gilbert Sorrentino, his father, is a very underrated writer. I could name a few different names on any given day. Those are the ones I'll say right now. I'm not crazy about a lot of recent historical novels where it's very clear the writer did a lot of research. There's a whole school of those books and I think that's a bit of a problem with contemporary fiction in that a lot of people turn away from "the now." There are writers who say, I can't really write about the way the world is now because it's too confusing and fluid and strange so I'm going to research the hell out of a strange thing that happened in 1850 when this dye was invented and a plate for daguerreotypes or something.

LRS: [laughs] I don't know if you've read the recent V.S. Naipaul piece in the *Times Book Review*...

Lipsyte: I didn't.

LRS: ...in which Naipaul and another essayist talk about how only non-fiction can keep up with real time. I'm simplifying it a bit here...

Lipsyte: This is something that Philip Roth said in 1961 or whenever he wrote that essay, *Writing American Fiction*. The 9/11 novel is annoying in a way, but at least it's people trying to wrestle with it.

LRS: And I don't think it's the pace of events, I think it's more the technology. Something happens in the morning, people expect to have it analyzed on a blog by four. The novel is a lumbering beast by comparison.

Lipsyte: Well, I don't think that's the job of fiction.

LRS: Is fiction still relevant?

Lipsyte: I guess it's about what kind of scale you're interested in. I read something once about the screenwriter Robert Towne,

who wrote *Chinatown*. He was talking about the golden age of Hollywood up until Watergate and Vietnam and all that. Before those events, the Hollywood movie was rooted in a certain idea: America is basically good; there's corruption, but we can root it out. The system itself is a good thing and the narrative was built around that assumption. And then, after Vietnam and Watergate, everyone *still* agrees, but now everyone agrees that everything's fucked and the system itself is rotten. You have your anti-heroes, but basically everyone's still on the same team.

The problem is that after that period, everyone became dispersed and everyone's in a different niche, so there are no common assumptions. I don't think this precisely applies to literature, but I do think it's an interesting point. So people talk about the novel being dead—it's not that it's dead, it's that the novel is no longer necessary to a lot of people.

People no longer have to fake reading books the way they used to. There's no basic assumption from which to work from anyway. So, very urbane, literate people talk about video games at cocktail parties. That's the new Dickens—it's Halo.

LRS: [laughs] But should we be making value judgments about Halo? And I'm not just saying this because we make our living writing fiction...

Lipsyte: Well, a lot of people we revere as giants were marginalized in their own time, so I don't worry about it too much. I remember I opened up a copy of *The American Mercury* and there was a little capsule review of the new William Faulkner novel... talk about snark! It was "Someday William Faulkner may write a good novel, but he needs to discover a sense of humor first..." or something like that.

LRS: I agree!

Lipsyte: I think what gets people upset is the expectation that large amounts of people will be wrapped up in their vision. It still happens, though. A lot of people read *your* book.

LRS: Eh...

Lipsyte: It still happens. But in a way it makes you work harder, because readers aren't automatically jumping on the new novel of the month.

LRS: What's strange to me is that fewer and fewer people read, and yet more and more want to write. Look at the proliferation of MFA programs, for example. Maybe it's a part of our self-obsessive culture. It's like the credo of *The Subject Steve*: "I am me." There's more concern with self-expression than there is in trying to connect with another person, than trying to hear someone else's words.

Lipsyte: I think that's absolutely true. There's a lot of interest in just "spiritual creativity" and "unlocking your inner narrative voice" and so on. People are interested in writing a journal and then turning that journal into a memoir. A Romanian philosopher wrote about how the Roman army really entered its decadent phase when everybody wanted to be in the cavalry. They had to outsource to get foot soldiers because all of the sons of Rome had their dads buy them nice horses so they could be these fine-looking cavalry officers. Everyone wants to be a writer, nobody wants to be a reader. And it's not just that. It's not just cultural developments, it's, you know, a painter uses paint, but we use language and so does everybody else. And so people look at you and think, "Well, I can do that." Somebody makes a really nice chair—unless you're trained in woodworking, you don't think, "I could do that."

LRS: *Home Land* is a very Bush-era book. To quote from it "We think that we're not fat and that we're a nation." Where do we go from there?

Lipsyte: These characters are [high school] class of '89.

LRS: As were you?

Lipsyte: No, when I was writing it, I made the characters a few years younger than me. I was class of '86. So these characters [in *Home Land*], their formative years were the Reagan years.

LRS: Right! As Lazlo, the armless boy turned political operative says, "Look at me now. I made it. Fuck the victims! I mean, victimhood."

Lipsyte: [laughs] Yeah, all that by-your-own-bootstraps stuff. Sometimes you hear the most brutal, reductive reasoning from people like Lazlo.

LRS: In *Home Land* there's not a page that isn't pure bitter comedy. But there's also a wistfulness, almost a nostalgia about high school. There's one sentence that stuck in my mind. Teabag, the narrator, says of his classmates: " I could have sketched the pimple distribution of the chins of the boys whose names I barely knew." What is it about high school?

Lipsyte: Well, I think I write about institutions. *The Subject Steve* was about the medical institution. *Home Land* touched on all these young people, hormones coursing their veins. You're in this kind of controlled frenzy, and it's not really nostalgia for wonderful times, it's nostalgia for a certain kind of closeness and intensity—even with people you don't know or aren't friends with—that never really appears again.

LRS: And of course there's the famous Teabag incident, how he gets his name.... These football players mash their balls into his face in the locker room. But what hurts him most isn't the sexual assault, it's that he doesn't get accepted afterward, that it's not an initiation ceremony. And when another high school student who gets 'tea-bagged' sues his school, Teabag is outraged.

Lipsyte: Right! That's his anger at what he sees is a weaker generation coming up and suing. Whereas he thought the whole thing was just to take it.

LRS: That's a great set-up, the tea-bagging. How do you feel about the speech Teabag gives at the high school reunion in the end of the book? The great heroic speech. You're making fun of high school movies.

Lipsyte: What I said to myself was, "You put these characters here, you better at least deliver that moment." The choice was,

do I maintain my cool and not have him say anything although I know that tradition [the speech at the end of a high school movie] does exist, or do I at least acknowledge this familiar terrain and try to subvert it? So that's what I was trying to do.

LRS: You do great male-to-male conversations in your books. Here's Teabag's friend Gary talking to him:

"What was that?"

"What?"

"The sound you just made."

"A laugh. I laughed."

"Is that a new laugh?"

"That's my laugh."

"You've been working on a new laugh."

"The hell I have."

"Fucking poseur."

And that to me is just pitch-perfect conversation between two male friends. I had a lot of male friends in high school, but I couldn't recreate the conversations so well. Mostly we were pretty high.

Lipsyte: I had a lot of male friends, too. I don't know if we had these kinds of conversations. I think that's what we can do with fiction. In a way, two guys talking—that's a comfort zone for me, and maybe I don't want to get too comfortable. It just feels very natural to take this in some absurd direction, let their dialogue ricochet around. But you're more likely to get that kind of satisfaction on the page than talking to your friends.

LRS: The way you write is getting better and better, from book to book.

Lipsyte: I hope so.

LRS: I'm just glad you're not going to write about 19th century daguerreotypes. I noticed you have an attachment to the first person.

Lipsyte: Some people cannot write in the first person, some can't do the third-person. Some can do both. But I have a real problem with the third person. I don't know what it is. When I write in the third person, it sounds stilted, it sounds wooden, fake somehow.

I think it's the phrase "he thought," that a good writer doesn't really have to use. But somehow the ghost of it is still there. I think it's psychological for me, this stumbling block, not aesthetic.

LRS: Back to the role of fiction today, are we asking too much of the middle class to buy our shit? To get into it?

Lipsyte: Those are two different things. To get into it, maybe. But we're not asking too much for them to *buy* it. [lots of laughter] ❖