

Article on Alistair McCartney for *IN Los Angeles Magazine*

Many years ago, I saw author Alistair McCartney take off all of his clothes and perform nude. It was at Highways Performance Art Space in Santa Monica. The stage was soaked and McCartney slid back and forth butt-naked, while the audience looked on amused, entertained, and perhaps somewhat baffled. McCartney was doing something interesting and the audience was ultimately engaged.

His debut novel *The End of the World Book* can be described as doing the same. McCartney is challenging the function of the novel. *The End of the World Book* is written in the form of an encyclopedia, with 26 chapters, each chapter is a letter of the alphabet. Each chapter is filled with entries, thoughts really, on a myriad of topics like Asteroids, Mad Cow Disease, the poet Thomas Gray, Nightmare on Elm Street. From A to Z, the reader becomes privy to the thoughts of a protagonist also named Alistair McCartney. It is a non-linear, plotless story that could fall into a category of writing called “experimental.”

And it is certainly the most different book to come by in a long, long time.

“I was working on Flash Fiction or Short, Short Stories,” McCartney said, referring to a genre of writing that encapsulates a story in less than one thousand words. “I was at Antioch University, in the MFA program, trying to develop a unified Masters thesis.”

He continued way after he finished his degree, putting in a good seven years before calling it something he was pleased with. “I loved the World Book Encyclopedia,”

he said. When he was a boy, he spent hours pouring over the volumes of the World Book. In those pages, he discovered that his birth city of Perth, in Western Australia, was described as the “most isolated city.” He addresses this in his book, writing, “For me this isolation, along with the deep tedium of childhood, was eased, if not erased by the World Book’s sense of beauty and order. Every time I opened one of the twenty gold-edged volumes I felt as if I were approaching infinity.”

McCartney describes himself as a “novelist and encyclopediast.” He wanted to develop his own World Book. “I wanted to write a perverse, queer encyclopedia,” he says. “What it means to be a gay man in the twenty-first century. That’s one of the things I wanted to do.”

He also wanted to stretch his and the readers’ imagination. “The imagination is the most important thing,” he says. “We’re living in a time where imagination is stifled. The imagination has a stagnant quality at this point.”

The book is clever and funny, with colorful descriptions. In an entry on Leonardo Da Vinci, he writes, “His male anatomical studies are amazing, especially the close-ups he did of their assholes, particularly that famous one, where he drew the man’s asshole as if it were a kind of whirlpool, full of all sorts of crazy currents, and with bits of moss and rock-like formation around the edges.”

Throughout the book, however, is a solemn, floating quality. There is a sense of loss and insecurity. Alistair’s partner is the American performance artist Tim Miller. Though Alistair considers himself married to Miller, he doesn’t reap the benefits of heterosexual marriage. One major benefit that eludes McCartney is citizenship,

something automatically granted to heterosexuals when marrying an American citizen. The couple has been struggling with this dilemma for years.

“An undercurrent of the book is uncertainty about the future,” said McCartney, who is on a work Visa and would have to leave the country when his visa runs out in 2009. He would have to move back to Australia for a year before reapplying to return to the states. Unless gay marriage, with all the benefits of straight marriage, becomes a reality in America in the next year, Alistair’s future is in question. “A lot of my writing is about dreams, my dreams and of others.”

He has been wondering about his fate in this country for the last ten years. Alistair has lived in Los Angeles since 1997. “I feel like an American,” he says, “but have no legal documentation of that.”

One document that McCartney can proudly call his own is this unique and refreshing novel. Like his nude performance oh so many years ago, readers will be amused, entertained, perhaps baffled. One can’t deny the work is interesting and ultimately engaging.