

# Dennis Cooper, Whipping Boy

The Rebel Writer Speaks Out on Art, Politics, and Evisceration

BY ADAM BLOCK

**D**ENNIS COOPER MUST DIE! The angry words are scrawled on the cover of a small pamphlet, which a pale, intense boy presses on Cooper. Glaring at the novelist's frozen half smile, the young activist snarls, "If I try to talk, I'll get too angry, but as a male hustler, I want you to know what you're exploiting and profiting off of." Then he slips away.

Cooper, who has just finished reading before an appreciative crowd, winces and glances at the pamphlet. It is signed by HULA (Hookers' United Liberation Army). He squints after the youth and shivers involuntarily. The bad boy of gay letters has had a rough Memorial Day weekend.

It began in Chicago when the 38-year-old author flew there from his home in Los Angeles to attend Spew, the first-ever queer 'zine convention, where he read from his new novel, *Frisk*. Cooper's novels and collections of poetry (*Closer, Safe, and He Cried*) have all dealt graphically with sexual obsession and violence, making Cooper the most controversial author writing in the gay community today. *Frisk* ranks as the most myopic and personal in this decade's worth of slashed-and-skinned-boy books.

In Chicago, Cooper enjoyed the camaraderie of Spew's band of outcast literary activists. Real-life horror intruded into his final night there, when the event's organizer was viciously, repeatedly stabbed by a group of fag bashers.

Arriving in San Francisco on the heels of that incident, Cooper was greeted with disgusted reviews of *Frisk* in both of the city's gay newspapers. A critic for the *Bay Area Reporter* scored it as a punishing retread of a nauseating topic from an author who is creatively bankrupt. The *Sentinel's* re-

viewer fussed worriedly, "I can't ever remember writing such a negative review."

After years of facing appalled critics, Cooper knew that his new book would disturb and exasperate mainstream readers. It was meant to. But he wasn't prepared for the confrontation with the boy from HULA.

On May 27, the last night of his visit to the Bay Area, A Different Light Bookstore on Castro Street was packed. Cooper read a fantasy about dismembering a pale young hustler ("I tore up his body like it was a paper bag"), and when he was done, fans crowded forward for autographs. In their midst stood the boy, who looked like one of Cooper's obsessions made into flesh: a sullen teenager with cropped black hair and sensual lips. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt bearing the logo ACT UP.

After the boy split, Cooper flipped distractedly through the pamphlet, scanning its contents. A friend reached for his cuff and asked, "Did that disturb you?"

"Yes," Cooper nodded bleakly, two pearls of sweat drizzling down his forehead, "very much."

Both before and after the literary death threat, the embattled author spoke with *The ADVOCATE* about dismembered boys, disenchanting critics, and the reasons behind his writing.

**Have you seen any boys you'd like to eviscerate lately?**

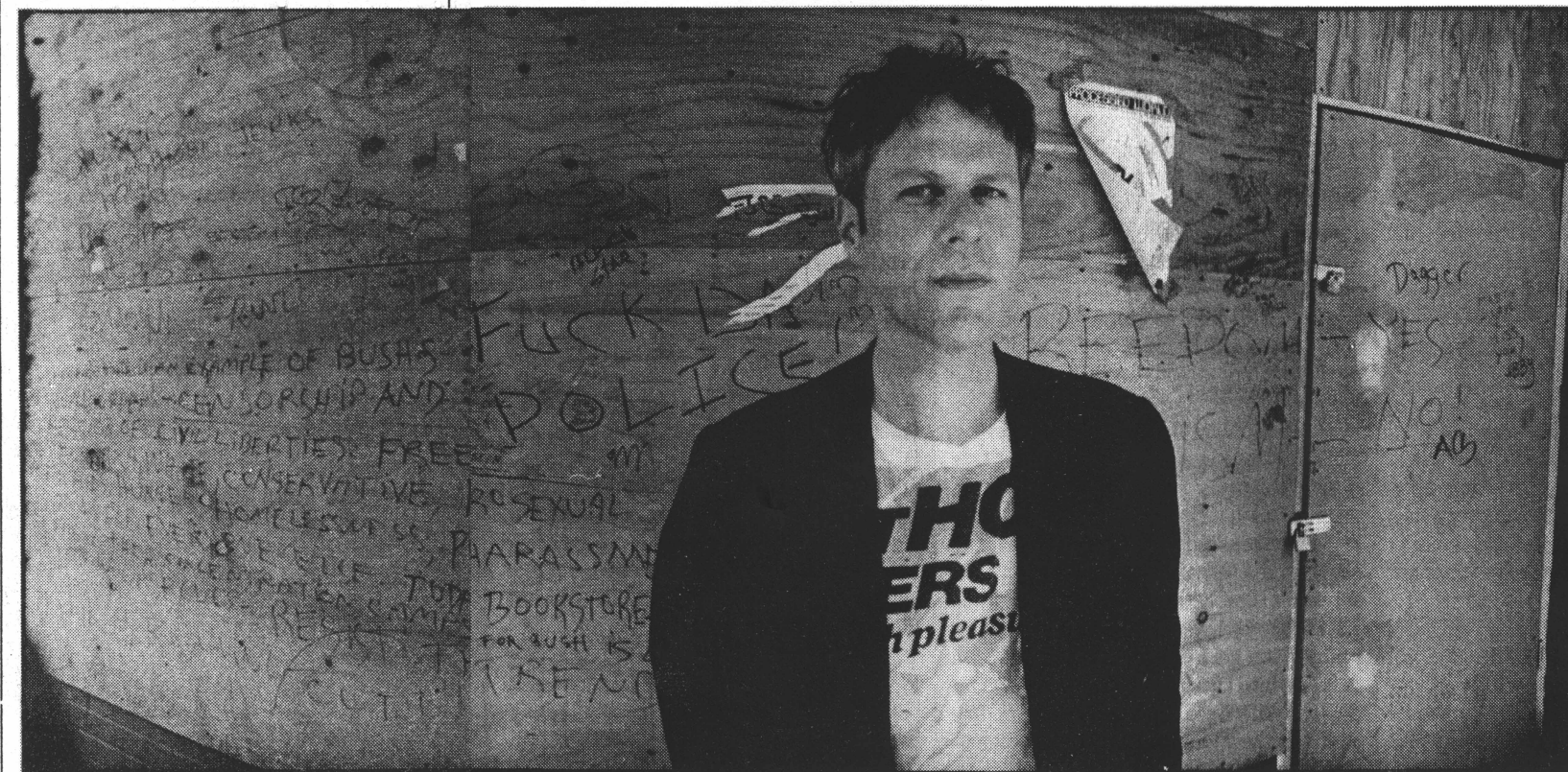
Possibly. [Laughs] Well, no. It's my boyfriend—he is very jealous. He doesn't want me to think of other boys, so I don't.

***Frisk* examines an obsession with torturing and killing male sex objects, a theme that has long been a feature of your work. Is the narrator, Dennis, autobiographical?**

It's not my whole sensibility, but I take responsibility for his thoughts and actions, because I could imagine myself doing them.

But I'm not exactly like the character. I'm not completely obsessed. I have a life.

See, I want to understand these interests that I've had since I was a kid. The farthest



I can trace it back is to reading de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* at 15. I remember being absolutely amazed, horrified, and turned on. It was only later that I realized that it was fiction. I had thought there might be a real world like the one de Sade described, where people explored each other as sources of information about life or desire. Then I realized that you don't really have a right to use people like that.

**Your narrator is erotically obsessed with photos of a young boy who has apparently been ritually murdered. Have you ever seen a snuff film?**

*"My interest in [ritual murder] is as the fuel of eroticism."*

No. I've been sort of trying to. When I went to see [filmmaker] John Waters, I thought I might ask if he had access to one. But I realized when I met him that his interest in serial killers is different than mine, and it seemed inappropriate to ask.

I'm interested in what the experience is like and what gives people the freedom to do it. My interest in [ritual murder] is as the fuel of eroticism. If you're erotically at-

were offended—the Queer Nation agenda—and it's true that gays don't get a decent shot in the media, but I think they were barking up the wrong tree. I was more offended by *Our Sons* [a recent TV movie about a gay man dying of AIDS]. It was just this whirlwind of bad writing and bad acting around this guy's death. Nobody was reacting to that guy's dying in any kind of real way. Then he died, and suddenly his mother and

tions as something that would get in the way of his search for information. He shut his feelings down.

**The *Sentinel's* critic wrote, "I hope that someone can give me a plausible explanation of *Frisk* and its message if there is one."**

Message? No, I don't have a message. If I do have a message, it's that I'm interested

in this stuff and trying to present it in a way that allows the readers to explore it too. Everybody expects when you're writing about violence and murder that you're supposed to come to some kind of enlightenment, and there is none. There is no answer to things as complicated as violence or sex.

**Your book has been equated with slasher movies and compared to Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*.**

I think that's really stupid. My book

isn't superficial or exploitative, but there are people who think that if you write about this stuff without explicitly rejecting it or interpreting it as the result of child abuse, then you're not dealing with it in a serious way. That's a failing of theirs.

**Speaking of serial killers, how did you feel about the protests over the film *The Silence of the Lambs*?**

I thought the movie was really slick, like a TV show. It bothered me less that the killer was "gay" than that the character was just a big, fuzzy hole in the movie. I couldn't imagine that people would see that movie and hate homosexuals more. I mean, that guy was a total wacko.

I understand emotionally why people

his lover are in this airport smiling and waving good-bye, and he's zooming by in a coffin on a luggage transporter! He wasn't even sympathetic: He was made to seem like this lame movie queen. Everybody in that film just seemed like a complete idiot!

**Do you think the characters in *Frisk* relate to death in a real way?**

Well, they're not interested in moral interpretations. I think they are really interested in what death is about.

**Or in experiencing it emotionally?**

Yeah, well, the narrator in *Frisk* saw emo-

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