

## *A Conversation with Lee Houck*

The following conversation is included to enhance your group's reading of *Yield*.

**What was the genesis of this story? What about Simon's character made you have to write about him? Were you at all worried that Simon might become a clichéd gay hustler?**

Simon's voice came barreling out of the void one evening while I was sitting at my desk. Whatever I did to try and get him out of my head—and I did try—he insisted on telling his story, and that's how *Yield* came about. At the time I started writing the book, this would be 1999 or so, I was living in my first New York apartment, with three roommates. (We even had two bathrooms and a dishwasher; it was luxury!) I was trying to find my way into the queer community, or I think I was learning, in a very practical way, what it feels like to have a new family made of queer people, and how they are different from your biological family. I was also figuring out what it meant to have intimate, meaningful, and sometimes difficult or exhausting relationships with friends—the kind of friends who know you better than you know yourself. Simon's voice is not my own, *per se*, but it is the voice of someone like me at that time, when the newness is so great and vast that it can be overwhelming, but also exhilarating.

I never thought that Simon would be perceived as clichéd character. At the time, I was simply concerned with getting him down on paper correctly. I felt strongly about his distinctive point of view, his very real observations and choices—I knew him as a person, fully formed and original. That said, although characters often initially emerge from nothing, the writer eventually has to finish making them. So, of course, I worked during the crafting of the novel to make Simon real to the reader, as real and complicated as he was in my imagination. And in those terms, in general, I work completely on instinct, trusting my writer's brain to make the best choice for the character, and ultimately the story.

**Louis, Jaron, and Farmer play no small role in *Yield*. Why did you decide to tell the story of these four friends through only Simon's eyes? Do you think you could have explored some issues—such as Jaron's cutting and the emotional impact of the beating on Louis—more deeply if you had gone into their heads as well?**

A lot of what *Yield* says about friendship is that you surround yourself with clever, loving, complex people, that support you through the shifts that life can take, but you ultimately have to make your own choices. They ignore Jaron's cutting because Jaron prefers it that way—and whatever the outcome, his friends respect that choice. Louis

reacts to being attacked in a way that feels right for him, or rather the only way that feels possible, for good or bad, and ultimately it strains his relationship with Simon.

From the very beginning, Simon had such a strong, clear voice that I couldn't figure out any way to get around him. I worked on several sections over the years in other voices, from the perspective of the other characters, even from a third-person narrator, but none of it had the ring that I wanted. None of it had the kind of immediate intimacy that I was interested in exploring—I wanted the reader to be looking out through Simon's eyes, to have that kind of concentration. The novel I'm working on now is in third-person, and it's very refreshing to have the openness of that perspective, and the distance that a wavelength like Simon's does not provide.

### **How much of the interaction between Simon, Louis, Farmer, and Jaron is based on the relationships you have with your own friends?**

Some of the lines—like when Jaron says, “I'm so hungry I could eat the ass out of a rag doll,” that is from my friend Foster, verbatim. But really, it's all invented. I drew from my queer family for a kind of basic inspiration, sort of understanding how gay men talk to each other, and how love can sometimes look like meanness if you aren't listening close enough. But, of course, gay men can also be extremely cruel to each other, even crueler than straight people, I think. So I wanted to have lots of scenes with the boys just living their lives, being themselves, and loving each other. It might look like a dysfunctional family, but they really are everything to each other.

### **What was the first scene you wrote? What was the most satisfying for you to write? Which gave you the hardest time?**

The first scene that was really finished, and that still reads basically the same as I originally wrote it, is the Central Park scene, where they are watching the opera. I had written much of the dialogue for a play—back when I was sort of, almost, barely working in theater. And I was digging through old material, looking for starting points for scenes that I knew needed to happen in *Yield*. So I started to build the prose around the dialogue. A few of the early scenes in the novel happened that way—they are reworkings of older material.

The scene that was the most satisfying to write was the last chapter in part one, when Simon is being drugged and shifting his consciousness back and forth between the now and his childhood. I say that because I don't actually remember struggling with it. That's not to say that the writing was just flowing out of me—it still went through countless revisions, but I always knew exactly what tone and weight that chapter needed, so it never felt problematic. It was always about listening carefully to the words, and letting the scene become as big and lost and illusory as it could be. Many of those childhood memories really are my own—the bike riding, the driving through Mississippi,

burning pine needles in the road—so, in that way, I was surrounded by those comforting ideas during the rather terrifying present I was inventing for Simon.

One of the last scenes I wrote is the first chapter in part two, in which Simon explains his journey moving to New York, and the difficulty dealing with his parents. I knew this background needed to be addressed, but I was resistant to having to, you know, go there. I think you really feel the melancholy of Simon's life in that chapter—as much as he is in love with New York City, you can feel the sadness of having to leave his home, even though that place is really a lonely existence as well. I had to force myself to write that one, absolutely. I avoided it for a long time.

**Simon has a very flat, jaded, affectless voice. Can you talk about that some? Is it something he developed to deal with his profession, much like the flat place, or is it a quality he's always had that makes it easier for him to do his job?**

I actually think that Simon is very emotional, although he does cut through all that to the most basic of feelings, and I think, yes, he's been desensitized to a large degree. But then again, Simon has good instincts when it comes to the emotional life of his friends, even though he might say that he doesn't—take the scene with Jaron at Rockefeller Center, for example. Also, people tell him things, deep, difficult things, so I think that even though he seems away from so much of life, people trust that he understands a lot.

The beginnings of Simon's voice began somewhere in his childhood—with the mother who spoke only in notes left on the counter, and the father who was mostly absent. That ability to compartmentalize certainly allows him to hustle and not become totally destroyed by the experiences. And, I think, conversely, his tendency toward empathy probably makes him a good hustler. With the distance comes few judgments.

**You wrote Yield a few years ago, yet it seems so relevant today, especially with the fight for marriage equality shining a spotlight on the gay community, as well as the backlash and continuing anti-gay violence around the world. We're also seeing more and more spontaneous rallies like the one at the end of Yield. What is your reaction to these parallels?**

I consider myself a part of a community of artists who are also activists. The frank truth is that in this country it's still okay to have a public hatred of queer people, in a way that other racist or classist prejudices have to be more hidden—which, of course, is its own kind of insidious hatred. You can see it in the votes against marriage equality in New York, New Jersey, California, especially the votes coming from Senators. Maybe unconsciously at first, I was drawn to telling a story, at least in an emotional way, that would force the reader to empathize with a radical-ish, queer hustler who did things with his body that might scare you to death. Maybe I was, indeed, looking outward to readers who aren't like me, who might not know anyone like Simon or Louis, but who

understand their otherness and can see some part of that in themselves, even when the character's circumstances are so extreme.

**At one point in Chapter 4, Simon recites his menu, yet there's no mention of bareback sex. In fact, there's no mention of condoms throughout the book. What was your intention in doing that?**

I realized early on what kind of sex scenes that the story required—fluid, powerful, ethereal, seamless—and I made a choice not to mention condoms. My characters are not representations for how real people should behave in real life—I think people should be having safe sex. Period. Have safe sex. But I'm not really concerned about whether Simon's sex life is safe or unsafe, I'm just thinking about what he's feeling in those moments, where his own brain takes him, and what he chooses to tell us, the audience. And whatever feelings readers might have about Simon's choices, I think novels that lack ambiguity, or that suggest a tidy morality aren't very interesting.

**Farmer seems to be the only character without a flaw or debilitating weakness. What was your reasoning for not giving him a downfall? Or does he have one that wasn't as obvious as the others'?**

Farmer originally appeared because I kept thinking, 'Someone has to be the voice of reason.' Then he eventually became a real person with complicated motivations. He's more put together than the other boys, yes, and in some ways he has the biggest heart. He gets trampled every now and then, but he's stronger than he appears. Farmer is also the most like me, or rather the most positive-thinking version of myself distilled into a character. He has big ideas, but a realistic vision. I like him.

**What's the significance of the dream at the end of Chapter 7, the one with the chomping typewriters?**

That's not a dream that I had, although it sounds like something a writer would find nightmarish. The sound of typewriters falls somewhere between productive and menacing, doesn't it? They have teeth, after all. And I wanted imagery that combined Simon's past—in this case, a country road with a wooden fence, something you'd never find in New York, and something more industrial, but maybe also antiquated, something your unconsciousness would pull from nowhere, like the typewriters. I wanted the reader to feel real vulnerability in that moment, a real uncertainty about the future, and I think Simon's dream does that.

**Ultimately, Yield is a romance between Simon and Aiden just as much as it's about friendship, and introducing a new boyfriend into any group is significant. So where do you envision Simon and Aiden after the novel ends? Now?**

I always thought that Aiden was the boyfriend who sort of prepared you for your next boyfriend—you know, the guy who somehow shows you yourself in a new way, and ultimately that new you, the more real you, isn't the kind of person who can be in a relationship with that person? But I don't have a clear idea for what happens to Simon and Aiden. The uncertainty is interesting to me, the striving. I like that the readers aren't left with any neat endings. There is only a little hope. And lots of love.

**Talk about Mr. Bartlett. He's an interesting character, at times a little creepy (I was sure the freezer was straight out of a murderer's supply catalog), but he seems to truly care about Simon and want to protect him. Is he based on anyone you've come in contact with? Are his intentions pure? When he gives Simon the money toward the end, I sensed he might have planned to end his life; is that what you meant to imply?**

Mr. Bartlett is a combination of lots of people that I know and don't know—including a lady who lived down the street from me when I was a kid. She dressed all in white on Halloween and answered the door to trick-or-treaters in this bright feather wig that scared us all to death, for some reason—and that image is in the book. He is also a kind of aristocracy gone bad, or gone lazy, maybe British, maybe just old school Connecticut blue blood. And there is a dash of Quentin Crisp thrown in for the kind of leisurely pace I wanted him to have. When I hear Mr. Bartlett talking, I sort of hear Quentin Crisp's one-man show from the 70s, which you can find on CD somewhere.

Yes, his intentions are pure. I think he really cares about Simon, he's just a strange person. He's old enough to not care what other people think of him. At all. He's probably been through it, everything, over and over, and he really knows himself, probably more than any of the other characters. Mr. Bartlett is probably the most at ease, the most at peace person in the book. It's possible, yes, that Mr. Bartlett decides to kill himself. He either does kill himself, or he wants Simon to think that he's going to kill himself. I don't think it would be out of character for Mr. Bartlett. But, at the same time, Mr. Bartlett could very well turn up on the Silver Star line to Miami, cooking himself to a crisp in the summer sun until he shrivels and disperses with the wind.

**Why did you choose to title the book Yield? What does it mean to you?**

For me, the entire story gets distilled into one idea at the end of the book. Simon says: "When you loosen your grip on yourself, what you're capable of changes. New doors appear in the distance, sometimes impossible to reach, but still doors nonetheless."

The yielding is growing up, taking responsibility for your life, for your emotional well-being, and for the well-being of your relationships. I think the early 20s is a difficult time to get through, especially if you don't have a very clear sense of your direction. You can spend a lot of time defining yourself in opposition to things, because, really, you're trying to figure out who you are. If you allow yourself to relax, to bend a little bit, I think you'll discover that everything you need is already there. You just have to slough off all the shit left over from the confines of being a child, being a teenager, and the effects of high school, maybe college. The growing up is really in learning how to let all that out. Those doors that Simon talks about, they are always there. You just have to be able to see them.