

## Alternative Fertility

A Review of *Endangered Species*

By JOEL NICHOLS

Louis Bayard's *Endangered Species*, published by Alyson Publications this year, is his second novel. It is a tight story centered on a man in his mid-30's who, in the midst of a colorless family get-together, decides that he must beget a child before the end of the year. Nick, the father to be, does not seem like the best candidate of the Broome children to have kids: his brother is a straight and married doctor, his sister has a serious boyfriend, but Nick is gay. The plot winds through Nick Broome's journeys to sperm-banks, the search for a surrogate mother and egg donor, and his involvement with a shady "broker" who tries to help him through it all.

Except for Nick and his parents, the characters remain flat. The brother and sister seem to come either from an Edward Hopper painting – isolated and sad – while their mates are straight out of a John Waters' film. Nick's sister-in-law drops to the floor after dinner to keep her abdominal muscles in shape and his sister's boyfriend, a middle-aged dentist, has a lengthy conversation about gay sex and HIV transmission with Nick's mother. The conversation starts after dinner when Larry says to Nick, "And the sex? My understanding is you guys are mostly oral these days." Nick mumbles and gets lost in thought about his current love interest, a man he spent the night cuddling, without sex. Larry continues: "Maybe 2-1, oral-to-anal ... or 3-1."

Nick's mother steps through the kitchen door, a tray of coffee cups balanced against her chest, and says, "Hard to say ... you know, there's still quite a bit of anal ... of course, bare-backing carries a much higher risk of HIV transmission, but there are documented instances of ... strictly oral transmission. Which makes me a little concerned about these bathhouses ... where they have just the oral sex, over and over again."

I include such a long quote from the text for two reasons. First of all, it's hilarious. The images of the 41-year old straight dentist with a marine haircut and big ears, speculating on the amount of butt-sex with this PFLAG mom are indicative of Bayard's wit, which marks the book throughout with a strange, surreal quality. Secondly, I find it

an interesting commentary on the transformation of discourse about gay sex and AIDS. These two straight people talk about oral and anal sex in a detached way that on the one hand shows a level of awareness about queer issues, but on the other reduce the lives and struggles to a clinical level. Then the mother beams to her daughter's dentist boyfriend, "Did Celia tell you she's never had a cavity?" Again, equating a cavity to AIDS shows the odd way Bayard structures reality.

Within this funny, alternate world, the plot itself is interesting, unpredictable, and pleasing. I do want to criticize the inconsistency in Nick's quest. He starts wanting just to throw his genes into the human pool to keep his family going, but then his mission shifts as he imagines the daughter he could have. He sees her romping around on family holidays and playing in the park. If he wanted to have a kid, he would not just head off to a sperm bank as an anonymous donor. If the desire for a youngster were strong enough, as his recurring fantasies imply, he would adopt, not caring if the baby was genetically his. It is not that big of a flaw, but I would have liked to see Bayard resolve the issue of genetic babies versus adopted babies, instead of just using it as a plot device to get his main character to visit a sperm bank run by Christians.

The Jesus-loving fertility staff is funny and a great part of Bayard's alternative Washington D.C., though, so I can easily forgive him.

Parts of *Endangered Species* disturbed me in a fundamental way, like the people Nick meets on his quest for a surrogate mother; they allow Bayard to present a number of very sad cases of human beings – from someone controlled in a cult-like way to wannabe mail-order brides, the visceral reactions provoked by each of these characters is a comment on modern America. I do not want to dwell on these aspects, because they are balanced by a great love story involving Nick and his parents' loving interactions.

Bayard's style is dreamy but precise. He has a great way of describing Nick's thoughts and feelings and tries to illustrate his fantasy world. One

from the author of *Fool's Errand*

PARENTING PARTNER  
SOUGHT: GWM, 34, 6'2",  
190 lbs, b/b, HIV-neg, seeks  
GWT/CBFF/GLE/GAF, prof.  
non-smoker, for joint parenting  
arrangement. Artificial insemi-  
nations preferred. Applicant  
must be willing to share  
birth/sex adventures + custody  
of resulting child, from birth  
to adulthood. Joint residency  
not necessary. Discretion and  
confidentiality assured.

*endangered species*  
a novel

louis bayard

example comes early when Nick tries to get aroused to give a sample in the fertility clinic. He sits there with his penis in hand, unable to get an erection. Looking around the room, he realizes it is just anxiety and tries to calm down. He notices the pictures on the wall, tries to talk himself down, and begins to feel comfortable in the clinical room, reminding himself that there was no one waiting, and no pressure. This last part, that no one is waiting, lets Nick fantasize about the doctor waiting outside the door. Just a few erotically charged seconds later and he is in a full-blown sex fantasy. Bayard employs this semi-stream of consciousness often in *Endangered Species*, much to the benefit of the reader.

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Music performed by  
The Twin Cities Gay Men's Chorus

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Sunday, November 18th, 2pm  
Landmark College  
Putney, VT (info: 802-254-8263)

PBS Broadcast in December  
(check local listings)

Attending Premiere will be  
the Director, John Scagliotti (local Guilford resident)  
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