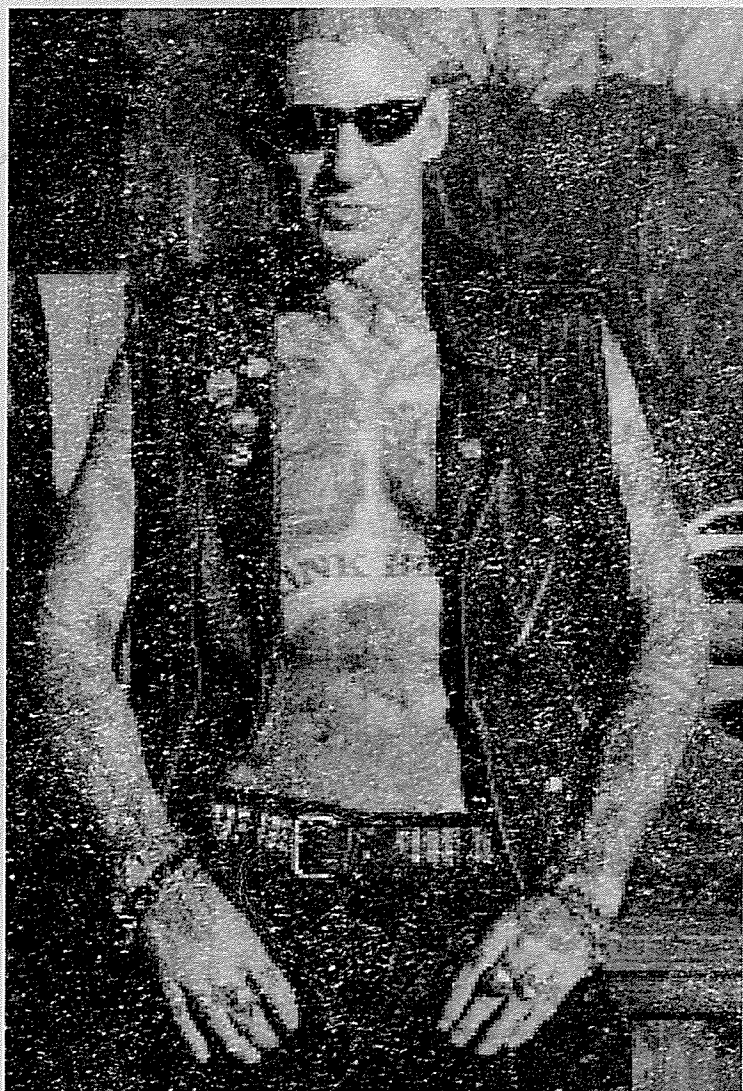


FRONT & CENTRE

Hard-hitting new fiction



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feature

GFY Press: BBP goes DIY with Chris Walter

I've been reading Chris Walter novels and short stories for about 7-8 years. I found a cluster of his colourfully-designed and smartly-titled books at an indie bookstore in Ottawa that has since ceased to be (an all-too familiar story). I remember reading Walter's bio blurb and being impressed: here's a salty motherfucker doing things his own way. But can he write? I wondered. Damned right he can, I soon learned. I scorched through a bunch of his books, eventually mail-ordering them straight from Walter. I recognized his passion for the art form and his compassion for his down-and-out characters. I was hooked.

Earlier this year, I finally had the chance to meet the man when a book tour with a difference brought Walter to Ottawa. When you think book tour, don't imagine short-hop flights and swanky hotels. Think punk rock simplicity: a van, a punk rock legend and a big, tattooed man on stage belting out his prose with panache. Before each reading, the irascible Chi Pig of SNFU fame sang stripped down songs that cut straight to the bone.

Leaning on a pool table brimming with his books and other merch, Chris and I talked about the book business, the long, cold winter, and punk. Earlier we had swapped words via email ...

F&C: It's shocking but true: there are *Front&Centre* readers out there who don't yet know your writing. Can you give these fools a quick overview (who you are; what you do and why you are here in *Front&Centre*)?

CW: I'm a high school dropout, drug addict, punk rocker, and general fuckup who took up writing when mere chemicals stopped getting me off. Although I eventually kicked the liquor and drugs, I kept the writing, which seems to be somewhat less destructive. My first book was published in 2002, but I quickly realized that I couldn't make a living with the small presses. Since

my girl manages a printing shop, I started pumping out my own novels and punk biographies. Putting out a book or two every year, I eventually got to the point where I could buy real food instead of digging in the dumpster behind McDicks for "nourishment." My publishing company, GFY Press, also published a couple of other bums, but there wasn't much money in that, so now I focus mostly on my own books. Even so, money isn't my driving force. If it was; I'd write cookbooks, erotica, or Harlequin romances.

F&C: I read a bunch of your press clippings leading up to this interview and two things jumped out at me that I'd like you to comment on: #1 – your band bios seem to get more attention; why do you think that is and what's your reaction? #2 a lot of your fiction reviews focus on your characters and overlook your literary style – true/false and what's your reaction?

CW: Fiction just doesn't sell the way the music biographies do. Sadly, the bios are a lot more work and I have to depend on fickle musicians as sources, but people seem to like the bios and they sell well. I wanted to write a novel for every bio, but I'm starting to think I might only be able to do a novel every third book. Which kind of sucks because I love writing fiction; it's like being paid to lie. Unfortunately, it doesn't pay *enough*, and I have to make rent. Does it sound like I'm contradicting myself? I do that sometimes.

F&C: This is a bit of a repeat from part #2 of the last question: Would you like to read a review of your fiction that focuses on your ability to weave together a fluid plot, write plausible dialogue, etc.? Why is there so much attention on the punks, drunks, junkies and down-and-outers in your fiction?

CW: I don't read any of my reviews *period*. There is nothing more destructive a writer can do than read his/her reviews. If they're good, the head swells up with nonsense, yet the writer falls into a bottomless pit of despair if they're bad. It's impossible not to be affected by them, if only on a subconscious level. The best thing to do is leave them alone. My girl picks which reviews go onto the punkbooks website. I never read them. Learned that the hard way.

As for your second question, I write about lowlifes and dopefiends because I find them infinitely more interesting than the average Joe. I just can't relate to people with no serious problems, with no driving force to motivate them. One thing I always remember about being an addict was the steady drama. While it's hard to appreciate at the time, you look back later and

realize how crazy it all was. After a while, crazy becomes normal and you don't know any better. You can swallow a bag of dope while being tackled by the cops, then run home, barf it up, and get high as if nothing had happened. Mind you, I'm very glad I was able to leave that behind. It's nice not to suffer so regularly and with such depth.

F&C: *Chase the Dragon* has a more crime noir feel at times, with the bikers, the hit out on one of the characters and the examination of what drives hitman Ellis Weston to do what he does. Did you consciously push off in a newish direction with the narrative style of *Chase the Dragon*?

CW: I think I might have been influenced by Tony O'Neill's *Sick City*. His bad guys were so great that I wanted to write a book with no good guys in it. I wanted *all* the characters to be evil scumbags. Unfortunately, I couldn't do it and the main protagonist has a few likeable qualities, despite my efforts to make him a thoroughly despicable human being. Even the other bad guys turned out to have a few traits that didn't completely suck, although to a lesser degree. I still dream about writing a book where all the characters are absolutely horrible people.

F&C: At the same time, *Chase the Dragon* begins in Vancouver's downtown Eastside, with a pair of junkies doing what junkies do. Do you consciously ground your novels in this neighbourhood or is that just where your mind goes "naturally" when it's time to write fiction? How important is place/location in your fiction? And why is it important?

CW: It would be hard for me to set novels anywhere else because I don't know those places as well. *Chase the Dragon* is set partly in Winnipeg, because that's the one other place I know. For my novels to be real, I have to put myself in them and see the locations in my head. I need to smell the filth and desperation. In ten years, the DTES ¹will be completely gentrified, and the drug ghetto will be nothing but a memory.

F&C: Like it or not, you're also clearly a social critic via your fiction. You have a lot to say about poverty, inequality, despair, and, at times, corporate greed. Do you do this consciously (if so, why and what motivates you) or is it more a matter that, given your characters, it's impossible not to comment on their social conditions?

¹ Downtown East Side – of Vancouver

CW: I feel the two are linked inextricably, and I want people to have another perspective on addicts. They get such a bad rap, but most of them really aren't so bad. They're caught up in something that has slipped beyond their control; stuck in a place they don't really want to be. The long-term addicts are truly miserable though, and that is very hard to see. Any sort of "fun" they once might have had and they know there is no way out.

F&C: Switching over to the publishing side, why did you start Gofuckyerself Press?

CW: It started as a joke when I needed a name to put on my self-published novels. I began putting them in local stores and was a bit amazed when people bought them. I did better than I thought I would do, and I kept printing and writing more books. I eventually changed the name to "GFY Press" because it's very hard to get one's stuff into bookstores with a name like that. The literary industry is the last bastion of uptight snobs, and many bookstore owners are total prudes. You wouldn't think they'd be like that but they are. Some are very cool, of course, but they're harder to find. Traditionally, I've had better luck selling my stuff in record stores and punk-oriented clothing places.

F&C: What are the challenges to running your own press?

CW: Having to run the business end of things means I have less time for actual writing. Some days I'm so busy with other stuff that I barely have time to write at all. Business and creativity don't mix well together, but I struggle to make it work. I'd rather be doing this than slinging drywall.

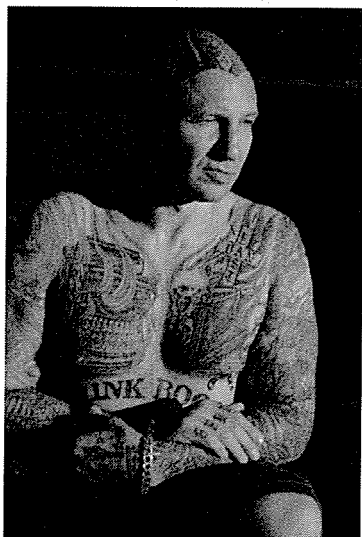
F&C: You're always working, whether it's writing, publishing or promoting. How do you maintain the energy and passion to do what you do?

CW: I love having a purpose in life. I used to stumble around chasing the next fix but I'm much happier thinking about storylines or plot arcs. I've been at it for fifteen years now, and I'll keep going until the day I die. There is nothing else I'd rather do, and everyone has to do something.

F&C: What book(s) are you working on now?

CW: I was working on a biography of punk/skate legend Duane Peters, but it went off the rails due to circumstances beyond my control. I jumped straight into a biography of Canadian Celtic punk heroes the Real McKenzies. That book will be out in early 2015. In March of this year, I'll be headed across Canada with

SNFU's Chi Pig on a book tour/acoustic act thing. It'll be cold but it will be fun too. Maybe I'll see you in Hamilton ...



Chris Walter is a Vancouver writer and the author of more than twenty novels and punk music biographies. He has also contributed to numerous publications including *Spin*, *Vice*, *The Georgia Straight*, *Nerve*, *Razorcake*, *The Big Takeover*, *Mass Movement*, *Loud Fast Rules*, and *Absolute Underground*.



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