

ON FREDERICK EXLEY'S *A FAN'S NOTES*

by Brock Clarke

I first read Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes* in the summer of 1993. I was at my parents' house in upstate New York. I say "my parents' house" and not "my house" because I was of an age where I should have had my own house, but I didn't. I also was of an age where I was too old to think of the entire summer as "my summer vacation," but I did. Perhaps it doesn't need saying that I was in college, again, still. I was underemployed and overeducated. A loser, in other words.

Being a loser will make you feel insane. I felt insane, a little, and had enough residual inherited Protestant work ethic left in me to know that I might feel better if I did something productive. So I decided to read a book (you know you're insane, and a loser, when you think of reading a book as doing something productive), and the book I decided to read was *A Fan's Notes*. I don't remember how I came to own the book. It wasn't my parents' book, but nor do I remember buying it, or someone giving it to me. It just sort of dropped into my life, the way books do when you need them the most.

Anyway, I plopped myself down on a chaise lounge in my parents' yard, opened a beer, and began reading. I know a lot of readers, when praising a book, claim that it speaks to them. These same readers might also claim that they saw themselves in a book. But those readers had nothing on me and *A Fan's Notes*, which, the cover told me, was a "fictional memoir" about Frederick Exley, an overeducated and underemployed "youngish-old" man in Watertown, New York (a larger, colder, rougher military base town not even two hours north from my parents' house), who basically plopped himself down on his mother's davenport every day and read books and drank booze and went insane. There were some differences between us: Exley was obsessed with the New York Giants in general (and Frank Gifford in particular), whereas I was made loony by the Boston Red Sox (who in those days were the gold standard for long-term loserdom); Exley had been institutionalized in insane asylums several times while I hadn't (and still haven't, yet). Basically, Exley was a worse off version of me (much worse, as it turned out: he'd died from his excesses a year earlier, although I didn't know that yet). But Exley was also a great writer: sometimes he sounded like a guy who didn't know he wasn't on stage ("I saw myself a kind of Owl-Eyes come to Gatsby's wake . . . sequestered from the one or two mourners, a curiosity weeping great, excited tears in the blue shade of funereal elms"), and sometimes he sounded like a guy who'd learned to talk in a bowling alley ("Wake up, yuh good-for nothin' bum!"), but no matter how he spoke, and no matter what he was speaking about, no matter whether he was self-pitying or self-deprecating, lyrical or profane, Exley was brilliant, and the proof of his brilliance was this book. He had made it, even though he was a loser, or maybe because he was a loser, or maybe the book itself was proof that he wasn't a loser after all. Reading the book had done strange things to me, obviously: I read it in one eight-hour sitting,

(continued on back)

and after I was done I felt much better, much less alone than I had when I'd started it. Although I felt more insane, too, more unhinged in a manic, jazzed up way. This is the book's strange power: it makes you feel the terror Exley must have felt in the asylums, and it also makes you feel the hope Exley must have felt after being released from the asylums, the exhilaration he must have felt when this document of his insanity was finished and published, the fear he also must have felt in knowing that these highs were only temporary, the lows always right around the corner.

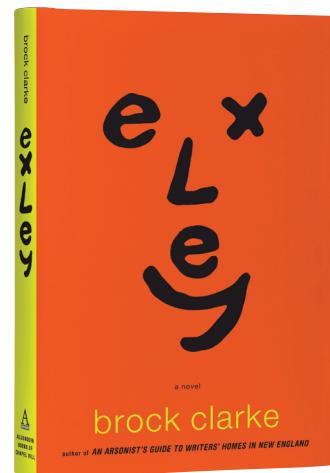
Anyway, just after I finished reading the book, I received a phone call from a friend, and in a rush, I told her about the book, what it was about, how I'd seen myself in it, how it had made me feel. After I was done talking, she said, "God, it sounds terrible."

"What does?" I asked. "The book or the way it made me feel?"

"All of it," she said.

"No, you don't understand," I said, but then stopped. Because I could hear the nutty whine in my voice, and it reminded me of the way Exley's voice sounded when he'd explained to his wife-to-be about his obsession with Frank Gifford, and how she said he must despise Gifford for being famous the way Exley never would be, and Exley responded thusly: "'Despise him.' I said. I'm certain my voice reflected my great incredulity. 'But you don't understand at all. Not at all! He may be the only fame I ever have!'" And then I realized that as much as I loved *A Fan's Notes*, I did not want to be the guy who wrote it. I did not even want to be the guy who was so obsessed with it.

Which is why, years later, I made up someone who was even more obsessed than I was, and then put him in a book so I could talk about what it's like to love things—a man, a town, a country, a book—that can be difficult to love. Do I hope you'll love my book as much as I loved Exley's? Do I hope you'll read, or re-read, Exley's book and love it, too, after all these years? Do I hope that, if Exley were alive, he'd love my book as much as I loved his? Hope, of course, is the lie you tell yourself to keep from going insane. But yes, that is what I hope.



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EXLEY: A NOVEL by Brock Clarke

The bestselling author of *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England* returns with another wry and insightful novel about truth and reality, this time featuring the alternating voices of a confused young boy and his slightly unstable therapist.

For nine-year-old Miller, who lives with his mother in Watertown, New York, life has become a struggle to make sense of his father's disappearance, for which he blames himself. Then, when he becomes convinced that he has found his father lying comatose in the local VA hospital, a victim of the war in Iraq, Miller begins a search for the one person he believes can save him, the famously reclusive—and, unfortunately, dead—Frederick Exley, a Watertown native and the author of his father's favorite book, the "fictional memoir" *A Fan's Notes*. The story of Miller's search, told by both Miller himself and his somewhat flaky therapist, ultimately becomes an exploration of the difference between what we believe to be real and what is in fact real, and how challenging it can be to reconcile the two.

Part literary satire, part mystery, *Exley* unleashes the enormous talent of a writer whom critics have compared to Richard Ford and John Irving and whose work has been called "absurdly hilarious" (*Entertainment Weekly*) and "wildly entertaining" (*Daily Candy*).

Praise for *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*

"Wildly, unpredictably funny." —*The New York Times*

"A seductive book with a payoff on every page." —*People*

"Clarke's novel sizzles." —*The Washington Post Book World*

"A wonderful book." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Darkly comic ... Bittersweet and ultimately sorrowful."

—*The Los Angeles Times*

"[A] darkly hilarious, high-spirited mock-memoir mystery." —*Elle*

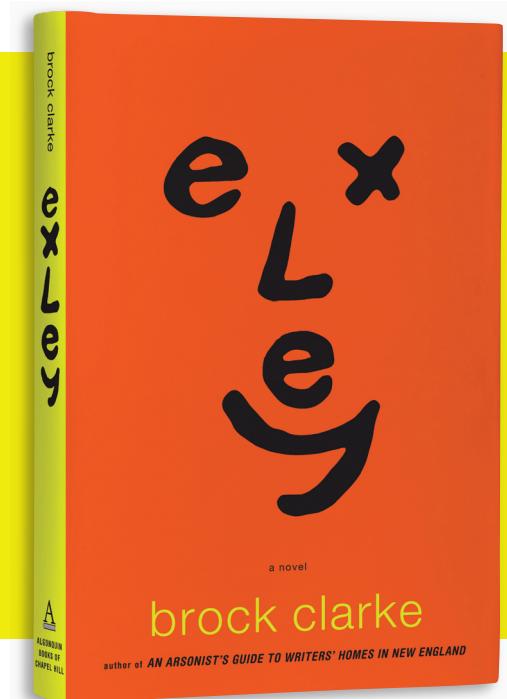
"A searingly funny book." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"A deadpan satire of all things literary ... [with a] witty edge."

—*The New Yorker*



Brock Clarke is the author of four books, most recently *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*, which was a national bestseller and has appeared in a dozen foreign editions. His stories and essays have appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *OneStory*, *The Believer*, the *Georgia Review*, and the *Southern Review* and have appeared in the annual Pushcart Prize and *New Stories from the South* anthologies and on NPR's Selected Shorts. He lives in Portland, Maine, and teaches creative writing at Bowdoin College.



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