

No. **1**
DOG FIGHT,
A LOVE STORY
 BY
 MATT BURGESS

BUY THIS GUY'S BOOK

(OR HE'LL LIGHT YOUR HAT ON FIRE.) by Mary O'Regan photograph by Kelly Loverud

Matt Burgess is 28 years old, yet his debut novel, Dogfight, A Love Story, reads like the work of a badass veteran scribe. Did we mention he's only 28? Meet local lit's newest star.

➔ New Yorkers have long held the reputation of being pushy, unfriendly and rude, and I'd always believed the stereotype until I met novelist Matt Burgess. A transplant from the Jackson Heights neighborhood in Queens, Burgess and I became friends through the University of Minnesota's Creative Writing Program where he and my boyfriend were getting their Master of Fine Arts degrees. He is funny and boisterous—personality traits I tend to gravitate toward—and has a stronger conscience than anyone I've ever known. He's the type of friend who will call you the day after hanging out and apologize for the tone with which he said a single sentence—a sentence you can't even remember, but which he's been agonizing over all night.

The same sharp wit and enormous heart fill the pages of *Dogfight, A Love Story* (Doubleday), Burgess's debut novel that hits bookstores this month. The book chronicles a frenetic weekend in the life of Alfredo Batista, a young Puerto Rican drug dealer in Jackson Heights. Over three tense, emotional and funny yet riveting days, Alfredo must steal a pit bull for a dogfight, welcome his psychotic brother home from prison and care for his very pregnant girlfriend, all while evading the police and steering clear of a band of brothers who may or may not want to kick his ass.

It's a dazzling debut, but of course you'd expect me to say that about my friend's novel (for the record, Matt, I'd say it even if we weren't pals). Lest I be accused of nepotism, I should add that a lot of other people agree with me. The national literary scene has been abuzz over *Dogfight* since Doubleday picked it

up in May 2009—a week after Burgess finished grad school. The book received a starred review in industry magazine *Publisher's Weekly*, which also deemed it one of 10 promising debut novels. This fall, Barnes and Noble stores will feature *Dogfight* on a special shelf as a "Discover Great New Writers" seasonal pick. Burgess is already scheduled to give several readings, including one this month at St. Paul's Micawber's bookstore.

"Matt's astonishing command of vernacular, which is rarer than it should be, immediately captivated me," says Bill Thomas, publisher and editor-in-chief at Doubleday, who personally edited Burgess's manuscript, despite rarely taking on new writers. "As I read further, I started to fall in love with the characters and their situation. All the elements that make a great first novel were there—intricate and well-constructed plot, a portrait of a community that's fascinating [...] Putting all that together, I thought wow, this is an incredibly talented young writer. I'd love to be in at the beginning of his career."

"I wrote one short story in my entire life that did not take place in Queens," Burgess says when I meet him for a milkshake and pie at Perkins. (I felt it important that the native New Yorker experience the quintessentially Midwestern restaurant.) "Living in an imaginary Queens 'x' hours a day pleases me. If I hadn't moved [out of New York], I don't think the compulsion to write the book would've been half as strong."

Burgess was born and raised in Jackson Heights, one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country. The youngest of four, he was sometimes the only white kid playing football in the park (his nickname: Troy Aikman), and he has friends from every background imaginable. The library near his house has materials in

more than 60 languages (Minneapolis Central Library has around 30), and the line at the post office goes out the door as immigrants from all over ship care packages back home.

Burgess first left home to get his undergraduate degree at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire and returned afterward to become an editorial assistant at a textbook company. "I would photocopy novels that I was reading on the train, and then sit in my cubical and read the photocopies with a pen next to me. My boss would walk behind me and be like, 'Can you—oh, sorry, I see that you're busy.' And I'd be like, 'Yeah, I'm probably gonna be doing this for a while.' I read a lot of books there."

The U of M's Creative Writing Program gave Burgess the freedom to read as many novels as he pleased. "It's like a fantasy MFA experience," he says, fiddling with the straw in his milkshake. "It's free. I got paid. It lasted three years. I stayed together with my long-distance girlfriend and then got engaged to her. I like the city." Black Sheep Pizza, Brasa and Namaste Café are some of his favorite restaurants, and he's currently taking suggestions for a good fried chicken joint.

Aside from feeling like apartments in Minneapolis are mansions compared to those in New York, Burgess finds our niceties one of the most jarring distinctions between the two cities. "I like that people here smile on the sidewalk and are like, 'Hello, hi,'" he says. "Someone saying hello in New York would be an invitation to a longer conversation, like 'Why are you saying hello to me?' You're either hitting on someone or conning someone. It blows my mind. Do you how much trouble you could get into saying 'hi' to someone in New York?"

Matt Burgess is six feet tall with a wily smile and thinning brown hair cropped equally short across his head and beard. He speaks with a thick New York accent and enjoys the attention that comes with being "the obnoxious Queens guy." In addition to working at a textbook company, he's worked as a photo researcher at Oxford University Press (where he also covertly read photocopied books) and rented bikes on the beach in Florida, where he spent the summer working on *Dogfight* before moving to Minnesota. (continued on page 76)



In the grand tradition of American satire dating back to Ebenezer Cook and Mark Twain, NYC-based novelist Gary Shteyngart at once celebrates and skewers by pointing out our country's absurdities. He's equally comfortable roasting the pompous literary fiction-sphere in which he resides (scan the QR code at right to see what we mean) as he is painting scary-funny dystopian portraits of America's not-so-distant future (see his latest novel *Super Sad True Love Story*).

➕ Gary Shteyngart reads from *Super Sad True Love Story* at Magers and Quinn, 9/21; 3038 Hennepin Ave. S., Mpls.; magersandquinn.com



Novelist/lifelong New York Mets fan Matt Burgess barbecues a Yankees cap outside his Uptown apartment.

buy this guy's book

(FROM PAGE 38)



Nowadays Burgess lives and works in a two-bedroom apartment in Uptown with his fiancé, Georgia Banks, a social worker, and a temperamental tortoiseshell cat named Petunia. Superstition and routine play a major role in his workday. He writes by hand in black-and-white Mead notebooks while reclining in a Poäng Ikea chair with a blanket over his lap. An American Heritage Second College Edition dictionary, 1977 Fourth Edition Roget's International Thesaurus and Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* sit on a shelf near his desk. "Sometimes I'll pull out *Kavalier and Clay* because I can read any paragraph in that book and it'll make me feel bad about myself and want to do better. Most of my day is spent self-flagellating like that priest in *The Da Vinci Code*," he jokes. "I beat myself with locks of Michael Chabon's hair."

On the windowsill above his desk are three index cards with quotes from writers he admires: "Fondle details." (Vladimir Nabokov), "Give 'em hell." (Saul Bellow) and "You're not so nice and polite in your fiction." (Phillip Roth). After finishing a chapter—he's currently working on his second novel, another Queens tale—he celebrates by listening to Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love."

These celebrations are the result of a lot of hard work. The first story he turned in at the U of M came back covered in red ink. In the margins, his professor, Steven Polansky, a New-York-born author and one of Burgess's idols, had written things like, "Yuck," "Cliché!" and "If I wasn't paid to finish this, I would stop right here." Burgess was so distraught he could barely watch his beloved Mets face the Cardinals in a playoff game that night. The next day he went to Polansky's office hours and asked how he could improve.

"Every sentence has to be exactly precise," Burgess recalls his professor saying. "He got me feeling like I'm an artist, and fiction is the most serious thing in the world, and I need to treat it that seriously."

Burgess took Polansky's words to heart and got things right with *Dogfight*, which he painstakingly filled with as many true-life details about Queens as possible, from the bells of an ice cream truck to an old stone turtle in Travers Park. Attention to detail and authentic, often hilarious dialogue are a big part of what make *Dogfight* so compelling. Sentences like, "This is his house. He knows where the parrots hang low and where sock-snagging nailheads stick out of the carpet," were written with love, every word finessed and eased into the natural flow of the sentence. It's no coincidence that "rhythm" is Burgess's favorite word.

Several scenes in the book were inspired by, or directly pulled from, the author's own adolescence. A shining example appears on page 66 with the introduction of "the ghetto car," an imaginary automobile Burgess and his buddies use to hunch down and "sit" in at McDonald's late-night drive-thru. The tactic never worked, and they once resorted to hailing a cab to take them 15 precious feet. Later, when one of his friends got a car, the vendetta continued and together, the five of them would revisit the drive-thru wearing nothing but boxer shorts, just to give the attendant a scream.

The idea for the book was similarly conceived after a random kid stole his friend's pit bull. "I became very much into the idea of what kind of person steals a dog and for what reason?" Burgess says. "[And] then the challenge was someone who would steal a pit bull and was likeable enough."

Alfredo, the book's main character, is at once charming, sensitive, baffling and infuriating, giving Burgess the chance to push the limits of his readers' sympathies. Alfredo can treat heavy topics—drug abuse, rape, murder—with solemnity, then crack a joke three lines later.

"There's some sort of feeling that something has to be somber and medicinal to be considered great literature, and I actually disagree with that pretty strongly," says Doubleday's Bill Thomas. "[Burgess] has such a strong sense of humor, and it's humor that's endemic to the vernacular of the place, and it's not cheap; it's woven into the fabric of the story and how the characters relate to each other, particularly insults. They're actually endearments."

Despite fierce devotion to his hometown, Burgess isn't sure he can ever live in Queens again—not if he wants to keep writing about it, anyway. Friends, family and the big city are far too distracting, and he can't get the type of perspective he finds tucked away in Minneapolis. "I can't imagine moving in the middle of the second book," Burgess says. "I wrote the first book here. It feels like a good luck charm." +

the wanderer

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It's this sense of tension that gives Soth's portraits their distinctive quality. "When he emerged in 2004," said Siri Engberg, curator of the Walker show, "lots of people commented on the old-fashionedness of the work. He's working in a well-established tradition, but other artists working in that tradition—Justine Kurland, Nan Goldin—immerse themselves in the worlds they're visiting." Engberg noted that Soth's photos depict tableaux from life, unlike the staged photos of his contemporaries Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall, but they don't pull the emotional triggers typical of documentary photography. "Alec has a unique place in that there isn't a sense of palpable personal connection with his subjects," said Engberg. "There's an interesting sense of remove that gives these pictures a tension."

A collection of Soth's work was displayed at a Paris gallery in 2008 with the title *The Space Between Us*, indicating both the literal and the emotional distance between the photographer and his subjects. "What I find interesting," Soth told me, "is how people fill that space." His subjects are often members of the working class—or of the want-to-be-working, or used-to-be-working classes—but his work has no sense of moral outrage, sounds no obvious alarm regarding his subjects' life circumstances. "I'm not trying to make the world a better place," Soth said frankly, "and I'm not trying to document the world for the future. My work is about me moving through the world."

Soth's other major project in the tradition of *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is called *Niagara* (2006), a collection of photos taken near and inspired by the giant tourist trap that is Niagara Falls. Through Soth's eye, the falls and their visitors appear beautiful, but also poignantly wistful. The cardboard fantasies of the romance Mecca wither under the photographer's skeptical gaze. Schlocky motels loom dark and lonely in the mist, found handwritten notes make grand promises (or dark curses). Multiple photographs depict nude couples who expose their bodies to Soth with neutral expressions that communicate a sense