

Jolly goodfellas

A GAY ENGLISH GANGSTER SHOOTS STRAIGHT IN JAKE ARNOTT'S HOT NEW BOOK, *THE LONG FIRM* BY MICHAEL J. GILTZ

Long before he became this season's hottest new writer, Jake Arnott loved to devour the "pulp nonsense" his father would buy when commuting between their home in the suburbs and London. "I remember reading all these Edgar Rice Burroughs books," Arnott says, "and then I was 13 or 14 and suddenly came across this other Burroughs book. It was William Burroughs. [but] I thought it was the same writer." He laughs. "They're not that different. They both are obsessed with the jungle or science fiction and this strange fantastical world. Then suddenly you get all this sodomy. At the time, you think, *What the hell is going on?*"

The 38-year-old Arnott eventually figured it out, but it took running away from home in the late '70s, getting into "all sorts of scrapes" while living illegally in a building near Kings Cross, and even working as a mortuary technician for a medical school. But



MICHAEL GILTZ/STYLING

RISEING STAR

his love of seeing the familiar in unexpected ways led him straight to his witty and engaging first novel, *The Long Firm* (Soho Press, \$25). A gangster epic set in London during the swinging '60s and '70s, *The Long Firm* features the memorable Harry Starks. Also known as Mad Harry, Starks is a tough guy with a fondness for torture and younger men.

Starks is based in part on the infamous real-life queer gangster Ronnie Kray, and as Arnott points out, "Kray, along with Harry Starks, saw himself in the great tradition of empire men. You know, the great adventurers like Lawrence of Arabia. And it's no surprise that when you scratch these empire heroes, they all turn out to be queer as well. Because in a sense they have to do that; they have to get away. They've got to run away from home. 'Cause they're never going to fit in."

Starks's story is told by five different narrators: Terry, a boyfriend who tries to scam Starks after they break up; Lord Teddy Thursby, who lends his name to shady businesses in exchange for money and entry to Starks's rent-boy parties; Jack the Hat, a straight tough guy who unintentionally influences the ska scene; Ruby Ryder, a faded B-movie star; and Lenny, a professor who teaches sociology to prisoners.

"There's a great tradition of deviant criminals and gay gangsters," Arnott points out. "I love the Dashiell Hammett type, but there's always that [idea] that they're deviant sexually and so they're deviant criminally as well. But when you've got a central character that's gay, it becomes more and more normal."

Widely praised in the United Kingdom, *The Long Firm* is already in development as a BBC miniseries. "There has been a mad amount of publicity, and it can be a bit distracting," Arnott says. He was even tailed by a BBC crew making a documentary about writers. "You get used to it," he allows, but "it's not really good for the soul in the long run."

Now Arnott is working on a new novel that deals with corruption of all sorts (including the police variety) and spans several decades. Is there a gay character? "I don't know yet," he says. "Maybe. Sometimes you're not sure about your characters, and sometimes they're not sure. Maybe this journalist character [is gay]; there's definitely something queer about him. But I'm not sure he knows it yet." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post and Entertainment Weekly.



To read the complete transcript of Michael Giltz's conversation with Jake Arnott, visit www.theadvocate.com