

books

# This boy's life

Already acclaimed for his powerful AIDS memoir, Mark Doty tackles boyhood in volume 2 **By Michael Giltz**

When poet Mark Doty was a little boy, he sneaked into his sister's room to play model. "I put the glass on top of my head, pulling myself up straight, the glass wobbles, I lift my arms up for balance, that's better, I'm getting it now," Doty writes in his slyly comic memoir *Firebird*, out this month from HarperCollins. "Another wobble, so I try moving my head from side to side like a Balinese dancer, and that's it, slip and disaster, the glass crashes to the floor and shatters, unnaturally loud."

The aftermath of that little accident spells out the dynamics of his family: a scary father, an eccentric mother who's drinking more and more, and an absent sister who will later become a prostitute. "I felt like I was getting to make a kind of opera out of my life, which I enjoyed," Doty tells *The Advocate*. After writing *Heaven's Coast*, a searing 1996 account of his lover Wally's death from AIDS-related complications, he welcomed the relief of recording less immediate grief.

"The first memoir was a grave meditation about love and death," says the 46-year-old Doty about *Coast*, which received a glowing review from *The New York Times*. "I wanted to write a very earthly comedy—even though it's a comedy about serious things a lot of times. And dark things too."

Indeed, Doty writes about moving from town to town—largely, he now believes, because his father couldn't get along with coworkers and quit jobs before he was fired—and watching his mother sink from eccentric to alcoholic, culminating in a terrifying scene in which



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she points a gun at her son but is too confused to release the safety latch.

"I've given galleys of the book to a few friends," says Doty, who lives with his partner, writer Paul Lisicky, and teaches at the University of Houston. "I ran into one friend the other night, and the first thing he said was, 'God, I know you so much better now!'"

"I wanted to talk about kids who experience themselves as outsiders," says Doty, whose books of poetry include the award-winning collection *My Alexandria*. "I did on many levels: as a gay kid, as a sissy boy, as a chubby boy, as a smart kid, as a kid with glasses, as a kid who moved all the time, as a kid with a Southern accent. I *always* felt like I was on the periphery of whatever community I was in."

Ironically, detailing his own sense of isolation in *Heaven's Coast* and now *Firebird* has made Doty feel part of a larger community than ever before. "The most wonderful thing about the publishing of *Heaven's Coast* was the outpouring of response from people who had experienced all sorts of losses," Doty says. "That was so moving to me."

Perhaps the most unexpected contact came from his own father, who wrote to Doty after years of little or no contact. "We were so estranged that I did not *ever* imagine him reading that book. His response to it was a real gift to me, something that changed our relationship." Now, says Doty ruefully, things have changed again. "He's read *Firebird*, and he's not at all happy about it. In fact, he's so unhappy about it that he's not speaking to me." ■

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

To read the entire transcript of Michael Giltz's conversation with Mark Doty, visit [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com)