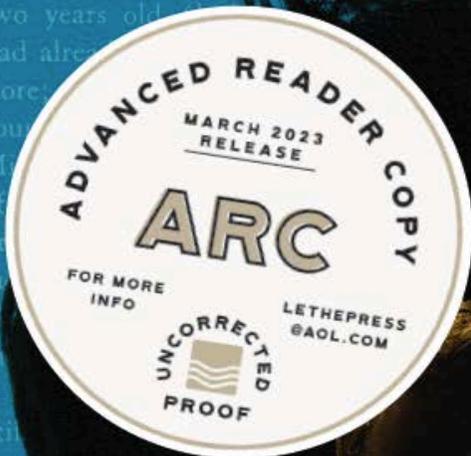


PATRICK E. HERRIGAN



# AMERICAN SCHOLAR

A NOVEL

2016

James Fitzgerald would no more part with those twelve storage boxes than cut off his right arm. For they contained all that was left of Gregory. In a material sense anyway—his files on lesbian and gay activism, articles on non-monogamy and queer theory, Marxism and feminism, his college notebooks, journals, essay drafts, old newspapers and magazines, flyers and pamphlets, song lists from his DJ days, everything to do with the Gay Study Group at Columbia, not to mention record albums, cassette tapes, books, letters, items of clothing, his stash of political campaign buttons ... a veritable time capsule of his life and the life they shared in New York in the 1980s. Every couple of months Fran would mention the boxes, how they took up so much space in the spare room, how he wished they could turn it into a proper guest bedroom. Or maybe even a nursery. *That* was the real issue, not the boxes. The boxes weren't in anybody's way. The real issue was children. Fran wanted a child by the time he was forty, and the drumbeat had only gotten more insistent since he turned thirty-eight. James didn't want children. My books are my children, he sometimes said. Well I'm sorry but your books aren't enough for me, Fran would shoot back. They quarreled about it again this morning, and on the very day he was set to give a reading from *American Scholar*. Surely that was no coincidence.

The buzz in the Warburg Lounge grew louder as the time approached. James had sequestered himself in the tiny office at the back of the lounge to look over his notes and some passages from the book. He never liked interacting with people before a talk or a class because it blew his concentration.

Jay popped his head in. "You about ready, doll face?" James looked up, startled. "Sorry to disturb. Sandy said we should start in five minutes."

"Almost ready."

They briefly went over the plan for the reading and discussion. "So I just realized," Jay said, "I have more questions than we can possibly address. But I think some of what I want to get at during the interview will come up in Q&A with the audience."

"That's fine. My part shouldn't take more than twenty minutes. I'll read a couple of passages, say a few words about Matthiessen, and the rest is up to you."

"Sounds like a plan."

James looked him in the eyes. "Thank you again for doing this. I appreciate it so much."

"Honey, what are friends for?" He held out his arms and they embraced. "You nervous?"

"Always. But good nervous."

"I remember I had this professor at Columbia who said to me, 'If you don't feel a little nervous every time you cross the threshold of the classroom, it's probably time to think about retirement.' And honey we ain't there yet."

James nodded. "He called you 'honey'?"

Jay laughed and gave him another hug. "*You'll be swell, you'll be great!*" he sang in his best Ethel Merman voice as he exited.

James smiled. Jay had always been there for him. Fran, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen. He tried calling one more time .... Still no answer. They'd originally planned on going uptown together, but that af-

ternoon Fran texted saying he had to work late and would meet him at the Y instead. Now, minutes before the reading, he sent a message that the 7 train was delayed. So which was it? Too much work or subway trouble? Why not jump into a taxi or call an Uber? It didn't take a PhD in English to see what was going on.

Of course he loved Fran and wanted him to be happy, wanted to do what he could to make him happy if it were possible. But raising a child—the sacrifice, the expense, the headache and heartache—he just couldn't fathom. The idea of being *married* wasn't even something he imagined for himself until a few years ago, much less being a parent. Maybe if he were younger, like Fran, he might feel different. But he was fifty-four. He liked his life the way it was. His path, he believed, was set. He was already working on his next book—a series of personal and scholarly essays on “Place,” from the house he grew up in to the home he'd made with Fran, along with some famous attics, rooms, and houses, both real and fictional, in between. And he could dimly see two or three more writing projects on the horizon.

He took a deep breath. People had come to hear him speak about *American Scholar*. Friends and colleagues and students and people he didn't even know. Getting tangled in a marital spat was the last thing he wanted at this moment. He stood up, silenced his phone, and slipped it into his pocket. Now with book, notepad, and lucky silver Cross pen in hand, and feeling “good nervous” as he'd said to Jay, he entered the lounge. Anyway, who knows? he thought. Maybe Fran will make it in time for the reception.