

## Winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction **IF WE WERE ELECTRIC** - stories by Patrick Earl Ryan

Roxane Gay's first selection as judge for the prestigious award, *If We Were Electric*'s twelve stories celebrate New Orleans in all of its beautiful peculiarities: macabre and magical, muddy and exquisite, sensual and spiritual. The stunning debut collection finds its characters in moments of desire and despair, often stuck on the verge of a great metamorphosis, but burdened by some unreasonable love. These are stories about missed opportunities, about people on the outside who don't fit in, about the consequences of not mustering enough courage to overcome the binds.

In "Feux Follet," an old man's grief attracts supernatural lights in the dark Louisiana swamps. An exploding transformer's raw, unnerving energy in the title story matches the strange, ferocious temper of an unlucky hustler. "Blackout" sets the profound numbness of a young man physically abused by his mentally unstable partner beside the meaningful beauty of an unexpected moment of joy with someone else. The teenage narrator in "Before Las Blancas" is so overwhelmed by his sexuality that he abandons everything and everyone he's known to live in a happy illusion...in Mexico. And "Where It Takes Us" is a poignant, understated snapshot of a gay man who accompanies his straight, HIV-positive brother to the race track to bond again.



photo credit Frank Farm

### About the Author

PATRICK EARL RYAN was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, in a family spanning 5 continents and 7 generations in the city. His debut short story collection *If We Were Electric* was chosen by Roxane Gay as the winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and published in 2020 by University of Georgia Press. His stories have appeared in *Ontario Review*, *Pleiades*, *Best New American Voices*, *Men on Men: Best New Gay Fiction for the Millennium*, *Cairn*, *James White Review*, and *Gertrude*, among many others; he was the founder and editor-in-chief of the LGBTQ+ literary journal *Lodestar Quarterly*, and in 2022 was a judge for the Flannery O'Connor Award.

For more information, go to [patrickearlryan.com](http://patrickearlryan.com)

Praise for *If We Were Electric*:

**Roxane Gay**, author of *Difficult Women* and *Hunger*:

“*If We Were Electric*, the debut short story collection from New Orleans’s native Patrick Earl Ryan is, indeed, fiercely electric. These twelve startling fictions have been crafted by a writer with an assured and absolutely original voice and a remarkable understanding of how place is as much a compelling character in a good story as the people who populate it. There are stories here about unrequited love and youthful yearning, the complexities of desire between men, the beginnings and ends of relationships, deaths both inevitable and untimely, the bitter ache of loneliness, the quiet horrors that unexpectedly befall us, and the magic of the ordinary world. With this outstanding collection, Patrick Earl Ryan makes his mark on Southern literature and how!”

**Martin Pousson**, author of *No Place, Louisiana* and *Black Sheep Boy*:

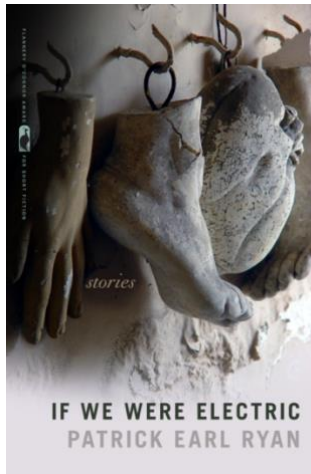
“Ryan seduces us... into an awareness and awakening to the fact that if you're truly alive, if you're truly beating, and smelling, and sensing, then you are always fucking up, you are always behaving badly, but each bad step is a step that moves you forward. In *If We Were Electric* we're always moving forward ultimately to grace. There's always *feux follet*, there's always light at the end. The plots are sinewy, they're forked like all the little waterways around New Orleans, but there's often this burst like a coronary system. There are passages even that have the fierce familiar grip of a tender heart. The ultimate triumph of *If We Were Electric* is that through all of the murk and mud and the mystery of New Orleans, at the end, what Ryan really delivers is an incredibly light, powerful, and majestic sense of what it means to be human in a place as topsy-turvy as New Orleans.”

**Jim Piechota** at *The Bay Area Reporter*:

“Infused with all the mystique and mystery that New Orleans is known for comes this enchanting, hypnotic debut story collection from Patrick Earl Ryan that, at its best, probes deeply into the interior souls of its characters and embodies New Orleans as a living, breathing entity... Ryan is a true natural at weaving textured language and complex characterization into plots that are serpentine and saturated with emotional complexity. This quality is exceptional for a debut author and a definite determinant for a gilded literary career ahead. Addictively gorgeous and mesmerizing, Ryan's collection of twelve literary gems are meant to be savored, re-read, and reflected upon as readers await his next creation.”

**Jim Gladstone** at *Passport Magazine*:

“Ryan combines the insight of a seasoned writer with the crackling energy of a literary wunderkind. Every one of these Louisiana-set tales is densely populated and richly detailed. They almost burst at the seams, as if each story had the potential to grow into a novel. The result is work that practically rustles off the page, with even minor characters offering major memorability. These dangerous, heart-wrenching stories will grab you like kudzu and suck you in like a swamp.”



## IF WE WERE ELECTRIC: STORIES

by Patrick Earl Ryan

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### **Patrick Earl Ryan in conversation with Martin Pousson**

Recorded November 13, 2020

Green Apple Books in San Francisco

#### **Martin Pousson**

Patrick, these stories are just so sensual. So much of the writing is incredibly sensual. In thinking about the book as a whole, I was imagining as it would be taught, someone might think of these stories as experimental, but I don't think they're experimental, because if they're experiments they succeed brilliantly. I don't think of them as experimental so much as unconventional, but then they're only unconventional if we think about American storytelling, which is based on rationalist, Calvinist, Protestant problem/solution axes. Yours don't work that way. They run counter that. The stories are almost inevitably fragmented in structure. There's ample use of ruptures and white space and glyphs to separate these fragmented episodes. Yet the collection holds together as exactly that... it's a collective experience of a myriad of characters through an expansive time with a coherent voice and a coherent purpose. The boundaries in this book I thought were interesting because they're not about boundaries of state or city or parish or race so much as they are boundaries of... they're not even boundaries of the body... they're boundaries of the mind. The coherence seems to arise out of a kind of psychological probity, and it seemed to me your aim was to put forward these seriously flawed people who are both flawed and yet perfect. There's an incredible amount of hard mercy and tough grace in these stories. As a whole, they shouldn't work, these stories, but they do. There's little to no plot. There's often no cause and effect with some sort of logical motivation. There're often no clear antagonists, unless it's a hurricane. The stories are not interlocking. They don't share a narrator. There's no single protagonist or point of view. They don't always share a theme. But they always share a setting. In one way or another, the stories arise out of an escape from or a return to New Orleans, so the collection ends up being almost like a travelogue... which seems ideal for your readers who are trapped in their homes right now, want to get out, and want to go somewhere new and utterly different. That's what you offer, Patrick. It's utterly distinct. It's

utterly New Orleans. It's redolent with the place. I wanted to know, as a seventh-generation New Orleanian, was this your strategy? Did you decide you were writing a whole collection that would be interconnected in one way only—New Orleans? Or is New Orleans just that bitch that commanded you to write only about her? Which is it?

### **Patrick Earl Ryan**

I would have a hard time separating those two, because I think they're both true. I will say that there are quite a number of influences in the book, literary influences, and one of the obvious ones when I look at the story collection on a whole would be James Joyce's *Dubliners*, in the sense that he is taking a city and showing that this is the effect, this is the power of the city on its people. This was also what I wanted to convey in the book, that there is a power that New Orleans exerts upon its citizens. So even when you have the narrator in "I Wouldn't Say No," who is in London, there is still this magnetism that is pulling him back to New Orleans. It's the swamp dragging you down into its mud, into its dirt. Personally, it was difficult for me to get out of New Orleans, even though now I just want to go right back. It's that draw and pull and push that keeps happening. New Orleans itself is what spoke... or I shouldn't say spoke, but yelled for me to write this book and to write it in that way. New Orleans is the connection between each of these stories. The title itself, *If We Were Electric*, speaks a little bit of that, what's connecting everything. It's the electricity that the city itself possesses, that pulls and keeps everything together.

### **Martin Pousson**

Your adoration for the place is intoxicating and utterly seductive, and yet you live in San Francisco. Do you think that distance is part of what infuses and empowers your storytelling about a place in which you don't currently live?

### **Patrick Earl Ryan**

I think that it is. All of the stories were written outside of New Orleans, so they were written once I had come to San Francisco. In a way, they are representative of my yearning for New Orleans. They were a way of me possessing the city without being able to live there. I would live there. I would love to live there, but life brings us to different places, and we just have to do what we can to get by, to live. It's a difficult city... bearing the weather, for example. So I think that this was my way of remaining a New Orleanian. I do have a deep love for the city, and I do go back. I haven't been able to go back this year, but in the past I would go back every year. It refuels me. I've spoken about this before, that I'm an introvert, which is odd for a New Orleanian, but I think it's because I live out here in California. Every time I go back to New Orleans, as soon as I step foot off of the airplane, as soon as I get into a cab or an Uber, I'm completely an extrovert again, my voice comes back, I'm in love with the city, and it comes out of all my pores... did I get off point?

### **Martin Pousson**

No, no no... you're right on point. What you're saying is people there speak the language, right? We share a language. Like a couple of raccoons, when we were first introduced to each

other via email, we had to root around in each other's garbage, and we discovered that we near missed each other in New Orleans, in Lafayette, but also in San Francisco by just a couple of years.

There are a lot of surprises in this collection, and one of the surprises is that although there's this utter fascination with New Orleans, the stories are populated with people who aren't always from New Orleans or even from the U.S. You mentioned London, but you also have Chinese, Japanese, Czech, New Zealander characters. I wondered, was that part of a strategy? New Orleans is often thought of as the *exemplum primum* of regionalism and parochialism, but anyone who knows New Orleans knows that it's incredibly international, and it once vied with New York for European capital of the West. Were you pushing against that parochial view of the city by purposely populating your stories with people who were from other places or other backgrounds?

### **Patrick Earl Ryan**

I don't know if it was completely conscious as I was writing them, but as they were written and finished, and I started looking at them as a whole, I certainly saw that, and I understood it as something that I genuinely believed about my city. Growing up I would always think of New Orleans as completely separate from the South. This isn't the South. We're not the South in New Orleans. Y'all are the South. We're this little European city that's tucked away from everyone else around us. If you look at even just voting records, how people vote in Louisiana, you have the entire state basically red, but then you have New Orleans and it's blue. So there is this internationalism. It's always been that way. It was the third largest city in America during the 1800s, and if not the richest then one of the richest cities. People came from all over. Myself as an example of what New Orleans is... I was saying earlier my ancestors came from five continents. One lineage from my dad's maternal side is from Filipino boat jumpers who escaped from the Spanish armada ships in the 18th and 19th century and became shrimpers in Barataria Bay, which is to the east of New Orleans. I have four brothers. They're all straight. One of my brothers married a Cambodian immigrant who came to New Orleans in the early 1970s. She was a refugee. There's also a large Vietnamese community in New Orleans East. I grew up seeing Asians. They were close to my family, close to the Creole culture. It wasn't anything strange to see people from all over the world in New Orleans. I think that makes it so different than the rest of the South.

### **Martin Pousson**

The streetcar always seemed to have a great desegregating effect on the city. You know, it was the first city in the U.S. with an opera house, the first apartment building, first public bar, and some even say first public gay bar with the original Lafitte's. So I'm glad you mentioned your straight brothers because one of the many surprises in this book is that although the book is mostly homosocial, concerned with men and boys mostly behaving badly, it's not homosexual, not explicitly. There's a big embrace here of all masculinity, liminal masculinity and otherwise, and readers might be surprised, for example, to know that the story that is most explicitly concerned with HIV/AIDS features a straight character who has HIV/AIDS. Also, I thought it interesting to go back and look at the beginnings of the stories. All but two of them work along these lines. These are the first sentences, for the

most part... we have "I could smell him," then "So I punched him square in the nose," "During his nighttime walk," "My brother's ghost," "I'm in love with Kent," "Three men lived in the last house," "He wasn't the sort to keep secrets," "I first see the boy named Mark," "I haven't told you about my real brother," and finally, "He expected a thunder's mighty rumble." So when I looked back at the collection as a whole, I started wondering, in addition to making the stories populated with this international view of the city, were you also trying to really hone in and focus on what it means to be male and masculine in a place like New Orleans, which is completely distinct from being male and masculine in the rest of the country?

### **Patrick Earl Ryan**

This is reflective of my own personal history, growing up with four brothers, no sisters. My mother was my only feminine role model, my only feminine connection. I went to a Catholic school for grammar school and high school. My high school was all-boys, so my connection with the world was through a masculine lens. I didn't have close friends who were female. I have friends now who accuse me of being afraid of women, which I'm not, it's just who you have around you become the friends that you have. It is personal experience. That's why it's so focused on the masculine. This collection represents a particular decade for me. That decade was obsessed with masculinity, obsessed with men, the crushes that I had, the straight masculinity in my family.

### **Martin Pousson**

I should make clear that your book has such a wide embrace that women are there, it's just that men are the anchor, men are the protagonists invariably. But the book does start with a boy trying to leave his mother and then it ends with a man trying to in one way or another return to his female friend. I've often thought about the fact that our culture really is almost more matriarchal than it is patriarchal, so I wonder if that's why sometimes we feel contested in our gender roles. It's a fascinating part of the book, and I admired it. I also really admired the superstructure, because again, in a book that doesn't have more of the obvious interlocking, interconnected points, it's evident that you really thought about how to arrange and sequence it all so that it would have a totalizing effect. When I reached the last story and we had the mandatory evacuation in "The Tempest," for an approaching hurricane, it led me back to the beginning, and in "Before Las Blancas," you've got two men, or a man and a boy, who are driving down a hurricane evacuation route away from New Orleans. Then it ends with a man answering the call of a woman and pondering how long to New Orleans by canoe or by foot... of course I thought of Fats Domino's "Walking to New Orleans." You've got in the beginning fat mosquitoes and singing locusts and the Atchafalaya swamp, then in the end you've got this overgrown flooded swamp... it starts with the smell of semen and ends with the sight of blood, so it seems...

### **Patrick Earl Ryan**

Well, I don't necessarily say it's semen...

## **Martin Pousson**

No, no. But I figured that out on my own. [Laughter]

It ends up having this incredible superstructure, so I wondered to what degree when you started putting together all these stories did you intend that effect, and if so, what then was the strategy? What are you trying to say to us about the experience of all these men in New Orleans?

## **Patrick Earl Ryan**

I think that the structure is subtle. It was purposeful, but it was subtle. I spent a lot of time seeing how I liked the stories arranged. For example, in a very obvious way I start with “Before Las Blancas” because it is the youngest narrator of the collection. It’s this flowering, this birth, the springtime coming out of the ground, his awakening. I also like the idea of mirroring. For example, the story “The Blue Son,” which is the story of a mother and two brothers, mirrors “Where It Takes Us,” which says, so this is the story of my real brother, “I haven’t told you about my real brother.” It’s almost as if the narrator of the entire collection is saying, “Oh, I’m a storyteller, and I was telling you a fib before, but this is the real version,” and of course neither is the actual real version... and it was important for me to have those mirrored stories spaced apart from each other so that you had a chance to notice that reflection. If they were right next to each other that would be too obvious. I want that to come to the reader in a more natural way rather than being pushed into their face. Cars are also very important throughout the entire collection, cars breaking down, and in one story a car passes on the roadway, which is the same car that is in another story. Even though the stories may seem very disjointed and disconnected, they do rope through each other in subtle ways.

## **Martin Pousson**

New Orleans is a city of masking, and one part of the beauty of your book is that it’s never overt, it’s never direct, it’s never didactic. Its spaces are always changing. It’s subtle, but it’s also wonderfully arcane and mysterious. So I only come to these conclusions because I have to sit there and reflect on it. It’s not that you’re broadcasting all this. I think that’s part of the power of the writing. You allow us to do some of that work. In Southern fiction, especially Southern Louisiana, place is always the shadow protagonist, and if place is the shadow protagonist, then memory is the antagonist, because nothing marks place or spikes it more than the smell of it. Your book has so much of the funky aura of New Orleans and seemed to be a way to gin up memory and have that memory clashing with place, and the stories spin out of that. I think it’s fantastic.

## **Patrick Earl Ryan**

Is that not the way the rest of the world is?

## Martin Pousson

No, no, it's only New Orleans! You mentioned possession earlier, and I was interested also in the fact that these stories are usually in one way or another about severance, about death, but not death the way that would be understood in the rest of the nation, not an Anglo sense of death as permanent. Instead you have a lot of living death. You have a lot of ghosts. So I wondered if you'd say a little something about the dual meaning of possession in New Orleans, because it's not a single meaning there, right?

## Patrick Earl Ryan

Right. The stories that come to mind... "Feux Follet," that's a good example, and that is right next to "The Blue Son," both of those deal with this idea of possession and death and spirit. The mother in "The Blue Son" is so overcome with grief, she refuses to allow the memory of her son who has died to leave. His ghost then possesses the entire house. In the same way, in "Feux Follet" you have the old man who has lost his daughter and that memory possesses him. So memory as a way of possession. In a larger sense, you look at New Orleans and how the city itself possesses the people who live there. There's such a history with New Orleans, such a diverse history, that it possesses you, too. I was very interested in examining that and how people can't get away from those spirits, from those ghosts that haunt them even though time has passed.

## Martin Pousson

The possessions also are sometimes sexual. One of the elements that really fascinated me with this book was the way in which everyone ultimately is forgiven, but it doesn't even feel like forgiveness is called for, because there's such an embrace of these characters, and such an overwhelming sense of affection for them all coming from the narrator, who ultimately is you. You mentioned that it's sometimes autobiographical, and I thought of how powerful it is... fiction. It's not rhetoric, it's not about persuasion, it's more of an art of seduction, and you're so incredibly seductive that when we read the first story, we might forget that it's a romance of a 13-year-old boy and a 28-year-old man, but we don't think of words like *pederasty*. There's no sense of indictment or crime, although this would be a criminal act in really every state in the country. I felt like you really worked to have us so seduced with this world and these characters that we dropped our usual moral framing and instead adopt a more truly moral framing, and that is an awareness and awakening to the fact that if you're truly alive, if you're truly breathing and smelling and sensing, then you are always fucking up, you are always behaving badly, but each bad step is a step that moves you forward. In this book we're always moving forward... ultimately to grace. There's always *feux follet*. There's always light at the end in your stories. The plots are sinewy, they're forked like all the little waterways around New Orleans, but there's often this burst like a coronary system. There are passages that even have the fierce familiar grip of a tender heart. That's the ultimate triumph of this book, that through all of the murk and mud and mystery of New Orleans, at the end what you really deliver is an incredibly light, powerful, and majestic sense of what it means to be human in a place as topsy-turvy as New Orleans. Right now, in this country, we're all living in a topsy-turvy place, so you really offer all of us this chance at redemption.



## **Patrick Earl Ryan**

Yes. And you're always forgiven. There's that sense of always being forgiven. It's a tricky business when you're dealing with pedophilia, and that would be a completely different story, of course, if it was told from Neil's adult point of view. But it's Evie's point of view, and what we have instead is... we all know what it feels like to be in love, we all know what it feels like to long for something, to desire something, so the story keeps its bearings by focusing on those primal emotions that he's having, that desire that he's having. Desire is something that winds throughout the entire book. Not always sexual desire.

## **Martin Pousson**

There you go, as seductive in life as you are in your fiction. Thank you, Patrick, for writing this book. I encourage everybody, if you haven't already picked it up, here's the thing... you look at this cover, and if you've ever been to New Orleans, or if you're from there... it's this tiny low-ceiling little shrine with these fragments of human bodies hanging down. These are all blessed parts, people praying for a heart to be healed or a foot to be healed. That's what your book really is about! If you can't make it to New Orleans, if you're trapped in your house during the time of COVID, you can go there by picking up a copy of this book and reading these stories. It was a trip for me in every sense of the word.