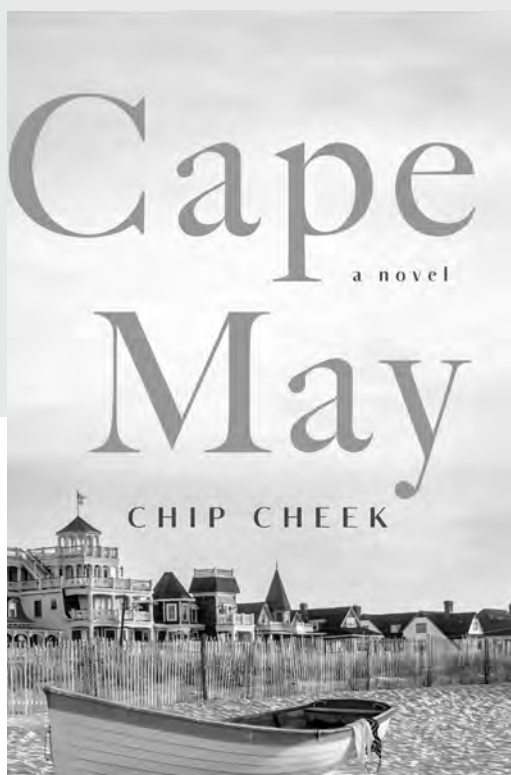

ONE *to* WATCH

What we're watching: literary events, books by former contributors, and interviews with the authors of debut works the *Carve* community is excited to read.

CAPE MAY BY CHIP CHEEK



Interview by Sejal H. Patel

Over a decade ago, I took my first writing class with Grub Street in Boston. I had published nothing then and had no sense of whether I was any good at writing or even liked it. I made two lifelong friends in that class—both fellow students. One was a photographer, the other a former actor who I recognized from his guest role as Chrissy’s date in *Three’s Company*. You never do know who walks into a writing class. We bonded as friends and fellow artists, I think, because of the shared space our instructor created for us. It was a place of warmth and encouragement for new writers that had a single mission—to honor the craft of storytelling. Our instructor treated stories with a sort of piety that I value as a writer to this day. We all remember that person who first introduced us to writing—who made us fall in love with it and believe that maybe we could do it, too.

That teacher was Chip Cheek, a celebrated short-story writer whose debut novel, *Cape May*, was published by Celadon Books in April 2019. Chip’s novel takes us to Cape May, New Jersey, in 1957. A newly married couple from rural Georgia travel there for their honeymoon. Henry and Effie are recent high school graduates who experience a rapid and dramatic transition from adolescence to adulthood. This novel explores what marriage and individuality mean to these two young people. More specifically, I found myself questioning what sexuality means to these characters and what happens when the vows of marriage conflict with primal instinct.

People Magazine featured *Cape May* as a “Best New Book,” and a Wall Street Journal reviewer summed the book up like this: “A dozy, luxurious sense of enchantment comes over the story, until the rude awakening at its finale.” I interviewed Chip weeks before the book’s much-anticipated release.

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your thoughts with *Carve* readers, Chip. I want to start by asking you about how this story came to be. I know that you had worked on two other novel concepts before writing *Cape May*. How did you settle on this story?

First of all, let me say what a pleasure it is to do this interview with you, Sejal. All those years ago, back in Boston, who would have thought we’d be here? It’s such a joy. But to your question: yes, I had at least a couple of failed novel attempts before *Cape May*. I’d been working on this other novel for a couple of years—this dark, violent novel set in Georgia in the twenties—but I was spinning my wheels and getting nowhere. I loved the material, but on some deep level it wasn’t engaging me, maybe because it was so distant from my own experience, or maybe, conversely, it was because I knew the story too well and there wasn’t enough mystery in it. (It was based on real events in my family’s history.) In any case, to shake things up, I decided to marry my point-of-view character, Henry, to a then relatively minor character, Effie, and I sent them on a honeymoon. I chose Cape May because I loved the town—I used to go there for writing retreats with my friends—and I thought it’d be refreshing to get the characters out of their usual contexts. Once I was there in Cape May with Henry and Effie, I couldn’t stop writing, and after a few days I had something like fifty pages. I realized

this was the novel I wanted to write, not the other one. I happily dumped the old novel and wrote the honeymoon novel in a fever. I didn’t settle on this story; I was swept away by it.

You set your novel in 1957, a big year in American history. It was the Eisenhower administration, America was in the height of the Cold War, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 passed that September, and Elvis Presley was winning hearts on stage and in the cinema. What about the cultural fabric of this year grabbed your attention?

To be honest, the choice of the specific year was somewhat random. I didn’t even decide on the era until after I’d finished the first draft. I experimented with various time periods—the Depression era, World War II, the sixties, and even, very briefly, the present day. I really struggled with this question, because to a certain extent the year didn’t matter, since the situation of the novel was so cut off from the characters’ regular lives. That’s part of what allows them to do the things they do: They’re in this sort of enchanted realm. But eventually I settled on the fifties, because if it was set too much earlier, the action wouldn’t feel plausible enough, and if it was set too much later, the action would lose its charge. I chose the latter part of the fifties, when the sexual revolution was maybe just discernible on the horizon but still some years away. And once I had the year, I immersed myself in it—the art, the music, the literature, the news—and it felt exactly right.

You tell the story from the husband's perspective—Henry. Henry and his new wife, Effie, are recent high school graduates. Henry had neither traveled north of Atlanta nor seen the ocean before this trip. Effie had traveled east before. While Henry professes to being a virgin, we aren't sure about Effie. Henry's family is agrarian, while Effie's parents are politically prominent. You set Henry up to be the "innocent" one. What sorts of big questions did you want Henry to confront as he is facing many things for the first time—his sexuality, marriage, being in a new place, and being exposed to elite, educated, and rich people?

Henry and Effie are both very innocent, but Henry wears his naivety more openly—at least in the beginning. He faces, I think, a very fundamental and general question, which he poses to himself a few times in the novel: What kind of man am I going to be? A farmer, a scholar, a businessman? A devoted husband and father, or a playboy, like Max? By the end of their honeymoon, the answer that seems to be emerging is not flattering. But of course it's far too early in his life to tell; he and Effie are both still so young, practically children. That's one of the reasons I draw the lens so far out in the last chapter—to say, here are the kinds of people Henry and Effie will become. And I leave it to readers to judge them—or not!

I love how you write Henry's interior voice in that you really capture well the post-high school tone. He knew it all but also felt like he knew nothing at all. How did you go about researching this novel such that you could capture that young voice?

I didn't need to do any research to capture that voice: It is a version of my own. Writing a novel is hard enough, so I decided early on that, at least for my first book, I wasn't going to try to write from a perspective too far removed from my own. So, in imagining Henry's character, I tried to imagine what kind of boy I'd be if I'd grown up in the rural South in the 1950s. Of course, to make the novel interesting, I had to push him to make decisions that I myself (I hope) would not have made—although, to be honest, if I'd gotten married when I was his age and found myself in a similar situation, I'd have probably been deficient enough in judgment to do some of the things he does.

Alma, which means "soul" in Spanish, is a central figure in the story. Henry meets her on his honeymoon, has sex with her in the riskiest of ways, and considers abandoning his marriage for her. But he doesn't abandon Effie ultimately. Here we see how reck-

lessness does have its limit. How did you go about setting that limit? Did you consider writing the book the other way—where he does abandon Effie for Alma?

I always knew Henry and Effie were going to stay together. I didn't have many preconceived ideas about where the story would go when I set out to write it, but I knew that. At the same time, I wanted to push the situation as far as it could go, to the breaking point. Alma, ultimately, is nothing to Henry, nor is he to her; they barely know each other. But Henry is still naïve enough to confuse sexual intimacy with deep familiarity—with a lasting, sacred connection—and so, at the height of their brief passion, he's overcome by the illusion that they belong together, that she is the love of his life. But it's only that, an illusion.

Okay, let's talk about the sex. The sex scenes in this book are very descriptive. The *Wall Street Journal* said about you: "He wields... observational control over the sex scenes, which are plentiful and, against the odds, extremely well done." I have to both agree and also confess—the scenes made me blush. I noticed that the book is categorized as "Fiction" and not "Romance." Can you tell us how you view the difference between these genres? And to you, where is the line between writing "romance" and "erotica"?

I try to think as little as possible about genre; I leave that question to publishers, who need genres to figure out how to market books. (Apparently *Cape May* is "upmarket women's fiction." Who knew?) A genre is just a set of expectations. I think of genres like kits—each one a box of forms and set pieces and moods and so forth, along with an instruction manual, which you can follow or not. When you open the romance kit, you expect to find certain things in that box: a "meet cute," thwarted passion, ultimately a happy ending. (I'm guessing here; I'm not actually that familiar with romance.) The same goes for the western kit (lonesome hero, conflicting land claims), or the fantasy kit (magic, a quest), or the literary realism kit (sad people, an epiphany), and so on. I'm not sure I've ever read erotica—where is the line between it and pornography? Is there one? What is pornography, anyway?—so I'm not sure what's in that kit, but I think I can identify the line you're talking about, which is the extent to which sexual arousal is the *raison d'être* of a scene or story. In pornography, I think it's safe to say, the intent of any given scene is to arouse. I can't speak for erotica or ro-

mance, but in upmarket women's fiction, the intent of any given scene is to reveal character and move the story forward. A sex scene, like any scene, probably fails if it doesn't do one or both of these things. It may be arousing—it may *need* to be arousing, to show a character's emotional state—but it may also be repulsive, or horrifying, or awkward, or any emotion at all, given that sex is endlessly complicated.

Sex can present in a story in vastly different ways. Sometimes you see just the lead up to it and then “Scene!” I grew up watching Indian movies. There, the characters held hands around a tree trunk, and when it started raining and the lights faded, we were supposed to understand what happened. How did you calibrate how descriptive to be in these sex scenes?

Ha—that is wonderful about Indian movies! I'm copying that for my next book, if it has anything to do with sex; it'll save me a great deal of suffering, because there are few things more difficult to write well than a sex scene. I knew from the beginning that I was writing a book that was largely *about* sex—this one couple's sexual awakening, and what happens when there are no limits to it—so I knew I was going to be writing explicitly. But explicit should never be confused with gratuitous. Gratuitous simply means unnecessary—unnecessary details, unnecessary scenes. Sex is an action like any other in fiction, and like any action, it must (again) show character and advance the story. I think for most stories, it's enough for the door to close, the lights to fade, because for most stories, the simple fact that the characters are having sex is what really matters. But for some stories, like mine, what matters in a sex scene is how, say, the characters react to seeing each other naked for the first time, or how they deal with the mess they make on the sheets, or how wide the gulf is between what they're doing and what they're thinking. It's all about relevant detail. Where is the lens supposed to be focused? In *Cape May*, the lens is focused very closely in. And it's not all hot. Much of it is awkward, some of it is gross. Some of it is hot, awkward, and gross all at once.

Do your characters forgive infidelity—or does the fact that they both did it somehow equal the sin out?

Oh no, there's definitely no equaling the sin out. Two wrongs don't make a right, after all. But I'm trying to dramatize life, and there are no simple answers here.

Forgiveness is complicated. I don't think it'd be right to say either of the characters forgives the other, but neither would it be accurate to say they hold each other in contempt for the rest of their lives. People, who are flawed, make choices, and time passes. Memory fades, new memories take over. People wreck each other but go on loving each other regardless. I think one of the most important lines in the book comes at the very end, when Henry makes the observation that, if it's true that in heaven people will be free from sin, then in heaven everyone he has ever loved will be a stranger to him. He doesn't want an Effie free from sin, whoever that could possibly be—he wants the Effie of the world, the love of his life. And I presume Effie would want the same, although we (and he) will never know that for sure.

There is an explosive scene between husband and wife in which Henry believes that his wife “belongs” to him. Henry believes that Effie's obligations as a wife are different from his obligations towards her. A woman, he believes, can be “spoiled” while a man is expected to cheat. We are in the 1950s in this novel, but these themes are (sadly) timeless. How did you think about these gender dynamics and expectations as you wrote the story?

The gender dynamics of the 1950s were certainly in my mind as I was writing, mainly in an effort to portray the time period believably, and in the scene you're describing, I was trying to imagine as well as I could the ways in which Henry's sense of male entitlement would manifest itself at that moment, in that day and age. As far as the gender dynamics are concerned, Henry and Effie are both products of their time and place, just as we are products of ours—for which we shouldn't congratulate ourselves too much, considering who the current president is. But in writing this novel, I mostly proceeded with the view that Henry and Effie are, like most young couples then and now, fundamentally decent people who want to treat each other with respect. They often fail, because they are human beings in a flawed world, but their intentions are usually good. This is how I struggle to see all people, difficult though it is.

The last chapter of the book fast forwards Henry's and Effie's lives, such that we know they stay together and both, at various times, engage in extramarital affairs. But their decision to stay together was resolute. Even when Henry had a chance to read letters Effie

had secreted from a lover, he chose instead to burn them. Tell us why burning those letters was an important gesture for Henry and what finding shards of paper with a word here and there on the property meant.

I think burning the letters is Henry's way of saying, *This doesn't matter*. I see it as a selfless act, a gesture of faith in Effie, an act of love. Rather than give in to grievance, he lets Effie have her secrets, and loves her regardless. As for the shards of paper, that's just a clever, writerly way of showing how we can't ever totally bury (or incinerate?) the past. Based on the responses I've gotten to the book so far, many readers will probably disagree with this, but I think, by their own standards and by the standards of the culture they come from, Henry and Effie's marriage is a successful one—even, on balance, a happy one. "Happily ever after" describes no one's life. Effie's and Henry's life together is a mess of betrayal and anger and despair and disappointment, but it also includes bursts of joy, healthy children, a lot of friends, frequent parties, financial security, and companionship in old age. In the final analysis, maybe Henry and Effie don't have it so bad. I've been surprised by how many people say *Cape May* is a dark novel. I think it's radiant. Maybe there's something wrong with me. ↪