

# MY NIGHTS WITH MADGE

One man's love of Madonna changed his life — and made for a fine gay novel, says *Dan Cairns*

**A**t a drinks reception in London in the mid-1990s, I overheard a man who worked in publishing discussing the success of the novelist Alan Hollinghurst and the anticipated wave of gay literature arriving in his wake. The man was drawling away about the piles of “romans à bloody clef” he was receiving with gay rite-of-passage themes. (I left out an adjective there, as this is a family newspaper.)

Is it likely you'd overhear something similar now? Possibly, though surely worded more diplomatically. As in, perhaps, the response of multiple publishers to Matt Cain's new novel, *The Madonna of Bolton*, which can be boiled down to: “It's too gay.”

Loosely based on Cain as a child, the book's central character, Charlie, endures the same relentless homophobic bullying the author suffered in the 1980s, before he fled Bolton for a place at Cambridge and, later, a media career in London. Like Charlie, Cain's life was transformed when he discovered Madonna, who became his secret ally and touchstone as he carried the secret of his sexuality around with him in his teens.

“If you grew up at a time when people viewed gay men as dangerous, disease-carrying predators who weren't to be trusted around children, then there was Madonna, parading her gay friends around, gay dancers, gay men in her videos, and all of this pre-internet, remember — well, in a place like Bolton, that's going to seem pretty powerful, isn't it?” Cain says.

A former culture editor of Channel 4 News and editor-in-chief of *Attitude* magazine, the 43-year-old wrote the

first draft 10 years ago. The rejection letters piled up, as they would for two later drafts. Undeterred, he turned to the crowdfunding publishing house *Unbound* and promptly broke its record for hitting a funding target. Surprisingly, Madonna herself has now given the novel her seal of approval, and the film rights have already been sold.

An experienced journalist, Cain is good at the pre-emptive strike and at anticipating traps. The novel is written in the present tense and is uniformly chatty in style. As I chew wasps in my attempt to say this, he strides in. “Light and frothy? Yes, it is. But what's wrong with that? There is such snobbery about popular culture. It's like with the World Cup. Everyone's going on about ‘the beautiful game’, about how stadiums are the ‘cathedrals’ of the present day, as if they think they need to justify it, at the same time as saying

— I don't know — that listening to Little Mix is a guilty pleasure. Nonsense. There's no guilt whatsoever as far as I'm concerned. Why do something, or not do something, out of some sense of cultural obligation?”

I like the novel's tone, I splutter; it blinds you to what's coming. “Exactly,” Cain chuckles. “And before you know it, you're in a gay sauna, a sex club and a clap clinic.”

This tone is, in fact, crucial. The elements of the story — from wretchedness and poignancy to defiance and redemption — creep up on you where, in someone else's hands, they could have been used as a battering ram. Tracking Charlie's journey from cowed child to Madonna-obsessed teen, on into reinvention at university and as a

sexual adventurer in London, it slowly twists the knife. The arcs of Charlie's friends and foes are also traced, and the book ties up all the loose ends with an ending that is pure Hollywood. No wonder the film rights have been snapped up. (There is also talk of a stage musical.) So that's the success

story. But the “real” story, Cain's and Charlie's, is altogether more complex and painful — and Cain's most significant achievement with the novel is to convey this humorously and indelibly.

“The thing about homophobic bullying that makes it different from being bullied for being, say, fat or ginger,” he argues, “is that in those days I couldn't tell my parents, because I'd have basically been admitting to this secret, that other people thought this awful thing about me. Which might have prompted them to start asking awkward questions. All they knew about being gay then is that it meant social ruin, no career, unhappiness and dying of Aids.”

The novel's principal characters, sharply and beautifully drawn, are taken partly from life, partly from a process of amalgamation and licence. Cain's father, he says, is nothing like Charlie's — who refuses to discuss his son's sexuality, albeit for reasons that have little to do with prejudice, a lot to do with fear. This becomes more understandable when Charlie moves to London and throws himself into the gay scene and a sputtering career at a television station that bears more than a passing resemblance to *L!VE TV*, the anarchic enterprise overseen by Janet Street-Porter in the mid- to late 1990s.

“When I left Cambridge,” Cain recalls, “they literally said, ‘You can



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write your own pay cheque, you can run the world.' I wrote 211 letters of application for jobs. I wanted to do something creative. The only one that replied was a soft-porn channel called Granada Men & Motors. I started as a runner on £7,000 a year – this was after going to Cambridge. As for LIVE TV? The weather in leather and that dwarf on a trampoline? Happy days."

Cain has never met Madonna, despite a number of chances to do so: "I'm too scared about coming face to face with a fantasy." But he is, he says, thrilled and thunderstruck by her endorsement. Prominent supporters such as the Sherlock writer Mark Gatiss and Russell T Davies helped give his crowdfunding wings. And Cain cannily harnessed the heft of Madonna fan forums all over the world, especially in countries where gay people are still hounded and imprisoned.

"This book is about having a role model, definitely. But it's also about the long-term damage to someone's self-esteem that results from encountering extreme rejection as a child – and how difficult it is to get over that."

He feels reconciled with Bolton now, he says. Besides, it's a different place. "I went back for the first gay Pride to be held there – something that would have been inconceivable to me when I was a teenager." Did he feel the spirit of Her Majesty hovering over the occasion? "Oh, don't worry, she was there." 🇬🇧

*The Madonna of Bolton is out on Thursday ([Unbound](#) £14.99)*

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**Crazy for you** Matt Cain beside his heroine, Madonna, pictured in 1984