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Some hearts are true

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Forced to sum things up, Douglas Glover says he "basically works by thematic obsession." It's a word, obsession, the author of the 2003 Governor General's Literary Award-winner *Elle*, and this year's writer-in-residence at University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, uses regularly to describe the way his mind works, referring to his "little obsessions" and "sub-obsessions."

For his most recent book, *Savage Love*, a collection of short stories released by Goose Lane Editions last month, its weddings that preoccupied his imagination.

"I've just been thinking of literature as a whole and became a bit obsessed," says Glover. "I realized that if you stick a wedding in at the end, you immediately insert a sense of optimism."

Glover's fascination evolved in opposition to the obsession that forced him to write his 2000 book of stories, *16 Categories of Desire*. That collection was inspired by a comment made to him during a tour of Soviet Union in the 1980s: "All my life has been an effort to liberate myself from love." The idea was so counter-intuitive that he kept returning to it for more than a decade. But when the book was finished, he told himself he had to move on.

So, he thought about weddings. He thought about Shakespeare. And he thought about the romantic comedies he loves to watch -

about the only films he enjoys watching, even teaching the 1994 Academy Award-nominated *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in one of his classes.

"Almost nothing looks like romantic comedy in whatever I write, but the idea of a dramatic narrative that ends with a wedding is ancient."

Indeed, the story from *Savage Love* that most haunts Glover and influences his thinking, "Tristiana," is more *Blood Meridian* than *Hugh Grant*. Following the American Civil War, the story chronicles one man's murderous path across the Midwest and the love he finds along the way. The resulting "wedding" is a liberal interpretation and far from traditional.

Glover says the story "carries all the thematic DNA" in the book, and every time he now sits down to write, it all comes out like "Tristiana." "There's no point to even try to write," he says. He'll have to give up for a while, something he's learned to do. He trusts that a new obsession will come along. In the meantime, he has fallen back on writing essays.

"When I've written a story or novel and it's worked, I do have hard time shaking that," Glover says. "Every project is a kind of earnest or passionate project. ... It's absolutely imperative to reconstitute one's self as a thinker and writer, over and over."

Although it's not all blood and brutality, the stories in *Savage Love* are each unconventional takes on love stories. But death is a recurring theme, as he writes in the story "A Flame, a Burst of Light," "Death is always an event of note." He quotes Walter Benjamin - "Death is the sanction of everything the story-teller can tell" - by way of explanation.

"It's not that I'm obsessed with death, it's more that I learned over the years that stories attain significance by being framed by death," Glover says. "If you tell a story that doesn't include death in background then you automatically make it more superficial."

"I have a soft spot in my heart, not necessarily for those that survive death, but those who persevere or push on. Going back to my novel *Elle*, the beauty of *Elle* is that she's just unstoppable."

And so, there is a quasi-religious element, a hopefulness, to his writing. Whether he actually believes or not, it's a perspective others have noticed and he himself addressed in his 2011 essay, "Mappa Mundi: The Structure of Western Thought":

"After all is said and done, out of the whirlwind of imagination and language, there is yet 'a still, small voice' that has nothing to do with God (yet) but is my voice, the voice of the self, which may be nothing but the self who talks and protests and expresses a desire that does not stop at the surface of things but leaps, however quixotically, into the dark."

He admits his thinking may be a kind of "wistful nostalgia" but when forced to make a statement of belief he says,

"Whether it's possible or not, it's important to think it or want it."

It's this conclusion that spawns Glover's style of writing that's been called "a rich blend of elegance and punch, raw affect and slippery allusion." The language of his stories is entwined with his other themes.

"When you say a sentence about something, it really sounds plausible. Grammar makes things plausible, but it's completely illusionary," says Glover.

It's this illusionary aspect that allows Glover to set his stories in places he's never been, such as Idaho, or just passed through. The illusion of language frees his imagination, and he says is "something I've tapped into all my writing life ... I enjoy throwing my voice in all kinds of direction." And, in *Savage Love*, he does indeed throw, reinforcing his claim, "Convention is really the enemy of art."

Yet, he can't shake the feeling that something beyond the illusion anchors his writing. Call it the impetus for his obsessions, his quixotic leaps into the dark.

In the story "Uncle Boris Up in a Tree," he describes one of his characters, writing, "Like everyone else she wants a moment of true feeling."

"Basically, what do people want? What does every ordinary person want? You want someone else in your life," says Glover. "What happens is you get married and you get lost in the economy of marriage."

"So much of our lives are coloured by not even having real moments. ... That seems to be an important element one wants, but

is almost entirely missing."

And more than a wedding or death, it's in writing, in language, where these moments lie for Glover. s

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