



CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN
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Christopher BOLLEN

By JAY McINERNEY Photography CRAIG McDEAN Styling KARL TEMPLER

THE AUTHOR'S DEBUT NOVEL FOLLOWS A CAST OF CHARACTERS TORN BETWEEN YOUTH, AGE, BEAUTY, AND SELF-DESTRUCTION IN POST-9/11 NEW YORK CITY

“AMERICA, AND PARTICULARLY NEW YORK, RUNS ON THE IDEA THAT HISTORY DOESN'T MATTER. THERE IS NO HISTORY. THERE IS ONLY THE NEVER-ENDING PRESENT.”

Christopher Bollen's debut novel, *Lightning People* (Soft Skull Press), begins with a wedding and ends on a beach. What happens in between, however, is more of a nightmare than a storybook fantasy. Not that it's a nightmare to read: The 35-year-old first-time fiction author (and *Interview* editor at large) has constructed a rich, intricate, almost dizzying vision of post-9/11 Manhattan that's filled with characters no longer so young and optimistic, who are fighting for survival in a city that no longer embodies the hopeful American dream. Certainly self-destruction is part of this arc, but so are love, conspiracy theories, more than one possible murder, and, at its heart, the question of truth, and whether discovering it is worth its price. Bollen is certainly familiar with the terrain he writes about, having lived in New York City for more than a decade. He recently spoke to Jay McInerney, author of the iconic New York City novel *Bright Lights, Big City*, about *Lightning People*, killing characters, the old East Village, and the American obsession with conspiracy theories.

JAY McINERNEY: I couldn't help noticing the city in your book is composed of immigrants, specifically Midwesterners. I was curious as to where you come from. CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: I'm from Cincinnati, just like the main character, but I swear he's nothing like me. And it gets worse, because my mother is also a college professor, just like his mother. I feel like I need to make some public announcement that she is absolutely nothing like that character. *Lightning People* isn't a roman à clef in any way.

McINERNEY: So she's not holed up in her bedroom mourning . . .

BOLLEN: No. I guess when you're starting out, at least for me, you gravitate toward a few familiar markers when building a backstory, and I did use jobs in my family as anchors, which will now confuse everyone to no end. But really, most of the characters in the novel are invented from scratch. Especially the New York characters. A few friends have read it and said, "Oh, I see such and such in this person," and I think, Ah, no, that isn't them at all. All the characters had much longer histories than what made it to the final manuscript. I overwrote. *Lightning People* was nearing 700 pages at one point.

McINERNEY: It's still long. Did you work with an editor?

BOLLEN: Yeah, and he was great. But he made me cut out an elaborate second narrative set in Ohio. At first I tried to keep it, but eventually I said, "Okay, I give in. Let's minimize it to flashbacks."

McINERNEY: I think sometimes backstories can be distracting. I guess I'm biased toward the idea of the city novel.

BOLLEN: Obviously I wanted it to be a big New York book. Perhaps part of me put in the Ohio sections because I was afraid of writing a straightforward New York novel, because it's already been done so well before. But in the end, it became a New York City novel, free of Ohio, free of a safety net, one big Manhattan high-wire walk.

McINERNEY: What are the New York books that were done so well before?

BOLLEN: Does it sound too flattering to say *Bright Lights, Big City*? I read that when I was 15, in my bedroom, and loved it. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there aren't that many great city books.

McINERNEY: It's funny. There aren't as many as you'd think.

BOLLEN: There's *The House of Mirth*.

McINERNEY: Yes. And Damon Runyon wrote great

short stories about New York. Then you almost have to skip ahead to *The Catcher in the Rye* before you really get to New York novels. I mean, Fitzgerald wrote only marginally about New York.

BOLLEN: I always want to include *The Great Gatsby*, but that's really not a New York City book at all.

McINERNEY: Was that an important book to you? BOLLEN: It was. It's one of the rare books that I read every five years. It's so perfect. It moves like a shark. There's no excess to it. But I never looked to *The Great Gatsby* when I was stuck. There are moments where you do reach out to your favorite novels when you write to try to figure out how a writer managed to capture a scene or move the plot forward. But *Great Gatsby* seemed off limits. Funnily enough, Vendela Vida compared my novel to *Gatsby*, and perhaps she's right in terms of American dreamers and car accidents.

McINERNEY: It's very hard to imitate *The Great Gatsby*. It's very hard to say even how it works. It almost *shouldn't* work. *Gatsby's* background is sort of preposterous, and yet we believe it somehow. You mentioned a shark, but I think it's sort of like a bumblebee. Technically, it shouldn't fly, but somehow it does. I tend to reread that one, too. And, of course, there's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Were there movies that helped to create your image of New York before you came here? I'm always curious what brings people here.

BOLLEN: I was obsessed with New York when I was a kid. I had an aunt and uncle who lived here, who moved away right after 9/11. But I'd visit them in the summers and be a hopeless romantic about the subway system or their view of the Empire State Building. They even took me to see Buster Poindexter perform at a dingy club in the Village when I was about 8. And movies did encourage that. I was an HBO kid. I sat in the family room on the best days of summer glued to the television set. I'd go to the public library and dig through books on Andy Warhol and the Factory for the smallest pictures of these people, just to imagine living among them. I finally moved here in 1996 for college. By then, New York was already said to be over, deep in the Giuliani days, but I feel like I caught a few years of it when there was still something of an underground going on.

McINERNEY: You have an older character named Quinn who talks about the good old days. His stories of the '80s were fairly familiar to me. And I love how William, his young friend, complains, "I'm sick of hearing you talk about how great New York used to be." Do you have that sense of having missed the '80s?

BOLLEN: I do in the way, I think, everyone young does. And it is a little heartbreaking to hear all of those wild stories older friends tell about the city, which you can't access. But, like I said, I'm glad I caught the fumes of it. I remember when going to Avenue A was considered highly dangerous. If you were going to Avenue B, you were basically taking your own life in your hands. Then they started putting ATMs in storefronts, and all that was goodbye. I think that might be one of the themes of *Lightning People*: going to this city expecting that dream life of freaks and bizarre possibilities only to discover that this city doesn't really operate that way.

McINERNEY: It seems like your characters sort of run through their first supply of romance about New York, where they have used up their initial dream of the city. Maybe partly it's a question of them losing a little bit of their faith in themselves.

BOLLEN: It's a condition of their ages, too. They

aren't young and new anymore. I didn't want to write a book about young, fresh, hopeful people here. I wanted to get them when all of that optimism was starting to sour—when there isn't anymore time to reinvent. I think that was because I started writing the book when I turned 30. In my twenties here, I kept meaning to write my first novel, but I was a bit too busy being that reckless, exploring youth. So in some ways I just missed the cut-off of being able to write a true young New York novel. How old were you when you wrote *Bright Lights, Big City*?

McINERNEY: I wrote it when I was about 27, and it came out when I was about 28. I was writing about people in their twenties, and I was writing about the early days of New York. But I suppose for my main character, his faith in the city and himself was being sorely tested over the course of a very brief period of time. I was really writing about the period of '80 and '81 in that book, when the Mudd Club was around. People just assume that because it was published in '84, that it was about 1984, but I was really writing about a period three or four years earlier. It was interesting that at that time, as a novelist, you could deliver cultural news, because there was an underground. There were worlds in New York that weren't relentlessly subjected to the spotlight of journalism. There was really nobody covering that scene. So, at that time, it was possible to surprise people with a subculture, even on the very delayed schedule of publishing a novel. I mean, it takes pretty much a year to publish a novel. But I was sort of able to deliver news, as it were. There were subcultures. There was an avant-garde. There was a downtown scene that was decidedly different from uptown. It's much harder to do that now . . .

BOLLEN: It's become its own industry.

McINERNEY: Yeah. If something is in *Paper* magazine on Wednesday, it's in *Time* magazine by Friday . . .

BOLLEN: And it's already run its course on Facebook and Style.com.

McINERNEY: Yeah. I think it's harder now to capture the zeitgeist, to capture the mood of the city in a novel. I'm curious about the extent to which you feel that September 11th changed your view of the city. Were you here?

BOLLEN: I was here. I was living in Williamsburg. I had an amazing view of the World Trade Center. It did radically shift my view of the city, or my faith in it. And maybe that served as some sort of the death knell for the gleeful, consequence-free, anything-is-possible lifestyle, because of course, anything was possible, we just didn't know anything included that. After 2001, there was still a lot happening, but I believe it all took a much darker, almost deranged tone. Fear crept its way in. And paranoia. I think that had something to do with the fact that everyone witnessed one of the most violent events imaginable, firsthand, and yet most New Yorkers never saw a single dead body. They never saw a drop of blood. There was really no visible human carnage. In a way, that made it less real and very mental, and at the same time more terrifying. Then you're being constantly told that terrorists might poison the water supply or cover the streets in anthrax, so you're expecting (CONTINUED ON PAGE 266)

JAY McINERNEY IS A NEW YORK-BASED WRITER. HIS MOST RECENT BOOK IS *HOW IT ENDED*. HAIR PRODUCTS: WELLA PROFESSIONALS. INCLUDING TEXTURE TOUCH. HAIR: EUGENE SOULEIMAN/STREETERS. MAKEUP: MARK CARRASQUILLO. PRODUCTION: NORTH6. STYLIST ASSISTANTS: KAREN KAISER AND JOSHUA COURTNEY. >See more of CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN on interviewmagazine.com

something horrible around every corner, but nothing ever happens. I think that expectation of the worst, with no end and no delivery, affected the psychology of the city in a very warped way. I remember for a long time it seemed like you were an idiot for choosing to stay in Manhattan. Now that would be hard to express to someone who moved here maybe two years ago.

McNERNEY: Sometimes I think it changed Manhattan permanently, and sometimes I feel that the collective amnesia of the city has pretty much kicked in.

BOLLEN: When I was writing this book, I was thinking a lot about Greek tragedy. And this strange curse that runs through Joseph's family is almost Greek in the way it functions—like Oedipus. But the Greeks really believed in history. They believed that the past had consequences and that you might be punished for the sins of your father. America, and particularly New York, runs on the idea that history doesn't matter. There is no history. There is only the never-ending present. You don't even have your family because you moved here to get away from them, so even that idea of personal history has been cut at the knees. The impulse of writing a twisted family curse for Joseph was perhaps to explore the idea that history could catch up to you—maybe you can't forget, maybe it does eventually come after you. He's really the only person in the book burdened by the past.

McNERNEY: Joseph definitely is, whereas your character William is the opposite.

BOLLEN: He's really the perfect product of New York. This might sound cynical, but I see this as a place where no good deed goes rewarded. But bad deeds are a different story.

McNERNEY: I was intrigued that the character who is guilty of several bad deeds seems to be rewarded. It's a somewhat untraditional moral economy that you have in this book.

BOLLEN: Do you find it hard to kill off a character that you've created? I did at first. It hurt to do away with them after investing so much time. You live with them for so long they're almost like a secret family. But after the first death, there is a weird sadistic pleasure in writing.

McNERNEY: I think, when I'm writing, I have a more clinical view than I do when I'm reading. I like pretending to be God and basically determining the fate of my characters. But as a reader, I'm a sucker. I'm very sentimental. I get upset when people that I like die. And yet I have killed off characters in my books quite heartlessly, and sometimes found that readers were very upset by it.

BOLLEN: Did you ever hear from readers? Did they write you letters or march up to you at a party and say, "How dare you?"

McNERNEY: Yes, both. The main character of my second novel, which is probably my least-known novel—

BOLLEN: *Ransom*. You know, they taught that novel at my high school.

McNERNEY: Well, he dies at the end. Not to spoil the ending, but a lot of readers were very upset with me about that decision, which I eventually felt was inevitable and absolutely the right decision. But I learned a lot about the way that readers invest their emotions in a character. And I feel, as a reader, the same impulses.

BOLLEN: It's funny because characters are killed off in films and television all the time and the audience doesn't react.

McNERNEY: Reading a novel is just a much more involving and intimate experience than the act of watching a film. I mean, you literally get inside of a novelist's head, and you invest many hours to do so.

BOLLEN: It's asking a lot to have people read a book today. It's a lot of work to read. And it's a lot of work to write. It took me five years to write this book, and I did

it without an agent or a book deal or even a friend who I'd trust to read it. And there were weak days where I felt like a giant failure. On your first book, you're just writing blind, and you have no idea if it's any good or total crap. And yet you have to keep writing with some authority, like you know exactly what you're doing and you're in full control.

McNERNEY: I think it's dangerous to think you know what you're writing. I usually don't know, and usually I just discover it in the course of writing. I envy those writers who can outline a beginning, a middle, and end. Fitzgerald supposedly did it. John Irving does. Bret Easton Ellis does. But for me, the writing itself is the process of discovery. I can't see all that far ahead.

BOLLEN: At one point I thought the novel might end in Los Angeles, like all the characters magically find their way across the continent. That would have been a very different book.

McNERNEY: I do want to ask you: Are there any real examples of people on rooftops getting struck by lightning? I like in the preface how you describe these human lightning rods.

BOLLEN: There were. It's actually a fact that the World Trade Center was the highest conductor in the city, and when that was gone there were sporadic lightning deaths. A friend of a friend—someone who was in the band Gang Gang Dance—got struck and killed on his girlfriend's rooftop on the Lower East Side. So in a way those deaths could also be attributed directly to that event.

McNERNEY: How did I not discover this as a *New York Post* reader?

BOLLEN: I know! And, as a writer, that idea of one thing happening because another did—like a game of dominoes—intrigued me.

McNERNEY: Especially in the city, there's much more a sense of interconnectedness.

BOLLEN: I've been trying to figure out what interests me so much about conspiracy theories, and why they're such a big part of the book. Initially I blamed it on growing up Catholic, because I was raised to love Kennedy and maybe I was forced to watch the Zapruder film too many times. But just getting my haircut a month ago, the barbers were talking about the nuclear reactors in Japan and somehow they had decided that it could be a conspiracy about keeping countries bound to oil. I mean, the tsunami as a global corporate conspiracy? I really believe there is something in the nature of a democracy that naturally leads people to distrust the government, to assume because a democracy is built by people just like themselves that there must be secret plots and cover-ups and wizards behind the scenes running the machine.

McNERNEY: Do you know people who are conspiracy theorists about September 11th?

BOLLEN: I did a lot of research for the book in terms of looking at conspiracy websites, and there are plenty out there. But I don't know any hard-core 9/11 truth prophesiers personally.

McNERNEY: It's kind of a sore subject with me. I actually saw both planes hit. I was on the 15th floor of a building that looked out on the World Trade Center. I was struggling to close a shade and the chain got stuck and I was standing on a chair, trying to fix it, and out of the corner of my eye I saw this flash, this plane, and then this plane-like silhouette against the north tower. Anybody who saw that, I think, would be hard-pressed to stick to this conspiracy theory. I also consider it a real disservice to the actual tragedy of September 11th.

BOLLEN: It's a very dark subject, and this obsessive need to reexamine it over and over on endless repeat, looking for impossibilities and faults, is almost like an inability to digest the event for what it is. Like some hiccup in the system that can't accept what happened.

Like it must be something else. It also got mixed up in the distrust people had for the government at the time and the powerlessness they felt in how it was being reported and utilized for other political ends.

McNERNEY: Did you go to the types of conspiracy meetings that you described?

BOLLEN: No. I just kind of winged it.

McNERNEY: It's very convincing, this sort of conspiracy support group.

BOLLEN: It was like a group therapy session gone totally wrong. But I also think every single person's initial reaction in the face of it might be considered a little insane when you think about it. A friend called me that night and asked if I wanted to go to a party. I couldn't believe it.

McNERNEY: There was certainly a lot of irrational behavior in the immediate aftermath. That's kind of what I was trying to write about in *The Good Life*, that period where it was like life during wartime. My first reaction, for about three months, was that I might not ever write fiction again. I think, in retrospect, it was a very silly reaction. My feeling was, "Oh, in the wake of this event, fiction seems sort of meaningless." But the 20th century saw far greater catastrophes than September 11th, as bad as it was, and they didn't render literature or art or music irrelevant. In fact, I think that literature and art help us to understand—sometimes they provide narratives and metaphors for understanding history, for understanding recent catastrophes. Norman Mailer, for some reason, told me, "Wait 10 years. We won't really know what it's all about until then." Your book is *haunted by 9/11* more than it is *about 9/11*, but I'm glad I didn't wait because some of the details would have faded. As you said earlier, people who arrived here two years ago would be hard-pressed to imagine the state of mind in those weeks afterward—the paranoia, the bomb threats, the anthrax, the sense that anything could happen next, and the sense of *carpe diem*, and even the drinking and the sex.

BOLLEN: That was what was so believable about *The Good Life*. I do understand why people would suddenly have affairs and consider abandoning their families for the comfort of strangers. A friend of mine read my book, and there is a scene where one character's close friend is killed. What the character does is go home and manically clean. My friend said, "I don't buy that. The first thing you want to do is have sex after a tragedy like that. That's what the insane reaction would be—not to clean." Then I thought, Did I purposely try to avoid writing a sex scene? I don't think I'm a very strong writer on sex yet.

McNERNEY: That's the hardest. There's nothing worse than when it doesn't work.

BOLLEN: Yes, and it's so easy for it to fail miserably. How embarrassing if it did . . .

McNERNEY: John Updike was one of the few modern writers who was pretty good at it, although he has also been faulted for his sex writing. There's some award they give in England for the worst sex scenes in a novel every year . . .

BOLLEN: Oh god . . . That's a reason never to have a sex scene. You don't want to get that. No one will ever sleep with you again.

McNERNEY: Where do you live in the city?

BOLLEN: I've lived here for 15 years now, and I promised myself I would never live in the East Village. But last year I saw an apartment I loved and now here I am. But I don't like the East Village. It's a bit like Bourbon Street these days.

McNERNEY: I lived in the East Village just before writing *Bright Lights*. I was only at 5th Street and Second Avenue. Second Avenue was almost the border then. East of Second Avenue started to get pretty wild. Jack Henry Abbott killed the waiter not long after he

was at a party at my apartment.

BOLLEN: Mailer got a lot of grief for helping him out of prison. Could you sense that Abbott was a troubled character?

McNERNEY: Yeah, he was very troubled. He was so used to life in prison that he interpreted life outside through the lens of the code of conduct in prison. So when a waiter told him that he couldn't use a bathroom because he wasn't an employee, this was like an affront to his manhood, and it was a dis that had to be met with extreme force. He stabbed this guy! In prison, that's what you do. I knew his editor. His editor was a friend of mine. And Abbott used to basically call up in a rage because he went to the hardware store to try to buy toothpaste and they laughed at him. So it was inevitable. But somehow it just seemed like . . . Honestly, he fit right into the East Village. I mean, people were getting stabbed all the time over there.

BOLLEN: It's not like that now.

McNERNEY: It's funny that so many of us are nostalgic for things like crime and drug abuse . . .

BOLLEN: I know. Why aren't we happy that more of our friends aren't dying? That is a very good thing.

McNERNEY: Crack vials on the street. I remember walking down certain blocks and hearing the crunch of the crack vials irrefoot. Something that you just don't see anymore or hear anymore. It is strange, I guess, that some of us would be nostalgic for that. But what I'm nostalgic for is the idea of an edge. There used to be these fringes of the city where civilization sort of ended, and therefore young people could live cheaply, or open nightclubs or art galleries, or even squat. That fringe moved out to New Jersey and Brooklyn. The whole idea of the metropolis is the centralization of like-minded souls, and when the central real estate becomes too expensive, the dreamers, the young poets, and the artists will go elsewhere . . . You're writing about actors, William and Joseph. Did you ever act?

BOLLEN: No. Thankfully I never caught that bug. But I will tell you, at age 24, when I was horribly poor, working at a magazine, surviving basically on loose change, I did accidentally, by the blind luck of being at the right place and the right time, end up appearing in an American Express commercial. I didn't audition; they just grabbed me and used me as a stand-in. I was on it for half a second, and even then I think you can only see the back of my head. But, magically, like manna from heaven, residual checks in white envelopes started appearing in my mailbox. Week after week, checks written out to me for a hundred dollars, and then a thousand, came in the mail. It was a miracle to me then, and might have saved me from packing up and going somewhere else due to poverty. I ended up with almost 15 grand in residuals because I happened to be in the right place where they were filming. So that is one case of the city still producing some magic, reaching out and saving someone.