

Interview with Nick Poff, author of *The Handyman's Promise*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Nick Poff, who is here to talk about his new novel, "The Handyman's Promise."

Nick Poff is a life-long Hoosier from Indiana. After a long career in radio broadcasting, he decided to pursue his first love: writing stories. He still does occasional on-air work and production. He's been gratified at the enthusiastic response to Ed and Rick, the heroes of The Handyman series, and is pleased to announce the arrival of the third book, "The Handyman's Promise." "Faithful fans will be pleased to find answers to some lingering questions in this latest book," Poff teases. Nick has joined Reader Views previously to be interviewed about the early books in the series and today he will give us a preview of the new book.

Tyler: Welcome, Nick. I'm so glad you could join me for the interview today, and I'm thrilled to hear that the story of Ed and Rick has continued. In case we have any readers who are not already your fans, will you first tell us briefly about the first two books?

Nick: Ah, the recap! Well, the handyman of the books' titles is Ed Stephens, who is indeed a handyman in the small northeastern Indiana town of Porterfield. In "*The Handyman's Dream*," Ed meets his "dream man," Rick Benton, who at that time was a mailman. Ed gets to live out his fantasy of the perfect romance with Rick, which culminates with the two of them deciding to build a life together. "*The Handyman's Reality*," which takes up immediately after the conclusion of "*Dream*," is about their first six months as a committed couple—the adjustments and the compromises a couple goes through to make their relationship work. It's also Ed's wake-up call. He was able to enjoy his fantasy romance, but now he has to learn to accept the reality of his life with Rick, good and bad.

Tyler: What is the focus of this third book that separates it from the previous novels?

Nick: In "*Promise*" the action jumps ahead two years. Essentially I wanted to explore whether Ed and Rick were succeeding as a couple over the longer term. I also rather fancied the idea of a trilogy, so a good deal of this book was about tying up loose ends, and bringing any unfinished business to a satisfying conclusion.

Tyler: Do you have plans to write more novels about the characters?

Nick: (Laughs.) Well, as I said, I wrote "*The Handyman's Promise*" with the idea of wrapping up Ed's story, but the readers have let me know in no uncertain terms that they want more Ed and Rick adventures. That is incredibly flattering, and as a result I have to admit the muse has been whispering some ideas for further stories.

Tyler: Nick, the novels are set in the 1980s. What made you select that decade rather than the current decade as the setting for your books?

Nick: That's a rather long story in itself! In the end, though, I think it comes down to the fact that I first began to think about writing gay fiction back in the 80's. I had a vague idea about the kind of guy I wanted to write about—sort of a Midwestern gay Everyman. It took a long time for that seed to germinate, and when it finally did I had Ed

Stephens. Somehow it seemed appropriate to set the story in the era when the concept first began to settle into my mind.

I'll tell you, since the fans are so eager for more story, I'm glad I set it so far in the past, as I still have a good twenty-five years of potential material for more stories!

Tyler: For this book, you chose to use the word "promise" in the title. What is the significance of that word for you?

Nick: In this book our hero, Ed Stephens, has grown up and accepted the challenges and responsibilities of his life with Rick, their families, and the possible hazards of remaining in Porterfield. Although he doesn't say it in these exact words, Ed's promise to Rick is that he's learned enough about life to know he's ready and eager to continue their journey together. I also like to think Ed's making a promise to himself that he won't let himself down when it comes to the responsibilities and goals he's established.

Many people can be rather cavalier when it comes to promises, but they're important to a guy like Ed. He wouldn't be inclined to make a promise he couldn't keep, so to me it's rather powerful that he's willing to make this promise—spoken or not—to the people in his life that he will be there for them.

And again, what began as simply a dream-come-true kind of romance for Ed has grown into a strong emotional commitment. Unfortunately there a lot of guys who might bail when the going gets tough or boring, so like Mrs. Penfield, Ed's mentor of sorts, I'm proud of Ed and the fact that he's willing to do whatever he needs to make it all work.

Tyler: Let me ask you about Mrs. Penfield. Why did you choose to have an elderly woman become the mentor and friend to Ed? Why not an older man? Why did you feel the need for a mentor figure, as well as one who would end up being a financial benefactor to Ed?

Nick: It may be hard for long-time fans to believe, but Mrs. Penfield wasn't even in what I would refer to as the rough draft of the first book. When I was working on the first official draft of what would become "*The Handyman's Dream*," I began to think about Ed's clients, and how nice it would be for him if there were one he could be completely honest with concerning his life. Somehow the name "Hilda Penfield" jumped out on the page. I liked the sound of it, but I swear to God I didn't know a thing about her until Ed went over to her house in Chapter Seven of "*The Handyman's Dream*" to haul away some old books for her. Everything about Mrs. Penfield—her history, her teaching experience, her house, her fondness for Ed—simply came to me, as though someone or something had downloaded the information into my head. When she spoke her words were beautiful and almost magical. I knew right away she was a keeper. Everything that happened past that first moment has grown organically. So there was very little that was intentional about her, or her role in Ed's life. That's one of the joys of writing this kind of fiction. A character is born and immediately lets you know what his or her place is in the story. I've learned to get out of the way when that happens, and let those characters take the wheel.

As for an older man, I gave that some brief thought, but once Mrs. Penfield was established I decided to wait and see if some older gay man would one day appear in the story. Ed does have his woodworking buddy, Clyde Croasdale, as sort of a mentor/father figure. Their friendship develops over time, and he makes several appearances in "*The Handyman's Promise*." I enjoy the camaraderie between Ed and this older straight man, and I hope the readers do as well.

Tyler: In the novel, Ed and Rick live together and have a commitment, but do they really have a marriage? Obviously, Indiana has not legalized gay marriage so can you really call their relationship a marriage?

Nick: Ed and Rick grew up in an era when the word "marriage" was used as a term to describe the kind of committed relationship they have. They've made the mental leap above and beyond the traditional gender requirements for marriage, as many folks are doing today. I knew a lot of male and female couples back then who referred to their relationships as marriages. Basically, Ed and Rick use that term because they are comfortable with it. Too, I don't recall the idea of gay folks actually obtaining legal marriage as even being on the radar in the early eighties, so Ed and Rick, being the practical guys that they are, visit a lawyer in this book to see what they can legally do to protect themselves and their relationship. And that was something a good many male couples began to do in the early years of the AIDS crisis.

Tyler: Nick, you mentioned above the "possible hazards" of Ed and Rick remaining in Porterfield. What are those hazards, and what made you decide to set the book in a small town rather than a metropolitan area?

Nick: Small towns can be unhappy, sometimes cruel, places for those who are different. The general thought is that gay men who grow up in small towns should pack their bags and flee at the first opportunity. Again, I was the

exception to that rule, and over time I met a good many other men who were as well. The concept of this story—two men building a life together in such a town—is kind of a salute to all the men who chose to stay and stick it out at home.

And again, not all small towns are like that. As the story progresses, a lot of potential venom that could be aimed at Ed is deflected by the fact that he's such a fixture in Porterfield, and is highly respected for his work. I've seen that happen many times. Still, there will always be those who disapprove, and Ed encounters that occasionally. Ed worries that that occasional harassment could snowball into something bigger, and I think that's a legitimate concern, especially during the early years of the AIDS crisis, as readers will discover in "*The Handyman's Promise*."

Tyler: One thing I was struck by in the earlier books was the absence of mention of AIDS, when it is so often the focus of gay fiction. In the second novel, there was just a brief mention of it that made it sound unreal to the characters. How does AIDS play a more significant role in this third novel?

Nick: It all has to do with the time frame of the story. The first mention of some strange new disease that was affecting gay men was in the summer of 1981, midway through the time frame of "*The Handyman's Reality*." Ed, Rick, and their friend Gordy talk about it very much the way it was discussed at the time by those of us who really didn't know much about it. I recall a conversation with some friends that summer where we speculated that it was simply some new kind of venereal disease, and that sooner or later they'd come up with an antibiotic to treat it. That sounds foolish now, but we really didn't have a clue as to what was going on at the beginning.

By the autumn of 1983, the time frame for "*The Handyman's Promise*," we had a name for it, AIDS. It was in the news, and everyone was talking about it in one way or another. Therefore Ed and Rick are more knowledgeable, and have developed a healthy fear of this horrible plague. Overall, though, I think gay men in general were just plain scared. I know I was. Shortly before I began work on this book I received an email from a gentleman in California who highly praised the first two books, and thanked me for keeping any mention of AIDS at a minimum. He concluded with the hope that I would continue to do so in any further books. Well, believe me, I would have been happy to oblige him, but I simply could not write a story about gay men in 1983 without including the grim shadow AIDS had cast by that time. I can only imagine the hell that man in California had been through, and how he was at a point where he'd rather forget about how awful it was. I'd like to forget it, too, but unfortunately the battle is still going on today, so we have to keep talking about it, and we have to look to the past in order to prevent ourselves from making the same mistakes.

However, AIDS is in no way the centerpiece of this book, or even a major storyline. It's just *there*, as it was for all gay men who were looking for answers in 1983.

Tyler: If it's not too personal to ask, are there any autobiographical elements in your novels?

Nick: (Laughs.) Yeah, there are a few. Porterfield is based on the small Indiana town where I grew up, and some of the settings within the story are easily identifiable to people familiar with my hometown. Ed definitely gets his record-collecting fetish from me, and we have amazingly similar taste in music. Norma's family and history are vaguely based on my own family, although I'm always quick to point out that Norma was not based on my own mother. I think if my mom had lived to read these books, though, that she would have gotten a kick out of Norma's salty personality.

Tyler: Nick, one thing I have noticed about gay fiction is a strong emphasis on sex and sexual scenes, and usually, a token character that dies of AIDS. I find your books refreshing because they are more specifically about the relationships of the gay characters. As a writer of gay fiction, what do you feel is your primary goal and how does it differ from other writers of gay fiction?

Nick: Every writer has his or her own inspirations and stories to tell. I made a conscious decision to avoid an emphasis on sex in these stories and concentrate on the relationships developing between the characters. For me, that's just a lot more fascinating, and something of an alternative for readers who wanted to know more about the characters than how physically beautiful they were, and how many sexcapades they could have. I think that gets old pretty fast, but I'm the exception. The erotic books outsell mine by a wide margin. I have to chuckle here as well, because I recently received a very negative review from a reader who seemed to feel quite cheated by "*The Handyman's Dream*," and referred to it as "so much drivel." I'm sure he was disappointed by the lack of sex and melodrama. I'm about half-tempted to slap a warning label on these books that says, "If you're looking for hunky, well-endowed men getting naked every few pages, look elsewhere!"

Tyler: Nick, have you received any negative press or homophobic responses to your work?

Nick: Nope! Not at all. The only negative comments have come from readers who were disappointed with the somewhat PG-13 stories and characters. I knew these books wouldn't appeal to everyone, so I fully expected to receive some very negative reader reviews.

Tyler: Who do you think is your primary audience? Do you have predominantly gay male readers, or a mix of gay and straight, or male and female, young and old readers?

Nick: The majority of my audience consists of gay men, but I have some very dedicated straight female fans as well. I don't want to stereotype here, but a lot of women enjoy a sweet, romantic story, and they've found that in the Handyman books. Straight guys are rare, but there are a few. In "*The Handyman's Dream*," Ed and Rick have a very emotional discussion about anal intercourse without even remotely getting into the actual details. That chapter has a tendency to make straight guys squirm, and they'll say to me, "You got kind of graphic, didn't you?" I can't help but laugh when I hear that, considering how incredibly mild my books are compared to the majority of gay fiction.

Age-wise, I'd say my audience is generally on the older side; folks who have put most of their own youthful melodrama behind them. However, slowly but surely these books are finding a younger audience, and that's encouraging to me.

Tyler: Do you feel homosexuality and gay literature are more accepted today than they were in the early 1980s when your novels take place? And if so, do you think gay literature is consequently changing as a result of that shifting viewpoint in society?

Nick: Oh, absolutely. Living in Indiana I had a hard time in the 80's even finding what little gay fiction was out there, and often found those few titles weren't particularly engaging for me. Now, thanks to changing attitudes, the Internet, and technology in general, there's a both a huge selection and a huge audience.

What I've noticed in some of the gay novels I've read in the past year or so is that you can't even really call them gay novels. They are simply books where the main character happens to be gay. That's a big leap, in my opinion, and definitely a move toward mainstreaming gay characters and their stories, as opposed to keeping them firmly locked in a specific genre.

I can't imagine the Handyman books ever being published in the 1980's, let alone finding such a wide, enthusiastic audience. I occasionally get notes from librarians who write to tell me how pleased they are to have my books in their circulations. Somehow I don't think that would have happened too often in 1983.

Tyler: Which writers, in the gay/lesbian genre, or in general, have influenced you in your writing?

Nick: I think my two primary gay influences were Armistead Maupin and Stephen McCauley. I loved their books. The characters were completely believable to me, and lived through situations I could relate to. Not only that, but their stories were elegantly written, yet very easy to read. I've never been a fan of what I call heavy prose, and a good deal of gay fiction was somewhat locked into that for many years.

In general, my favorite novelist is Anne Tyler, and one of my favorite writers is Bill Bryson. Again, these are two writers who are incredibly literate and talented, but who write in an easily understood, rather common voice. I'm also a fan of the late Shirley Jackson. I can only wish I had her gift with words!

I think I should also mention Richard Peck. As a teenager in the seventies, I loved his young adult books. I suspect that Norma, Ed's mom in the Handyman books, was inspired by some of the crusty, comical characters in his books.

I have a very long list of favorite books, but those are several author names that come up more than a few times on it.

Tyler: Nick, whether you write more books or not about Ed and Rick, do you have plans to write any other books not about these characters, and do you think you will always focus upon gay couples, or will you try your hand at different genres?

Nick: I'd say I would probably stick pretty close to the gay fiction genre. I have a few more stories in me that I would like to write. However, I don't know that I plan to focus so extensively on a couple, as I have done with Ed and Rick. I still want to explore the relationships that gay men develop, but at this point, I'd like to look closer at the strong friendships that develop between gay men. Again, I think other writers have extensively covered the sexual aspect of those relationships, so I'd like to dig deeper into the emotional bonds between these men.

Tyler: Nick, what advice would you give to readers who are specifically gay and perhaps do not have the courage to live as openly as Ed and Rick in your novels? Do you think your characters can serve as role models?

Nick: I get lots of emails from fans that tell me that Ed and Rick are role models for them in the respect of developing the courage to live openly. I present Ed and Rick as two mature men who do their best at accepting life and responsibility for what they are. They aren't perfect; they get scared, and sometimes life gets heavy, but they manage to pull through with the wisdom they've acquired, and with the help of a little humor. I think that's what most gay men are looking for in themselves and in potential partners.

Without getting too preachy about it, I think all gay men have a lot in common, but each individual has very unique experiences. All we can do, I think, is take inspiration where we find it. Things have changed, but in many ways the world is still a very unwelcoming place for us. If I've managed to make a few guys feel better about their own experiences through Ed and Rick's fictional ones, then I'm very grateful. It's my way, I guess, of trying to inject a little warmth into what can be a very cold, forbidding experience.

Tyler: Thank you, Nick, for joining me today for this interview. Before we go, will you let our readers know about your website and what additional information they may find there about "The Handyman's Promise"?

Nick: Readers can find me on the web at both www.nickpoff.com and www.writersmen.com. I have a blog at www.nickpoff.com that goes back several years, and I often reflect on the books and the inspirations for them. I also occasionally comment on my own life, and what's going on with me. For those who enjoy the music I include in the stories, they can find most of the songs at iTunes through Imixes I've created. They need to go to Music, click Imix, and type in either my name or the titles of the books.

Also, I want to mention how thrilled I was recently that ForeWord Magazine gave their Gold award in gay/lesbian fiction to "*The Handyman's Reality*" at their 2007 Book of The Year ceremonies. That's a big honor, and I'm both humbled and excited about it. The recognition I've received from the book community and from the readers themselves has been an incredible gift for me.

Tyler: Congratulations, Nick, on the award. I hope you get some more, and that you'll come back to talk to me again when your next book comes out

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