

Interview with Alan Grossberg, author of *Zudd: No Bargain in Debasement*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Alan Grossberg, who is here to talk about his new book “Zudd: No Bargain in Debasement.”

Alan Grossberg is a wanderer who has traveled throughout Europe and the U.S., been published in “Esquire” and “O. Henry Prize Stories” and then saw his first novel in print, to wide critical praise, while scarcely out of his teens. Today he travels the country in his RV. Besides his new novel “Zudd,” he is the author of “The Endless Refrain.”

Tyler: Welcome, Alan. I’m glad you could join me today. To begin, will you tell us what kind of book “Zudd: No Bargain in Debasement” is? How would you describe the novel—what genre category does it fit into?

Alan: On advice I entered it as “Erotica”, in which category it won an award. Actually it is a serious novel about the pre-Giuliani New York of rampant crime, incivility, anarchy, vandalism, uncontrolled welfare, and entitlements. There are four main characters, with sex unavoidably the unifying thread due to the fact that Catherine, because she is sexually frustrated and feels unfairly deprived, is sex-oriented to the point that she is unable, or unwilling, to have a normal relationship.

Tyler: Will you tell us about Catherine Harlow—what words come to mind to describe her and how would you define her character and personality?

Alan: She has beauty, youth, brains, ambition, a good heart, and a comfortable job full of promise. But she is obsessed with the fact that she is also frigid. Having started out as a working girl, the daughter of divorced alcoholics and lascivious stepfathers, lacking formal education, culturally fragmented if not crippled, she demands unfettered freedom to pursue her vision of what she projects as happiness.

Tyler: Catherine has several men in her life—would you explain those relationships to us please?

Alan: She becomes involved with three men—a distinguished elderly blueblood lecher of refined tastes who is her boss and lives in the penthouse of the windowless eighty-storey corporate building which he owns; a young psychotic custodian who lives in the basement, is intelligent but rudderless, and who needs Catherine for a higher purpose he has concocted involving the human race; and a decent, simpatico, comparatively normal, formally educated Welshman who is her colleague and suitor.

Tyler: You mention above that Catherine is sex-oriented to the point where she cannot have a normal life. Would you say she’s a sex-addict?

Alan: She is sex-obsessed, not an addict. She wants that orgasm. She feels cheated by life because of that deprivation.

Tyler: Alan, what made you decide to name the novel after Zudd? Is he really the main character over Catherine? Where did you get the idea for him?

Alan: I started out with Catherine and old Foote, and Zudd just grew out of a need I felt for dialectical elbow room, for contrast, and for symmetry. I love the idea of a mid-Manhattan troglodyte. Both he and his name are invented. The book is named after him because, though anti-social, he has a forceful personality and is the nearest thing to a demon, a demagogue, an evil guru, a tyrant—name your dread—while remaining disturbingly human. He is also, as are many such powerful personalities, a masochist.

Tyler: Are you able, without spoiling the plot, to tell us more about Zudd’s higher purpose involving the human race, and how he plans to use Catherine for that purpose?

Alan: He plans to immunize himself against the unhealthy chemicals that surround us and invade us and, with Catherine, to start a physically superior human race by opposing the laws of nature.

Tyler: What about the subtitle? What were you trying to say about the novel by using this specific subtitle, “No Bargain in Debasement”?

Alan: Large department stores used to have Bargain Basements, where they sold unwanted items, usually clothes, at a discount. It’s a (humorous) play on words, and represents the moral of the story. Catherine, by the way, enraptured with liberation, intoxicated with the seductive illusions of untrammelled freedom, actually snubs the author-moral at the end. (Maybe there ought to be a sequel!)

Tyler: Alan, while “Zudd” was just published, I understand you had it accepted for publication many years ago. Will you tell us about the history of the manuscript and why it is being published now, so many years later?

Alan: Although I personally sympathize with Catherine, women editors vetoed the novel’s publication by a paperback after its nominal (and enthusiastic) acceptance on the grounds that she was too unlikeable and that the characters were “cardboard,” a description I have never understood. So I published it myself, though it took thirty years. Most male readers of the manuscript, and a few women, had always pressed me to do so.

Tyler: Do you think the reception of the novel in 1976 would be different from now? Is the book relevant to today as much as thirty years ago? Did you do any updating or revising of the book for this new publication?

Alan: Yes, yes, and yes. Different reception because even women are getting tired of the excesses of women’s lib; relevant because NYC may be improved, post-Giuliani, but some things never change, and anyway, *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*—pardon my French. And yes, I rewrote it entirely. The threatened environmental disaster was written with the bi-centenary in mind; then the millenium; and finally, neither.

Tyler: You mentioned most male readers pressed you to release the manuscript? Do you think “Zudd” is more suited for a male than female audience, or at least that men will enjoy it more, and why so?

Alan: Women are likely to feel misrepresented by Catherine. In a different day they were indignant over Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina, not that I’m putting her on that literary level. Men don’t feel they’re seeing a distorted image of themselves. I think maybe women do, and that they resent it. They feel every move she makes, every thought she has, is unnatural and undesirable, self-defeating in a word, and they disapprove. By the way, for “release” I would substitute “try to do something with.” As you see, I did do something finally.

Tyler: What would you say is the message or impression you want readers to have after they finish reading “Zudd”?

Alan: You can’t fight nature. Don’t sacrifice a promising relationship for an imagined entitlement. Don’t prostitute yourself, even for pleasure, even in small steps. And, limitless freedom is an alluring trap—Don’t go there unless you really have to. Catherine feels she really has to. I understand her. But I’m glad she’s not my daughter.

Tyler: I understand that “Zudd” is the third novel you have written. Will you tell us about your other novels, please?

Alan: Long and heavy. This one was short and light. And a pleasure to write. There were about six. Forget them. (Until I rewrite them).

Tyler: Would you say then, Alan, that it’s true what they say—that a piece of writing is never finished, just abandoned?

Alan: Absolutely, as far as novels are concerned. Not short stories.

Tyler: Alan, will you tell us a little bit about your writing process, and also the process of revision, especially for a novel like “Zudd” that you apparently worked on for decades?

Alan: Over those decades I revised it twice: once for the millenium, to fit the plot; then for publication, post-millenium, again to fit the plot, when I decided to go ahead and publish it myself. I don’t think I have ever had a “writing process.” I never had much discipline, for a start. First it was passion, then it was desperation, now it’s just fun. Not caring for fame, and not really needing the money, I’m happy to have a few appreciative readers, the more the merrier.

Tyler: Alan, what would you say are the biggest influences on your writing—literary or otherwise?

Alan: Life is one hell of an influence. Things like penury, defeats, disrespect, the loss of important friends and supporters are examples of that. Authors who left a mark were Steinbeck, Hemingway, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Trollope, Flaubert, I.B.Singer.

Tyler: Besides rewriting your earlier novels, do you have plans for any other books that will be published soon? Would you tell us about them?

Alan: There are four I’d like to work on, all rewrites, haven’t decided which one yet. Your asking the question could give me a push in that direction. Don’t care to talk about them except to say that, unlike Zudd, they’re mostly about me, while Zudd is mostly not.

Tyler: Thank you, Alan, for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information they may find there about “Zudd: No Bargain in Debasement.”

Alan: On my website, pierapress.com, can be found a bit of biographical info, a synopsis of Zudd, an excerpt, and the Reader Views Award logo.

Tyler: Thank you, Alan, for the informative interview. Best of luck with “Zudd” and all your books.

Alan: Thank you.

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