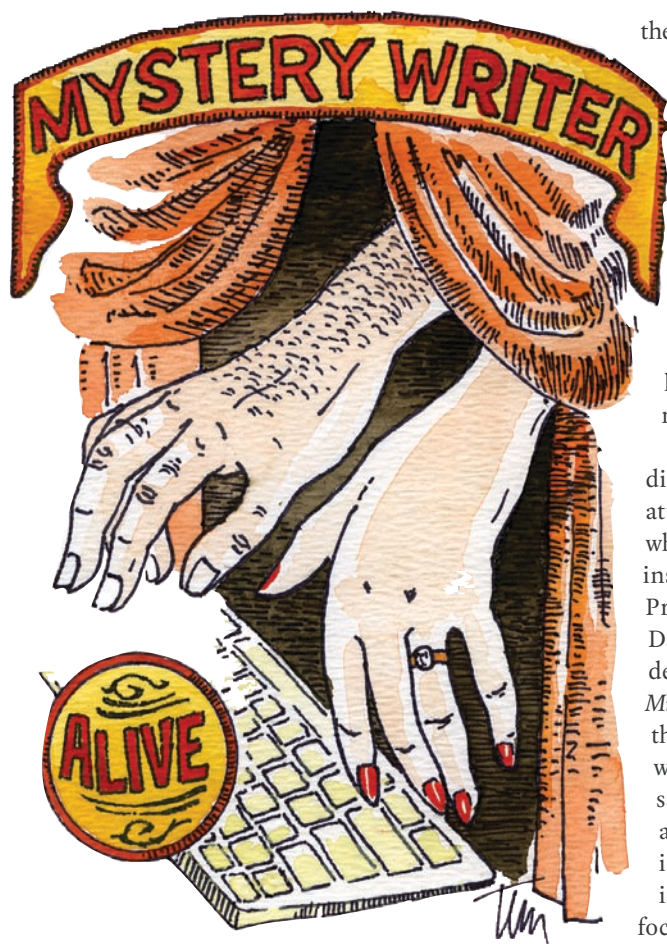


# BUILDING A MYSTERY

Author D.O. Dodd wants attention, but he'll get it his own way



**D**.O. Dodd is not available for in-person interviews. All of his correspondence is conducted via an e-mail address belonging to someone named “Gemma,” who declines to identify herself further. The author of the provocatively titled novel *JEW* (Exile Editions), Dodd goes to great lengths to disguise his identity, avoiding phone interviews, public appearances, and even meetings with his various editors. He also refuses to divulge his gender, even though people who met him early in his career – before he adopted the role of mystery author – insist he is a man. On his website, he states that “producing one’s sexual equipment is irrelevant when the aesthetic nature of literature is inherently androgynous.”

In contrast to reclusive authors like J.D. Salinger and Harper Lee, however, Dodd actively courts publicity, routinely sending cryptic e-mails to media filled with scorn for

the publishing world. Here is Dodd on Yann Martel’s *Beatrice & Virgil*: “His menagerie of animals poised in a fableland built out of the rat-at-tat cartoon squeaks of a much higher-brow disneyfication.” And on the book media: “[It] is a ditched machine, half-heartedly cranked by money’s mediocrity.”

Many in the industry dismiss Dodd as merely an attention seeker, but those who have worked with him insist otherwise. Mercury Press publisher Beverley Daurio, who edited Dodd’s debut novel, *Whispers the Missing Child* (2005), first met the author at a reading (back when he did readings) and says she’d work with him again in an instant. “D.O. is quick-witted, charming, and rather intensely focused within an affable exterior,” she says, adding that

he is also a disciplined writer. Like all of Dodd’s associates, Daurio avoids the use of personal pronouns when referring to him. “When Dodd self-represents as genderless, it feels conceptually whole with the writing, [which is about] the nature of identity and ... how we know ourselves and others,” she says.

## “Concentrating on the particulars of an author’s life is the stuff of freak shows”

Barry Callaghan, Dodd’s editor at Exile, had no prior knowledge of the author until he was e-mailed the manuscript for *JEW*, and has still never met Dodd or spoken to him on the phone. “I find it rather charming in this day and age – when people are desperate for a moment of celebrity – that all we have [in this case] is the book,” says Callaghan, who responds to my inquiries about Dodd with a mixture of amusement and mild irritation. “I’m not trying to belittle what you’re doing,

but I would rather you were calling me to ask about the book.”

Like Dodd’s e-mails, *JEW* is a cryptic work in which an unnamed man awakes to find himself in a concentration camp, buried in a mass grave, and with no memory of his identity. After freeing himself, the man comes upon the corpse of a soldier, a corpse that happens to look just like him. Taking the soldier’s uniform, the man assumes his identity and becomes commander of the camp, perpetuating the act of mass murder. The title is a deliberate provocation in that it is never clear whom it refers to – the protagonist, or his victims.

When reached via “Gemma,” Dodd responds to each of my questions with great care, but little clarity. Where did he grow up? “Canada.” How old is he? “As old as the number of rings in my fingerprints.” How did he start his writing career? “With a pen.” When asked about his writing habits, Dodd claims he sits in front of a mirror, hums until he enters a trance, then is moved “by my people” to a platform suspended over rippling water. “It is from those ripples that I form words through a complex chattering of my teeth that only my trained assistant is capable of translating into words.”

I ask about his gender, but Dodd insists it is a non-issue and that “the true artist speaks in both genders at once.... If a writer cannot master both male and female voices, then that writer is a fraud.”

Despite his dissembling, Dodd comes off as likeable, albeit in a pompous, over-the-top way. He was toying with me, but he didn’t seem to resent my questions or atten-

tion. Ultimately, Dodd insists he has “no aspirations to appear as a hired, low-grade celebrity,” and that an author’s private life should be irrelevant to the works they produce. “A book is a creation that is meant to stand on its own two feet,” he says. “Concentrating on the particulars of an author’s life is the stuff of freak shows.” Dodd may be sincere in that belief, but one thing is clear: he still wants you to buy a ticket. – Sarah Treleaven