

BOOK REVIEW

‘Not My Father’s Son’ by Alan Cumming

By JoAnn Greco | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 16, 2014



CARLO ALLEGRI/REUTERS

Alan Cumming (center) shown performing a number from “Cabaret” during the Tony Awards earlier this year.

As any scan of the Twitter feed of James Franco (2.5 million followers) and the Instagram profile of Kim Kardashian (nearly 20 million devotees) clearly proves, the days of the “I-want-to-be-left-alone” celebrity are long gone. This season a spate of

more literary efforts have and will be tossed into the mix: Lena Dunham, Neil Patrick Harris, and Amy Poehler are all offering confessional pastiches of essay, advice and, glancingly, autobiography.

Although he's won a Tony for his performance as the emcee in "Cabaret," a role he is currently reprising on Broadway, and received a couple of Emmy nominations for a recurring role on "The Good Wife," Scottish actor Alan Cumming is perhaps a less recognizable member of the bunch. His revealing book, "Not My Father's Son," more firmly roots itself in memoir than the others, honing in on the form's often fiendish devotion to picking apart the stuff of dysfunctional families.

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Cumming discovers that he has several strands of such history to untangle after he

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NOT MY FATHER'S SON

Author: Alan Cumming

Publisher: Dey Street

Number of pages: 294 pp.

Book price: \$26.99

Cumming may not be the most subtle of writers, but he's a good one and such honest insights are refreshing and surprising. He's not afraid to portray himself, even as an adult, as frightened, overwhelmed, or wrung out. He repeatedly shows that he can burst into tears at a moment's notice. When he admits, though, to crying while watching movies during long flights — “they all tended to have Sandra Bullock in them” — the cute self-deprecation raises a tiny flag as to this narrator's emotional reliability.

That he has much to be “wobbly” about isn't really in question, though. With unnerving revelations coming fast and furious and a packed film and television schedule that's interrupted by a series of exhausting travels in a quest to unlock some answers, even the sturdiest of souls might crumble. As we watch the “then” Cumming mature and his spine stiffen and we join the “now” version as he begins to understand all that has come before, we're proud of and happy for him.

Throughout, the author shows himself to be a master at crafting chapter endings, ensuring that we stick with him on his dramatic “odyssey.” (A lesson from episodic television, perhaps?) His likable, puckish persona — he refers to himself as a “cheeky chappie” — is ably conveyed by a coyly amusing writing style.

Cumming's tale doesn't pretend to offer any new insights on family dynamics; it's merely a highly personal look at one man's battle with them. When the time comes for an ending, he wraps things up with a satisfying vignette that involves a bit of familial revenge at the expense of the now-deceased Alex. There'll be no more crying for Cumming, we realize — at least until “The Blind Side” pops up on the seat-back screen.

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