The trailblazing writing life of Alexander Chee

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Alexander Chee is best known as a novelist, and after the operatic plot of his "Queen of the Night," readers may be surprised at the quiet intimacy of his first essay collection, "How to Write an Autobiographical Novel." He traverses a breadth of topics, including reading tarot cards, catering parties for William F. Buckley, growing a rose garden, unearthing repressed memories of sexual abuse and even subletting an apartment in Gramercy Park where he met ChloA’ Sevigny in the elevator. As Chee’s gaze turns inward, he beckons readers to experience his private moments with such clarity and honesty that we’re immediately brought into his consciousness. At the same time, he asks us to contemplate the largest questions about identity, sexuality, family, art and war.

Chee is an openly gay, Korean American writer of fiction, and in this trailblazing collection, he delves into his experiences as a young man in San Francisco. A short essay titled "1989" describes an AIDS march: "At the Castro at last, the traffic makes a break in the police line like a cut vein, and we spill out across the intersection into a circle, linking arms and cutting off all four directions of traffic." This is a typical example of Chee's virtuosity and power: With one skillful simile, he reclaims the relationship of blood to HIV/AIDS, changing what flows out of a "cut vein" from a stigmatizing horror to a symbol of strength and protest.

In "Girl," Chee chronicles a Halloween night, and we feel the exhilaration of putting on a new identity. "No one will ask me if I am white or Asian," he writes. "No one will ask me if I am a man or a woman. No one will ask me why I love men." In "After Peter," he writes about a man he once knew, but the essay goes beyond a personal ode to a tribute to all those who have died of the AIDS epidemic.

Though some of these beautiful pieces have been published before, collected together, they build to reveal the journey of a writer. "The Curse" is about 15-year-old Chee spending a leisurely summer in Mexico with a host family. Without classes or any responsibilities, he reached a milestone: "There was something I wanted to feel, and I felt it only when I was writing. I think of this as one of the most important parts of my writer's education -- that when left alone with nothing else to read, I began to tell myself the stories I wanted to read."

By offering the reader such advice in the form of personal revelation, Chee asks us to journey with him, to learn how to write alongside him. In the ensuing essays, Chee reflects on his professional trajectory. In some, like "The Writing Life," which chronicles Chee's class with Annie Dillard at Wesleyan University, he discusses craft explicitly. In others, like "The Rosary," he only alludes to his writerly life.
By the end of this moving collection, we learn through Chee’s experiences that to be a writer is to continuously reconsider the self, to find what drives you even in moments of despair.

Crystal Hana Kim’s debut novel, "If You Leave Me," will be published in August.

On Thursday at 7 p.m., Alexander Chee will be at Politics and Prose at the Wharf, 70 District Sq. SW.