

Master of History

Neil Bartlett plays with the past in his new novel.

"I LOVE A GOOD COSTUME DRAMA AS MUCH AS THE NEXT QUEEN," says author Neil Bartlett. "The color of the light in somebody's bedroom, the detail of a linen tablecloth—those are the things that history is made up of." The 37-year-old Englishman is talking about his sensuously detailed new novel, *The House on Brooke Street*, published in January by Dutton.

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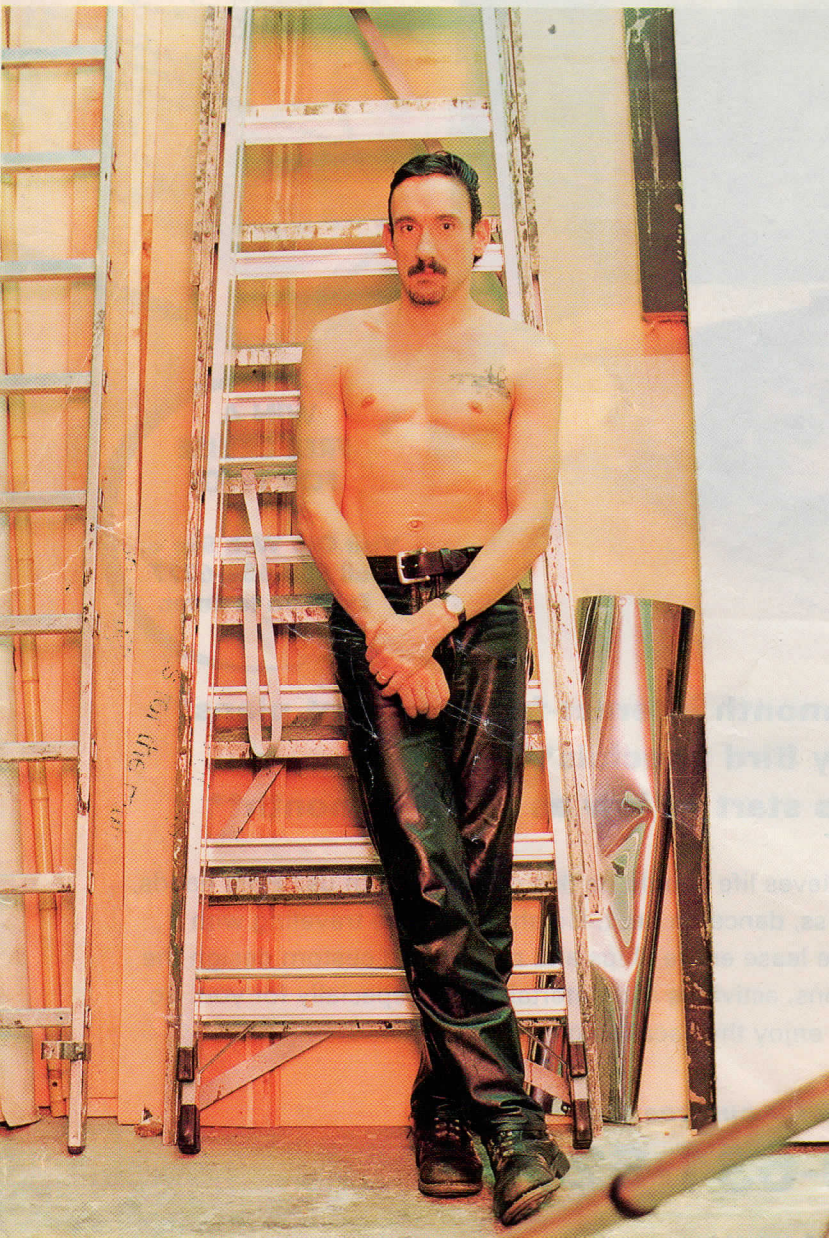
Over a lonely, drunken Christmas holiday in 1956, Mr. Page, a 53-year-old department store clerk, writes down a tale he hasn't dared to tell before: his obsession, dating back 30 years, with a young man who looks uncannily like him and the man's angelic 18-year-old manservant, Gabriel. Constantly fearful of being arrested, given the severely homophobic climate of 1950s London, Mr. Page keeps recalling, each time in more revealing detail, the incidents of the bright spring day in

1923 on which he believes his doppelgänger and the beautiful Gabriel flouted social convention and forged a new life for themselves. "If somebody has lived for 30 years with a frozen heart, it's what happens when the ice begins to melt," says Bartlett of his terrified narrator.

In America, Bartlett is known almost solely for his writing; his first novel, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*, about a gay marriage, was hailed in 1991 by Edmund White as "the best gay book of the year." But in London he wears several hats. He's a well-known avant-garde performance artist, a translator of French classical drama, and the artistic director of London's Lyric Theatre Hammersmith, where he recently revived his acclaimed music-theater piece *Sarrasine*, based on a Balzac story about Europe's last surviving castrato.

"Writing, for me, is a bit like tuning the dial on a radio," says Bartlett. "If I can get the tuning right, the story and the words just come out because they are somehow locked into these places." Traversing streets and landmarks in London that still exist today, Bartlett uncovers a forgotten past in the new novel. This fascination with history runs through all Bartlett's work—what he describes as the "intersections between the past and the present." While a student at Oxford, Bartlett created his first performance-art piece by holding a séance in the rooms Oscar Wilde once occupied there. (The British press later dubbed him "Oscar Wilde in leathers.") Bartlett returned to Wilde in his remarkable nonfiction work, *Who Was That Man?*, examining the great dandy's relationship to the homosexual demimonde of London in the 1890s through the prism of his own perspective as a gay man living in 1980s London.

Similarly, *Brooke Street* is also about "connections," and not just about how repressed the '50s were, Bartlett insists. For instance, he's interested in where the two lovers in Mr. Page's tale escape to. "The real questions are about the future—what's coming, what's possible, what's not," he says. "Mr. Page's future is our present." —GERARD RAYMOND



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