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MacLeish Sq.

A NOVEL BY

Dennis Must

MacLeish Sq. is a tale, real or imagined, of awakened remorse and familial longing recounted by an aging recluse when his life is abruptly reversed by a young visitor—captive to a mythical past of his own creation—who insinuates that he and the narrator are unlikely strangers.

John Proctor, about to turn seventy, spies a disconsolate young man eyeing him from outside his remote studio window. Invited inside from the bitter cold and fed dinner, the visitor, who calls himself Eli, implies that he is no stranger to the man, having been told by his grandmother that “you might take me in.” Astonished to learn that the woman was his wife who decades earlier had aborted their marriage, which lasted “but the length of a wedding candle,” the narrator ruefully explains he has since relished living alone by making no lasting connections to anybody or anything. Whereupon Eli confides, “She also said you had profaned my mother,” the daughter John Proctor never knew he had. Thus commences *MacLeish Sq.*, a tale of awakened remorse and familial longing recounted by an aging recluse when his life is abruptly upturned by the young visitor—captive to a mythical past of his own creation—who intimates that he and the narrator are unlikely strangers. Their unresolved relationship ultimately challenges the reader to question if he and his coincidental guest are one and the same . . . that Eli may be who the narrator has carefully hidden from himself throughout his adult life.

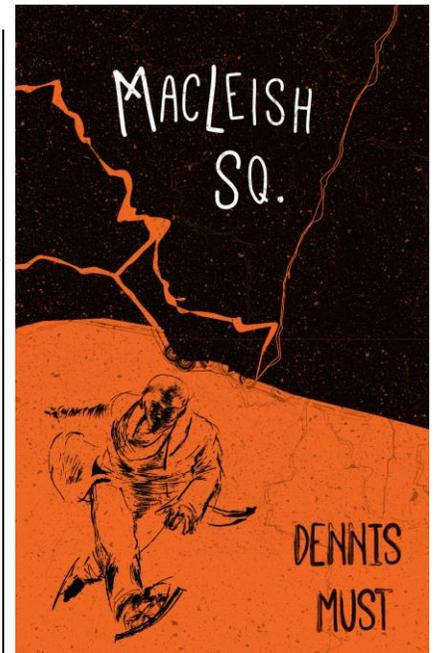
ADVANCE PRAISE

“*MacLeish Sq.* is a compelling psychological novel about personal identity, about loss, about delusion, and about the power of literature, of story, to make sense of one’s life. This is a world of lost souls. In a work heavily imbued with the unreal, reminiscent at times of Poe, Must’s two doppelganger protagonists, fractured and alienated, wrestle with their haunted pasts in pursuit of authentic selfhood. A masterful work of fiction.”

—Jack Smith, author of *If Winter Comes*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Must is the author of three novels: *Brother Carnival* (Red Hen Press 2018), *Hush Now, Don’t Explain* (Coffetown Press 2014), and *The World’s Smallest Bible* (Red Hen Press 2014); as well as three short story collections: *Going Dark* (Coffetown Press 2016), *Oh, Don’t Ask Why* (Red Hen Press 2007), and *Banjo Grease* (Creative Arts Book Company 2000 and Red Hen Press 2019). He won the 2014 Dactyl Foundation Literary Fiction Award for *Hush Now, Don’t Explain*; in addition, he was a finalist in the 2019 Next Generation Indie Book Awards for *Banjo Grease*, the 2016 International Book Awards for *Going Dark*, and the 2014 USA Best Book Award in Literary Fiction for *The World’s Smallest Bible*. A member of the Authors Guild, his plays have been produced off-off-Broadway. He resides with his wife in Salem, Massachusetts.



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MORE PRAISE FOR *MACLEISH SQ.*

“*MacLeish Sq.* approaches mythic status in which time, character, past, present, alive, dead—just a few of the literary polarities inhabiting this writing—interact at a level no reader can accept without relinquishing his/her own sense of person and being. Interweaving Dante, Melville, Hawthorne, and Pirandello into a single narrative that seizes the essence of each, Must puts them together with such skill that the author lives on par with the masters. It will take an honest reader to admit—I have never read anything like this.”

—Jack Remick, author of *Gabriela and the Widow*

FROM *MACLEISH SQ.*

The layers of separation between the young man and myself were incalculable. Except they weren't.

“Was there an Uncle Paul in *our* family?” he asked.

“Had my story convinced you that he was real?” I replied.

“It's why I ask.”

“Then he was. Alive as the voice at the foot of your bed.”

Eli nodded as if he understood.

“The white garments,” he said, “it's how my father will be dressed when we meet, isn't it?”

I couldn't respond.

Lifting his dog-eared copy of *Moby-Dick* from his bedside, he read:

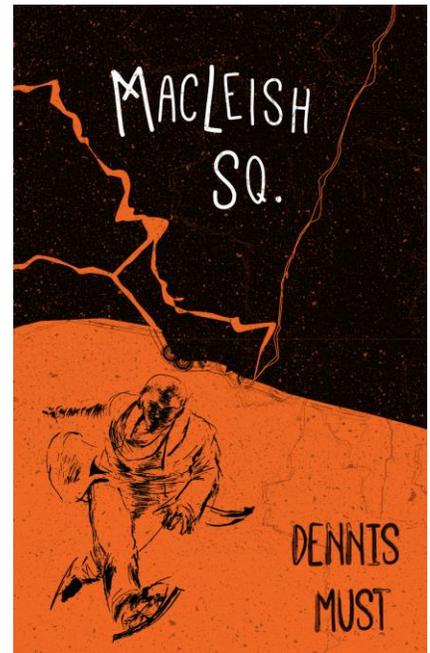
And from the pallor of the dead, we borrow the expressive hue of the shroud in which we wrap them. Not even in our superstitions do we fail to throw the same snowy mantle round our phantoms; all ghosts rising in a milk-white fog—Yea, while these terrors seize us, let us add that even the kind of terrors, when personified by the evangelist, rides on his pallid horse. (Revelation 6:8: “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.”)

I struggled to not be overcome by Eli's darkness and couldn't help but recall Ishmael describing Starbuck, *Pequod's* first mate, ignite a lamp and hand it to his squire, Queequeg, as a “standard bearer of this forlorn hope” while they pursued harpooning the White Whale.

There, then, he sat, holding the imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness. There, then, he sat, the sign and symbol of a man without faith, hopelessly holding up hope in the midst of despair.

In this very moment, I, John Proctor, saw myself as Queequeg . . . for like Ishmael, I had come to view the universe as a “vast practical joke.” Yet how could I not hold the lit “imbecile” candle before the young man?

Was Eli, in the end, destined to be my lifebuoy?



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