

## TALKING WITH CHRISTOPHER JOHN CAMPION

FROM BELLEVUE TO WELLVILLE

# Days of wine and neuroses

BY AILEEN JACOBSON  
Special to Newsday

Christopher John Campion grew up in Huntington in a music-loving Irish-Catholic family. In high school he was the lead singer for the Knockout Drops, a rock band he formed with local teens Tom Licameli and Phil Mastrangelo. After college, the three rented a ramshackle house near the Huntington train station and on weekends played Manhattan clubs like The Bitter End. Campion, now 43, held a long series of odd jobs — where he often showed up drunk. The Drops toured the country, opening for better-known acts, as Campion added cocaine and other vices to his lifestyle.

In his sharply humorous new book, **“Escape From Bellevue: A Dive Bar Odyssey”** (Gotham, \$26), Campion traces his life as a musician, alcoholic and patient in the psychiatric ward of Manhattan’s Bellevue Hospital, which he entered for the first of three visits after descending into what he writes was “a daily diet of disappointment, booze, and blow” and “suicidal rants.” He began telling his story in 2005 in an Off-Broadway musi-

cal, also titled “Escape From Bellevue.” He spoke to us by phone from his West Village apartment.

### Do you still visit Long Island?

My folks live out there, and I adore Huntington. Tom Licameli has a recording studio, Kaleidoscope Soundworks, right in town. We’re in the middle of tracking a new album, to put out next year.

### I’m not familiar with one Huntington bar where your band played. The Tuskaroo Lounge?

I changed names in certain places — particularly if there was any felonious activity.

### How did you come to write the show that led to this book?

In 2003, into 2004, we were touring in the U.K. I was always in the habit of talking between songs, chatting up the crowd. On the flight back, we decided to marry all that under one roof, the monologues and the songs.



PHOTO BY CHRIS CASSIDY



### Horton Foote Jr. was your original director?

Horton owned a tavern on Jane Street, near

where I live. He was a good friend of mine, and I knew he had years in the theater as an actor and director. He came to see an early show. I hadn’t scripted it yet, and he said, “I think we have something here.”

### Did you meet his father [prize-winning writer Horton Foote Sr., who died last month]?

I did. He said he thought I had a real ear for dialogue. He said, “Chris, I can tell you’re a real eavesdropper. That’s a good thing to be when you’re a writer.”

### How did your play turn into a book?

I was on WSUV radio, promoting the show, talking to the morning DJ, and an agent heard me and called me in for a meeting. I had to write up a 50-page proposal. It was a pain in the arse.

### Will the show have another life?

For now, we’re doing a kind of hybrid show with the readings. There is also a CD. The theater show, the book, the CD — it’s sort of like by air, sea and land. We might develop some sort of floor waxer after this. Or maybe a men’s shaving product.

Christopher John Campion and the Knockout Drops will be at Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., in Huntington, Saturday at 7 p.m. Call 631-271-1442 for more information.

# Lizards and short stories of many colors

**EVERYTHING RAVAGED, EVERYTHING BURNED**, by Wells Tower. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 242 pp., \$24.

BY JIM RULAND  
Los Angeles Times

In the title story of his debut collection, “Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned,” Wells Tower uses contemporary American idiom to tell the story of a Viking having second thoughts about his career as a plunderer and pillager.

It’s a weirdly empathetic and altogether unforgettable tale, but once you get past the absurdity of characters with names like Naddod the Norwegian Monk and Djarf Fairhair talking like teenagers around a game of Dungeons and Dragons, the story is fairly conventional: A young man in love must choose between the safety of the life he knows — the perils of long sea voyages and raiding villages notwithstanding — and the unknown terrors of raising a family.

For all the literary pyrotechnics on display in this curious narrative (first published in the literary magazine Fence in 2002), the rest of the stories are surprisingly straightforward. In fact, Tower’s skill at things like exposition and characterization mark him as almost old-fashioned.

Tower adeptly tackles all manner of familial conflicts: father vs. son, brother vs. brother, husband vs. wife, boy vs. stepfather; in other words, the world. The stories are set in locales scattered across the country, yet Tower displays the authority of a regional writer:

“He crossed the cockeyed patio. Tiny lizards scattered from his path. He followed the sound of waves to the end of the yard, through a stand of pine trees, limbless and spectral. He stepped from the pines onto a road paved with oyster shells whose brightness in the morning light made his eyes clench up.”

It’s hard to imagine anyone, much less a literary-minded fellow, paying such loving attention to coastal Florida.

Tower brings his keen powers of observation to bear on the human form as well. In “Executors of Important Energies,” a hustler’s broken front tooth is described as “a tiny gray guillotine.” A tall girl with too much makeup on in “Down Through the Valley” is “a bleached giraffe in tight jeans.”

Tower’s prose is a welcome reminder that the first job of the fiction writer is to introduce the reader to worlds both new and familiar in ways they wouldn’t have arrived at on their own.

The collection’s finest story, “On the Show,” begins with the portentous “Now it’s dark,” and proceeds with the sun setting on a traveling carnival show.

The sky “glows hyena brown” as egrets take flight over a drainage canal. A lizard, a “Florida anole, cocked on the shoulder of

the propane tank beside the service window, slips down the tank’s enamel face into a crescent of deep rust.”

The surface of the rusting tank prompts the lizard into changing colors, but it’s a trick.

“Against the lizard’s belly, the rust’s soothing friction offers an illusion of heat, and the lizard’s hide goes from the color of a new leaf to the color of a dead one.” This cinematic opening, full of garish colors and things not quite what they seem, introduces an unput-downable whodunit that centers on the molestation of a young boy.

Why Tower had to wait so many years for his debut is anyone’s guess, but one suspects we’ll be hearing his name — which invokes prose that is both soaring and deep — for a long time to come.



## THIS WEEK

Readings & events on LI

### Monday

**Marie Osmond** signs copies of her memoir, “*Might as Well Laugh About It Now*” (NAL). At 7:30 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 600 Smith Haven Mall, Lake Grove; 631-724-0341.

### Tuesday

**Dom Scala**, Adelphi baseball coach and former Yankee bullpen coach, discusses “*One on One Baseball*” (McGraw-Hill). At 7 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 1542 Northern Blvd., Manhasset; 516-365-6723.

### Wednesday

Meet **Kathie Lee Gifford**, who will sign copies of “*Just*

When I Thought I’d  
Dropped My Last Egg” (Random House).

At 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442.



### Thursday

**Howard Megdal** speaks about “*The Baseball Talmud*” (Collins), his exploration of Jews and America’s pastime. 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442.

### Friday

Historian **David Contosta** reads from “*Rebel Giants: The Revolutionary Lives of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin*” (Prometheus). 7 p.m., Book Revue, 313 New York Ave., Huntington; 631-271-1442.

### Saturday

**Countess LuAnn de Lesseps**, from “*The Real Housewives of New York City*,” signs copies of “*Class With the Countess*” (Gotham). 2 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 600 Smith Haven Mall, Lake Grove; 631-724-0341.



**Grace Schulman**, editor of “*The Poems of Marianne Moore*” (Penguin Classics), discusses the poet. At 6 p.m., Canio’s Books, 290 Main St., Sag Harbor; 631-725-4926.