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THE ARTS

March 06, 2008

Backspin: Charles Crosby's new novel

Charles Crosby serves up dark humour with with his new novel, *Backspin*

by **Kate Watson**

Chances are you've never met anyone like Ollie Wood. In his former life as a Canadian sports hero, Ollie was the toast of the professional tennis circuit. Back then, he enjoyed all the perks that go with the job---the money, the limos and Lear jets, the drugs, the sex with models, movie stars and other hot women.



But a string of bad decisions (or in Ollie's not-so-humble opinion, bad luck) reduced him to a broken-down shadow of his former self, dragging his sorry ass and his crazy cat from backwater-town to backwater-town on the tennis Futures circuit.

Writing in his journal, Ollie Wood is the main and indomitable protagonist in the new novel, *Backspin*, by Halifax novelist, playwright and tennis enthusiast Charles Crosby.

Now that the money has dried up, Ollie begs, borrows or, more often, steals. His means of transport is far from glamorous---bus, stolen car, hopped freight train or a lift from his best friend, a defrocked, dope-smoking priest who's now more likely to be smuggling drugs than snorting them. And while there's still plenty of sex, "drunk" or "fat" are now the adjectives he most frequently applies to his conquests.

However, Ollie is nothing if not a survivor and he believes, against all odds, that he has one more shot at the brass ring of tennis---the US Open.

Crosby, who set his first novel, *italics, mine*, in Halifax, says he conceived of

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Backspin as more of a road trip novel. "With *Backspin* it's not really important where Ollie comes from, other than that it had to be somewhere in Canada. That was the only way I could make it credible that this washed-up tennis player would still be getting wild cards to some of these events," explains Crosby over a cup of hot chocolate at a local coffee house.

"I just think it would have felt somehow gratuitous if I'd set it in Halifax."

Readers will find the tone of *Backspin* very different from that of *italics*, *mine* warns Crosby, who says his first book, which dealt with a man with obsessive compulsive disorder and a seamy---steamy---sexual relationship, was much darker than this second book. He describes *Backspin*, published by Vancouver's Now Or Never Publishing, as "absurdist" and filled with "twisted humour."

"There are points in the book that require a kind of suspension of disbelief, but I think that's part of the fun of this story," says Crosby. "In some ways it's the silliest thing that I've ever written and it's probably not as much as a critics' book as *italics*, *mine* [which was nominated for the Margaret and John Savage First Book Award last year], but to me, that doesn't matter."

Crosby admits that Ollie is not always a likeable protagonist. (Take, for instance, a scene that begins with Ollie saying, "I try not to steal, but sometimes it's necessary," and ends with Ollie mugging an old lady who can swear a blue-streak. It's laugh-out-loud funny, but it doesn't exactly endear the hero to the reader.)

"I really didn't want the reader to be able to settle on an opinion of Ollie. Sometimes it seems like he's a victim of circumstance and of his horrible childhood, and sometimes it seems he is just a big ass."

Still, it's obvious that Crosby himself likes Ollie, who the author describes as a character that he has "lived with in my head for a number of years"; at least long enough to give him something that Crosby generally steers clear of: a happy ending.

Without giving away any important details, suffice it to say that Ollie's perseverance pays off after a fashion and that by the end of the book he is well on the way to a kind of happily-ever-after.

"My plays generally end on a sad or anti-climactic note, because I really don't like to play to people's expectations. So I really surprised myself by giving this book a happy ending.

"I think I just got really attached to Ollie. He's the kind of guy who just is who he is, and I didn't want to soften him. But anybody that can push through the kind of shit



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