

LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

Desperate to Connect

By Jung Yun

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IN THE SUMMER OF 2010, before his freshman year at Rutgers University, Dharun Ravi searched the internet for information about the boy he'd been assigned to share a room with. Using the first half of his new roommate's email address — keybowvio — Ravi discovered old Yahoo posts about fish tanks and playing the violin, questions about asthma on a health forum, and requests for information about anti-virus software. Then he stumbled upon a discussion thread that keybowvio had started on Justusboys, a gay pornography site. Ravi tweeted a link to the site, followed by “wtf” and “Found out my roommate is gay.”

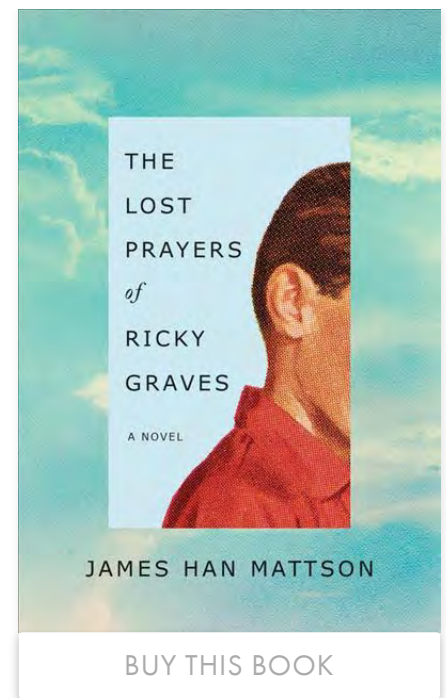
The Lost Prayers of Ricky Graves

By James Han Mattson

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Three weeks into their first semester, Ravi secretly recorded his roommate kissing another man in their dorm room. Again, he took to Twitter with his thoughts: “Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into molly’s room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay.” While the clipped syntax, lower case “m” in “Molly,” and deadpan “yay” reflect a certain type of online informality favored by many millennials, the careless tone of Ravi’s tweet belied the gravity of his actions. Three days after this incident, his roommate, 18-year-old Tyler Clementi, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge.

James Han Mattson’s thoughtful debut novel, *The Lost Prayers of Ricky Graves*, evokes the heartbreak of the Clementi case by imagining the life and death of a closeted gay teenager in rural New England. After a classmate posts a compromising photo of Ricky Graves online, Ricky shoots him and a second classmate before turning his gun on himself. The novel picks up several months after the murder-suicide when Ricky’s older sister, Alyssa, moves back to their small New Hampshire hometown. The reporters who flocked to El Monte Springs to cover the shooting have since departed, but an air of indictment remains. Alyssa, a tough, homespun realist who often seems wiser than her 25 years, is quick to understand why: “It’s not like [Ricky] was in a car accident or something else that wasn’t really newsworthy,” she says. “If that’d been the case, people would’ve talked about his shortened future or whatever, but in this case? No. They just wanted to place blame somewhere. Guns. Parents. Education. Technology. Small-town life. Homophobia. High school politics. You name it.”



At first, Alyssa feels good about her decision to leave Boston and move back home. Despite being pregnant, unemployed, broke, and nearly friendless, she believes she has a duty to help her mother, Harriet, move on from Ricky's death, but she finds it much harder than she expected.

I guess I just didn't realize how terrible it would be being back, being in the house, seeing all the rooms that Ricky used to be in. It was really bad for my mom: she couldn't go even a second without saying something like, "Remember when Ricky..." and I think for the most part a lot of these rememberings weren't really all that true, just nice memories my mom wanted to have.

Memory is one of the novel's key themes — not only how people remember the dead, but how selectively they filter their remembrances. Alyssa finds herself sugarcoating the way she reacted when young Ricky snuck up on her from behind and tugged on her shirt while she was applying mascara. Initially, Alyssa remembers that she yelled at him, "but not that much," and then picked him up and shook him until he laughed. But later, she realizes that she actually screamed at Ricky, furious with him for nearly blinding her, and then struck him across the face. When Alyssa allows herself to acknowledge that memories are often faulty, a different record of their sibling relationship emerges, one in which she was frequently absent, uninterested, or unsympathetic.

Unlike the Graveses, Jeremy Little doesn't have the luxury of conjuring up pleasant false memories about his interactions with Ricky. About a year before the shooting, he and Ricky met and corresponded on Man-Date, a chat website for gay men. Jeremy has a full

transcript of their relationship, from start to finish, which serves as a reminder of how often Ricky reached out for help, albeit obliquely. In many ways, the Ricky Graves who appears in these transcripts is the most painful to observe, given his obvious desire to be someone else, to be someone whom others liked. Initially, he lied to Jeremy, passing himself off as an older college student who lived alone. The tone of his messages was friendly and curious, almost to a fault, and he wore his small-town roots on his sleeve, always quick to assume that Jeremy, a controller in San Francisco, lived a more interesting life. Ricky clearly wanted more out of the relationship, inviting Jeremy to visit him in New Hampshire several times. But when Ricky sent illicit photos of himself and didn't receive a timely reply, the transcript reveals his underlying capacity for both embarrassment and rage.

Rickyg9999: hello????

Rickyg9999: u srsly ignoring me now?? am I that gross to look at??

Rickyg9999: u serious??

Rickyg9999: well fuck you then

Rickyg9999: you should watch out, kiddie porn and all

Throughout this novel, Mattson engages in an almost forensic mode of storytelling, recreating the last troubled year of Ricky's life by alternating multiple forms of digital media with first-person narratives of various individuals who knew Ricky. In addition to Alyssa and Jeremy, we see chapters narrated by Corky Meeks, Alyssa's ex-boyfriend and Ricky's self-appointed mentor; Mark McVitry, the second shooting victim who survived; and Claire Chang, Ricky's classmate and possibly only face-to-face friend. We also see Jeremy's Man-Date transcripts and Harriet's email exchanges

with Victoria Gorman, a self-help book author. Mattson moves seamlessly from one character to another, one form of media to the next, creating a multifaceted look at a sensitive young man whose sexuality is an open secret and a justification for abuse among his closed-minded peers. While I found myself more drawn to the narratives involving the adults in Ricky's life, there's a scene in which Mark, Claire, Alyssa, Corky, and Jeremy all converge in the same place that's both unexpected and supremely well executed.

Not to be forgotten is the email trail between Harriet Graves and Victoria Gorman, which some professional writers may find familiar and unsettling. In the first message, Harriet is delighted to receive a reply from her favorite author. She then proceeds to send a cringe-inducing succession of messages that become more revealing and personal over time. While Harriet's emails eventually resemble letters — long and newsy with updates on Ricky, her suspicions that he's gay, her plans for Christmas, and her dream of writing a self-help book like Victoria — the replies she receives become ever shorter until Victoria stops replying altogether. Through these messages, we learn that Ricky wasn't the only one who felt desperate to connect. We also see how the internet allows people to imagine a closeness that simply isn't there. Harriet writes:

Hope I'm not bugging you with all my emails! I'm finding that even just writing to you serves as an inspiration. It's the little things, I guess. Even if I don't get a response right away, I'm finding it like therapy to write about some things in my life this way.

These textual artifacts of Harriet's "relationship" with Victoria reinforce a point once made by Jeremy's ex-boyfriend, Craig, who was deeply skeptical of electronic interaction. To justify his decision to cancel his social media accounts and swear off all online communication, Craig focused on the shallowness and toxicity of the medium: "Achievements become 'likes.' Thoughts become 'shares.' Emotions become comments at the bottom of a video. It's a digital tapestry of unanswered prayers, and if you look really close at it all, you see this enormous wall of human misery."

One of the common sources of misery for the characters in this novel is the guilt they feel about their interactions with Ricky, which exponentially compounds their grief. Alyssa confides in Jeremy that she was the one who told Ricky where their mother hid her gun. Her reasoning for doing so, at the time, was innocuous and unthinking: "I don't believe in having a gun in the house without everyone knowing where it is. Just seems wrong. But you know how it makes me *feel*? I mean, can you *imagine*?" Harriet worked overtime in order to buy a laptop for Ricky as his Christmas gift, thinking it could be useful for school work and also bring him out of his shell. While the laptop did help in these areas, it also enabled him to engage in social media, which played an important part in his undoing. Corky, meanwhile, encouraged Ricky to stop being the victim of pranks at camp by getting even with his tormentors, unwittingly awakening something inside Ricky that he'd long repressed. Corky recalls what happened after Ricky played a harmless prank on his bunkmates:

I'd expected some laughter maybe. Maybe some contentment, satisfaction, smugness. But what I

saw [on Ricky's face] was menace. Like a serious power trip gone bad. For a second he looked like he was snarling, like some rabid animal, and his little chest was heaving up and down, up and down. I didn't like that look one bit, so I was relieved when it turned into something like sadness [...] He mouthed, *Not gonna be embarrassed again*. And this gave me the fucking chills.

Mattson fully inhabits the characters who come together to render Ricky's last year of life, and he punches hard in every scene, evoking feelings of anger and regret that any teen should ever be bullied or ostracized because of his sexuality. He also manages to create a palpable aura of suspense, backtracking into the events that led to the shooting. Ultimately, however, the real tension of *The Lost Prayers of Ricky Graves* doesn't come from discovering why Ricky took his classmate's life and his own, but from learning about the desperate, aching loneliness of a young man with whom many interacted but few ever really knew.

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Jung Yun is the author of Shelter.
