



Dogfight, A Love Story

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What Jonathan Lethem did for Brooklyn, Matt Burgess does for Queens in this exuberant and brilliant debut novel about a young drug dealer having a very bad weekend.

Alfredo Batista has some worries. Okay, a lot of worries. His older brother, Jose—sorry, Tariq—is returning from a stretch in prison after an unsuccessful robbery, a burglary that Alfredo was supposed to be part of. So now everyone thinks Alfredo snitched on his brother, which may have something to do with the fact that Alfredo is now dating Tariq's ex-girlfriend, Isabel, who is eight months pregnant. Tariq's violent streak is probably the #1 worry on Alfredo's list.

Also, he needs to steal a pit bull. For the homecoming dogfight.

Burgess brings to life the rich and vivid milieu of his hometown native Queens in all its glorious variety. Here is the real New York, a place where Pakistanis, Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Anglos, African Americans, and West Indians scrap and mingle and love. But the real star here is Burgess's incredible ear for language—the voices of his characters leap off the page in riotous, spot-on dialogue. The outer boroughs have their own language, where a polite greeting is fraught with menace, and an insult can be the expression of the most tender love.

With a story as intricately plotted as a Shakespearean comedy—or revenge tragedy, for that matter—and an electrically colloquial prose style, *Dogfight, a Love Story* establishes Matt Burgess as an exuberant new voice in contemporary literature. The great Queens novel has arrived.

Dogfight, A Love Story Details

Date : Published September 21st 2010 by Doubleday (first published January 1st 2010)

ISBN : 9780385532983

Author : Matt Burgess

Format : Hardcover 304 pages

Genre : Fiction, Young Adult

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From Reader Review *Dogfight, A Love Story* for online ebook

Kara Jorge says

I can imagine literary critics everywhere gushing and blubbing as they turn the pages of this book because, quite frankly, I hated it. I was hoping for an entertaining crime novel with some humor between its pages, and got mired in a literary snoozefest instead. I'm sure there are readers out there who love this sort of thing, but I'm not one of them.

Alfredo Batista is worried, now that his brother Jose Jr., who renamed himself Tariq after he turned Muslim in prison, is coming home. Rumors have abounded through their Queens neighborhood that Alfredo sold out his brother, but that isn't Alfredo's greatest concern. His apprehension arises out of the fact that he stole his brother's girlfriend and got her pregnant, and since she's eight months along, there's no hiding it. In order to appease Tariq, Alfredo decides to get hold of some Ecstasy and host a dog fight in his honor.

Unfortunately, the drug dealer he steals from and injures has some nasty connections, and now Alfredo has something else to worry about, not to mention his difficulties in obtaining a dog for the fight. The story plods along, following every single stray thought of the characters, as Alfredo worries about everything, his girlfriend Isabel worries about her unborn baby and what Tariq will do, and everyone else whose point of view is highlighted simply has wandering thoughts. A story that took place over just a couple of days felt like it dragged out over years, or maybe that was just because I had to force myself to read it.

I'm sure somewhere in this massive pile of useless internal ramblings there was something that I was supposed to find touching, but I didn't feel it. I disliked every last one of the characters and felt no sympathy toward any of them. Tariq was a predator, Alfredo an idiot, and Isabel weak. And this story simply dragged on so slowly, it was torture. It's safe to say I won't be looking for any more gems from this author, because this book was just not my cup of tea.

Destiny says

More like "A Like Story"

Dogfight, A Love Story by Matt Burgess, in my opinion was "OK." I say that because, overall, I have mixed feelings about the novel. On one hand, I think "Matt Burgess is a great writer. He sure knows how to keep a reader's attention." Then on the other hand, I think "Can I have a better story, please?" The story has potential. I just believe it needs to be rewritten. With that it often comes off to me as a homage. A homage to many things. I'm not quite sure if that was what Burgess intended. I was just hoping for something that I'm not as used to that's all. Even though I got the homage vibes, I could respect his admiration for something I'm interested in as well: Latino culture.

As far as Burgess writing style is concerned, he is a breath of fresh air. That's the element I felt often throughout his novel. In this aspect, there's really not a point where I wanted to truly put the book down. His choice of words and their structure helped to keep me alert and on my toes, which often outweighed my previous story complaint. There was an element of believability that Burgess also seemed to perfect. Such as

that he used real places and settings throughout his novel. He had his main character say things like bodega, instead of just corner store. And, the fact that he mentioned a myriad of different heritages or cultures to represent the melting pot that Queens is. It was as if Alfredo, Winston, Vladimir, and everybody else could be real people. And, that's something that I admired.

However, despite the fresh writing style or believability of Burgess' work, I still come up short in my overall appreciation story wise. I feel that the novel started off nicely and even continued that way once Tariq was released from prison, however, it wasn't until the dogfight or better yet right before the dogfight started that I began to truly get bored. The novel had been working up to that point from nearly the beginning and then when it got there it's like "eh", it's boring, and drawn out. Overly drawn out. It got better, however, when everything bubbled over the surface with Alfredo, Tariq, and Misha. But then once that bit of the story was out of the way it seemed to do a more significant nosedive than before. Yes, it was the falling action and resolution of the story, but I felt a little left up in the air with the outcome of everything. So these parts, I believe, are the biggest concern when it comes to the idea of revision.

All in all, I give Dogfight, A Love Story a 3 out of 5. It was ok, maybe even good considering it's Matt Burgess' debut novel. He's a great writer with style and has the potential to be a great storyteller. I'm genuinely interested to hopefully read his future stories that he transforms into novels.

Casey says

Matt Burgess's debut novel, Dogfight, A Love Story (published last September), is a helluva first novel. It takes place over the course of a single weekend in Jackson Heights, Queens, in the summer of 2002. While the plot isn't overly complex or complicated, though it is well crafted, a lot happens in this novel. I'll leave off giving a complete plot summary (I probably couldn't do it justice), but it involves nineteen year-old Alfredo Bautista, a small-time independent drug dealer. Alfredo is awaiting his brother Tariq's release from prison, and there are rumors that Alfredo had something to do with Tariq's getting caught in a botched robbery. But that's not all: Alfredo's seven-months-pregnant girlfriend, Isabel, was Tariq's girlfriend when he went into prison, and he's not sure how Tariq is going to handle the news. According to the rules of the street, Alfredo must also present Tariq with a "package" upon his release. It's in Alfredo's acquiring of the "package" - a hollowed out beeper full of Ecstasy - that the plot of the novel really begins to move. Alfredo, on suspect information from his friend, Winston, jacks the drugs from who he thinks is just a skinny Russian kid outside an all-boys Catholic school. Guess what? The skinny Russian kid isn't just some kid: he's connected. Though this isn't the only plot line, the central thrust of the novel begins here.

A couple things about this novel: first, don't let the subtitle "A Love Story" turn you away from this novel. Really, it's as much a love story between two brothers as it is a love story between the characters and Jackson Heights, Queens. Second, this is clearly a New York novel, and I'm sure there are things I missed, but I never felt like I didn't belong, like the novel wasn't for people outside of New York. That said, it strikes me as the kind of book that people in Queens will read and say, "Hey, I know exactly where that street corner/bodega/building/etc. is." I'm always drawn to novels of place, even if it is a place I've never been or can't easily identify with.

The language in Dogfight is superb. The dialog, to my ear, is pitch perfect, and the descriptions are gritty and

real. The novel is in the third person, but Burgess seemingly effortlessly moves between multiple characters and each has their own "voice." That's hard to pull off.

Also, although the situations surrounding the characters are deadly serious, the novel is funny. Alfredo is having one terrible weekend and it's hard not to laugh at some of the things that happen. This may not be the best example, but the mix of violence and humor are reminiscent of a movie like *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*, or even to a certain extent *Burn After Reading*.

Speaking of the violence, it's handled as well as everything else in the novel. There is a particularly violent dogfight (given the title, there has to be, right?), but I didn't feel it was gratuitous in any way.

Any gripes I have about the novel are minor. Tariq's actions building up to and including the climax of the novel are a bit hard to swallow. What he does isn't implausible, but it felt too far out of character for him. The pacing of the novel is excellent, so anytime there is a scene that slows down, it's more noticeable. It's interesting to see how Burgess wraps everything up for the climax. I'm not saying I don't like it - I do - but I'd like to hear what others think.

All in all, this novel makes Matt Burgess a writer to watch. I'm looking forward to what he does next.

For more, check out my blog: <http://thestoryisthecure.blogspot.com/>

Trudy Ackerblade says

What an unusual but captivating story.

Aaron (Typographical Era) says

It seems as though I've fallen into a cycle of reading very well written books that offer up only mildly interesting stories in exchange for the time I've spent consuming them. *Dogfight* isn't horrible by any stretch, as a matter of fact, the first third of the book is surprisingly wonderful, but after that it quickly tapers off and becomes something far less enjoyable. Add to the mix an ending that feels tacked on and unbelievable given the first three hundred pages and what you're left with is sadly a bit of a disappointment.

Author Matt Burgess possesses talent, there's no question there. The way he introduces readers to the story's central protagonist, a low-level drug dealer named Alfredo, is brilliant:

In the middle of Alfredo Batista's brain there is a tall gray filing cabinet, frequently opened. The drawers are deep, the folders fattened with a lifetime of regrettable moments. There is, tucked away toward the back, a list of women whose phone numbers he never asked for. There are the debts accrued. In the bottom drawer, in separate folders, there are the things he never learned to do: drive an automobile, throw a knuckleball, tie a knot in a cherry stem using only his tongue. What else? In the top drawer, there is a file recounting the evening he left the Mets game early, thinking the run deficit insurmountable. There is the why-didn't-I-wear-a-condom folder. There is—this one's surprisingly thin—the crimes-against-my-brother folder. Alfredo is only nineteen years old, and already his cabinet overflows with files, none of them collecting dust, each one routinely inspected. All it takes is a random word, a face in passing, and a memory blooms, a cabinet drawer

slides open. An intracranial research librarian—Alfredo imagines him bespectacled, with frayed pant cuffs and dandruff on his shoulders— waddles over to the open drawer, plucks out the appropriate file, and passes it on to the brain's well-staffed and efficiently run Department of Regret. Here, unable to help himself, Alfredo scrutinizes the folder. He re-creates the event's sensory details. He goes over, with sick and meticulous precision, exactly what was said and, of course, what was not said. He relinks the chain of events.

READ MORE:

<http://www.typographicalera.com/dogfi...>

Molly says

I pre-ordered this book because it was written by a friend, and I wanted to support his work. Although I didn't know what to expect, I know that I did not expect to be totally blown away by Burgess's talent. The fast-paced, cleverly-plotted novel is told in the visceral and vivid present tense by an at-first disjunctive-but-ultimately-appropriate third-person limited (and at times omniscient, if that's possible) narrator. While the plot takes place in Queens, the outer borough is less a backdrop than a character, and gives the novel much of its character. The rest of the character is fleshed out by the novel's protagonist, Alfredo Batista, a young Puerto-Rican small-time drug-dealer, whose sincerity of expression far outweighs the fact that he's a rather weak-kneed ne'er-do-well.

The plot is driven by Alfredo's attempts to "welcome" back home his hardened and terrifying older brother, Jose--or "Tariq"--, after a stint in jail for a crime that Alfredo was supposed to help commit. During Jose/Tariq's two-year absence, Alredo managed to fall in love with J/T's girlfriend, Isabella, get her pregnant, and get her moved into his parent's apartment. As he nervously awaits his brother's release and eventual retribution, he works to first steal a package of drugs for Tariq and then to set up a dogfight in his honor as a mea culpa. Alfredo is lucky, but he isn't that lucky, and his plans definitely go awry.

As many of the reviews have already remarked, Burgess's language is a delight--he is exceptionally attuned to communicating his characters' vulnerability in the street vernacular that makes those characters feel so real. At times, I felt so worried for Alfredo that I slowed down my reading to save him from what I feared was his doom. I highly recommend picking up this book: although it has "movie deal" written all over it, its characters--especially Alfredo and Isabella--deserve to be read.

Peter says

Full Disclosure: This writer is a friend of mine, and I may be influenced by the fact that he has purchased beer for me on occasion. Though, I'm pretty sure whether or not someone has bought me a beer has little influence on how much I like their book. But still, it's nice when someone buys you beer, isn't it?

Anyway, this is a damn good book. It occupies a nice slice of real estate between the occasionally-warring nations of literary fiction and the crime novel. I realize these distinctions aren't ultimately that helpful, though. It's probably more accurate to say that Dogfight is an incredibly well written book with electric prose, that touches on some universal human struggles while also featuring drug-dealing, double-crosses, and

some devilishly good crime-type plotting down the stretch. As soon as I see gritty people doing gritty things, I've got a hair trigger to yell "Crime Novel Right Here!" But this is a fascinating little hybrid that doesn't like to stay in one place for long.

Something I really appreciated about the book was its generous use of a roving third person perspective. I say generous because having access to so many characters' thoughts, goals, hopes, dreams, and bathroom habits, made the distinctions between good and bad pleasantly difficult to parse. It made the book feel populated by an array of complicated troubled folk, just trying to figure it all out like the rest of us. I particularly liked a lone chapter devoted to a young Russian ecstasy dealer's first kiss.

Finally, without giving away anything, I'd just like to say that this is a book that delivers in the end. All of the tension we readers drag with us through the pages is rewarded here with nine kinds of catharsis. Which should be the title of something.

Kasa Cotugno says

This is advertised as the first real Queens Novel, set in that Borough with its large immigrant population coexisting side by side, imparting an international alphabet soup quality to the story and the characters. Nobody writes so well about New York as her inhabitants, and Burgess is a welcome addition to this group. Yes, Jonathan Letham writes knowingly and lovingly about Brooklyn, but this novel seems to owe as much to Richard Price's *Lush Life* as to anything else, or any of Pete Hamill's evocative paeans to the entire City. So that is what I mean when I say this is not the usual love story even if it does have love between a man and a woman, brothers and brothers, mothers and fathers and children -- they are all somewhat in love with their City, with their Borough, and are doing what they can to survive and possibly change their relationships with her rather than having to leave. Decisions are not made easily and often are unwise. But by giving more characters inner lives and depths, Burgess expresses his deep held affection for his venue, warts and all.

Danna says

Matt Burgess nails his first novel, this book is great. While he plays up stereotypes and cliches, he does it in a creative way and with an electric story. *Dogfight*, a Love Story is reminiscent of the *Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* - it has a Latin flavor, with vulgar undertones, and a look into the streets of Queens. Burgess is witty, clever, and has a unique writing style. I read this book in a weekend, I was wrapped up in the characters and the story and really had no idea how it would end. Some of the story feels realistic, some of it a little far-fetched, but overall, I loved it.

Alfredo has knocked up Isabel, his older brother's ex-girlfriend while the brother is serving time in Fishkill's prison. The story takes place over a couple of days: the brother is getting released from prison and Alfredo, Isabel, and the rest of the Batista family is anxiously anticipating his arrival. Alfredo, both eager to impress his older brother and protect his turf and girlfriend, is scheming to find a way to show older brother Jose that he has grown up. His plot ends him up in trouble, fearful for his life and that of his best friend.

The cast of characters is great:

The best friend, Winston, is a hysterical character: an overweight, doofy, drug-addicted, Haitian with alopecia who frequently sports a Spiderman hat.

Mother Batista is a classic boriquena: she cleans nonstop and believes that a spotless home will cure her family of any troubles. Their home is decorated with the stereotypical parrots, she cooks stereotypical habichuelas, and has sofrito ice cubes in the freezer.

Jose Batista, Sr. is a paraplegic hooked on the lotto and infomercials.

Isabel, 7 months pregnant and living with the Batistas is a people-pleaser with a sad past. She hears her baby (in utero), Christian Louis, constantly guiding her and singing lullabies.

I don't want to say anymore because I feel it would spoil the ending.

Joshua says

This guy really nails Queens.

Amy says

This is my favorite book I've ever read. The vivid imagery, the unique and well-detailed characters, the intense atmosphere, and most of all the humor make this one of the most enjoyable, memorable, and worthwhile reads.

Molly says

Matt was in my MFA program: he was a third year when I was a first and we were in poetry workshop together. I really enjoy his poetic sensibility and look forward to watching his career rocket. I likely would not have picked up this story if I didn't know Matt--I'm not quite the audience for a drug-dealing tough-guy-in-the-city narrative (though I am a fairly catholic reader), and I'm glad I did. I managed to completely forget the fact of knowing the author and fell into the world of this book. How amazing that it was able to hum like this for me. He's a gorgeous writer--great moments of poetic prose at just the right moments, with excellent pacing.

Congrats, Matt. I can't wait to read your next one.

Some lines I copied:

Confused, he looks down at his hand, as if to make sure this is still a blunt he's offering, that it hasn't turned into something else entirely, a cup of tea maybe, or a big brass tuba.

She cut her legs. Blood wriggled into her socks.

The beeper weighs heavy. It causes the shirt to droop downward, exposing the root of Alfredo's throat.

He pitches it down the lane, and the ball breaks left, dropping heavily into the gutter. The pins stand erect, unimpressed.

little comets of blood all over the family's face towel

the lanyards of brutalized skin, where the kitchen knife tore up her calves

He goes up on his tiptoes to see his brother gripping the dog by the sleek engine of its neck.

Richard says

Great premise and the book started off with promise. Alfredo Batista, from Queens, NYC, is in a bit of a conundrum. Because although he is happy that his brother José is returning home from doing time upstate, he also has some major worries. One being that he has to figure out a way to get a pit bull for Jose's homecoming dogfight, and the other is that he's heard rumors his brother (who has converted to Islam while inside and changed his name to Tariq) might think that Alfredo is responsible for him getting locked up and is holding a grudge.

You get the sense that the author is trying to write his heart out in this novel as if this is the last book he'll ever write. Sometimes this earnestness produces great passages, but sometimes the writing seems a little masturbatory and distracting. Good try, but ultimately the book dwindled and I stopped caring.

Vanessa says

this book gave me some Junot Diaz and Raising Victor Vargas vibes. the second half of the book is a bit darker and the ending falls a little flat but this book was a nice little surprise.

Matt Trowbridge says

Dogfight, A Love Story is an interestingly-told, focused story with characters the author clearly cares about. Burgess gives his characters unique and empathetic voices, as well as endearing and, at times, unsettling traits that engender both affection and dismay in the reader, which, I think, are both emotions a writer would like evoked in his/her audience. Burgess slightly loses track of his plot in focusing more closely on how it affects the two main characters, leaving one too many loose ends for my liking, but overall, it is well-written and very much a New York story. 3.5 stars.
