

Praise for Tom LeClair's previous novels

Passing Off

“For all its flashy ball-handling and dead-on outside shot, *Passing Off* is a deeply literary work of art and politics, probing identity, representation, ecology, and, of course, our desperate, down-to-the-buzzer game of words.”

--Richard Powers

“One of the most literate and entertaining sports novels of the decade...*Passing Off* is a fascinating book.”

--*The Washington Post*

Passing On

“Entertaining, funny, serious, and death-ridden...*Passing On* takes on issues—with humor and irony—not many a serious novelist tackles these days. It's a winner, worth a shot.”

--*American Book Review*

Well-Founded Fear

“In the fierce unfinished business of Kurdistan, Tom LeClair has found the documentary edge and human center that makes *Well-Founded Fear* a resourceful and moving work of fiction.”

--Don DeLillo

The Liquidators

“The business of America may be business, but too few fine novels prove it. Here's a brilliant exception. To the tiny shelf of classic workplace writing, add this meditation on failure, fiscal and metaphysical...The workingman blues, as if sung by some truck-stop Homer.”

--*Kirkus*

Also by Tom LeClair:

In the Loop (criticism)

The Art of Excess (criticism)

Passing Off (fiction)

Well-Founded Fear (fiction)

Passing On (fiction)

The Liquidators (fiction)

Passing Through: A Novel

by

Tom LeClair



This book is a work of fiction. As such, names, characters, incidents, and places (real or imagined) are used fictitiously and are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons, places, or actual events is coincidental.

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Chapter 1

Michael Keever was through with the dead and the dying and was happy.

Terminal Tours, the company that got him in all his recent trouble, was now his estranged wife's business. For a year, Michael had escorted the terminally ill on trips they could not manage alone. Then a client that Michael took to Lourdes unexpectedly died there, and the pilgrim's son sued Michael for neglecting due diligence. When Michael lost the suit, he lost his house and wife and daughter, but he felt his daughter, Sara, would come around if he got the job at Queen City College.

He had a one-bedroom apartment and was through with the house that began his problems with his wife. A decade ago Ann agreed to move to Greece for Michael to play in the pro basketball league there because she thought his year-end bonus would get them the house they hadn't been able to afford. When Michael was exposed as lying about his Greek "heritage" and they lost the bonus, Ann wrote *Passing Off*, supposedly Michael's autobiography but actually an eco-terrorist thriller, to make enough money in Greece to buy the house in Cincinnati. It was ten years before Michael replaced Ann's portrait of him as a dumb, deceptive, and money-obsessed athlete, but his actual autobiography, *Passing On*, the account of Terminal Tours, corrected Ann's version of him. Though not a commercial success, *Passing On* also indirectly got him the interview at QCC.

Just because QCC was new, Ann and others in the city thought it was one of those distance-learning profit-turning scams, a school today, a telemarketing operation tomorrow. But the college had a "campus" in a remod-

eled three-story auto-transmission factory visible and easily accessible from Interstate 71 close to downtown. The college motto—"Shift Your Life"—was on the building to remind Cincinnatians of its former use and to demonstrate QCC's retraining mission. The classrooms all had computer consoles, Internet access, screens for PowerPoint presentations, and ceilings almost high enough for a basketball hoop. The library, mostly CD-ROMs and terminals, occupied a decommissioned Episcopalian church. Sponsored by AOL, the library had the company logo up on the steeple where the cross had been. The dorm, also visible from the Interstate, was a rehabbed residential hotel with an awning in front, a New York touch, and a Holiday Inn billboard on the roof. "After college," the billboard said, "a great room of your own."

By specializing in schools of Information and Dissemination, QCC had plenty of future-oriented young students and a good supply of older students trying to shift into new jobs. The innovative M.C.A. program—Master of Communication Arts—drew from all over the country, from all over the world. According to Ann, some professors at the University of Cincinnati, where she used to work writing grants, said it was because Queen City used its name to cater to gays. U.C. students who had been rejected were cruder and called the school Queer College.

The Communications Department chair and the director of the M.C.A. program who interviewed Michael brought up the school's reputation in the first five minutes. The chair, a short chunky man about forty, who was wearing New Balance sneakers and a tie more expensive than Michael's suit, held up his left hand to show Michael a thick wedding band.

"We don't ask if our students or faculty are straight or gay," he said, "but here's where my heart is."

Michael's right hand moved to his left, to feel the finger where his ring had been for almost twenty years. He missed it, even if he didn't miss Ann.

"Oh, Richard," the director said, folding her long bare fingers in the lap of her burlap dress, "No need to administer one of your little tests. Anyway, Michael, we take students away from U.C. because they're stodgy, not because they're straight. The faculty over there insist on the old fiction and poetry tracks. Creative Non-Fiction is the future for books, and that's why we hope to add you to the staff."

"Forget about books," Richard said, "They'll disappear in ten years. The future is hypertext, the Internet, virtual reality. Objectivity, economy, speed, collaboration. I really love what you're doing with your web site, not just disseminating your own writing but offering a place for others to post their narratives. Like your motto says, the site could go 'on and on and on.' And will in the future."

"Well," Michael said, "I want you to know the truth about that site. My wife began it, and she'll be kind of the co-proprietor in the future. She needs it for Terminal Tours, and I want to keep it because I'll be traveling to terminal places. So we're going to have a dual entry page."

"Now there's a future marriage for you, Richard," June said. "People may throw away their rings and find new consorts, but will keep their URL forever."

... excerpt from Tom LeClair's *Passing Through*