

NOTES CONTRIBUTED BY THE NCLR STAFF

Make Believe with UTTER CONVICTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH GARTH RISK HALLBERG

by *Brian Glover*



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK VESSEY

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—STEPHEN KING

By any measure, Garth Risk Hallberg’s novel *City on Fire* was one of the major literary events of 2015, garnering positive reviews from *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, a splashy profile in *Vogue*, and (perhaps the best indicator of New York publishing success) an irritable backlash in the *New York Post*. Stephen King called it “Dickensian, massively entertaining, as close to a great American novel as this century has produced.”¹ Set in mid-1970s New York, *City on Fire* combines a relentlessly inventive style with a page-turning mystery plot

and an expansive, warm-hearted vision of life, love, and art in the last quarter of the American century. Before his New York success, though, Hallberg grew up in Greenville, North Carolina, the son of English teachers at East Carolina University and Arendell Parrott Academy. As you might expect, he has as much to say about reading as about writing; indeed, he has made a name for himself as a critic for *The Millions* as well. Our conversation ranged from eighteenth-century British novels (my specialty), to the aesthetics of fanzines, to urban planning in Greenville, and the true meaning of David Bowie. I spoke with Hallberg in October of 2016, in the lobby-cum-gallery of the 21C Museum Hotel in Durham, North Carolina, before his public reading at the Regulator Bookshop. The transcription of our

¹ Michiko Kakutani, “Garth Risk Hallberg’s Novel of New York in the Bad Old Days,” *New York Times* 5 Oct. 2015: web; Frank Rich, *New York Times* 8 Oct. 2015: web; Louis Menand, “The Time of Broken Windows,” *New Yorker* 12 Oct. 2015: web; Megan O’Grady, “Literary Sensation Garth Risk Hallberg on Writing the Most Anticipated Novel of the Year,” *Vogue* 25 Sept. 2015: web; Elisabeth Vincentelli, “Overhyped Novel ‘City on Fire’ Is a Steaming Pile of Literary Dung,” *New York Post* 25 Nov. 2015: web; @StephenKing, “CITY ON FIRE, by Garth Risk Hallberg: Dickensian, massively entertaining, as close to a great American novel as this century has produced,” Twitter 31 Jan. 2016, 5:44 p.m.: web.