

book review

BUFFALO LOCKJAW

Greg Ames

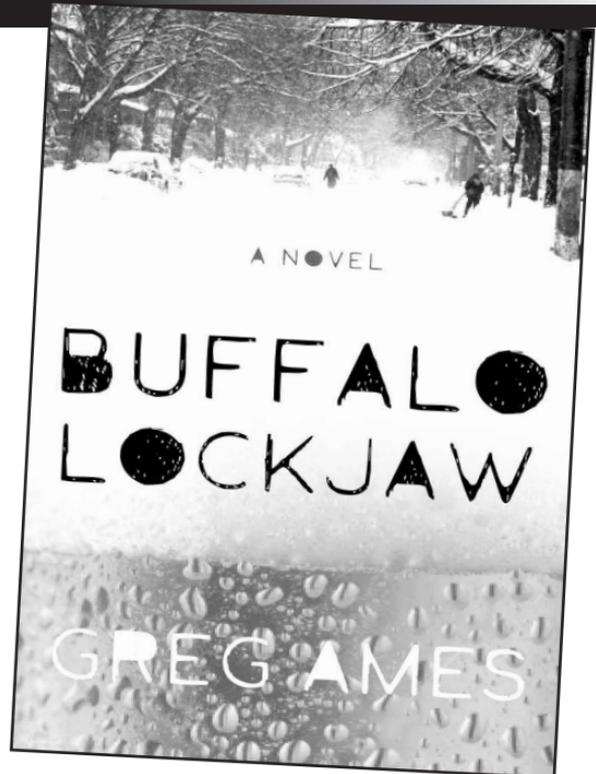
Hyperion, April 2009

By Andrea Seastrand

To those who know him as a roommate in a Brooklyn brownstone, as a greeting card writer at Laffs, or as an on-again/off-again lover, James Fitzroy is a confident-enough, typical guy; but when he travels to Buffalo for Thanksgiving with his family, James returns to a far more profound, intimate situation than what he's left behind. Through *Buffalo Lockjaw*, author Greg Ames' memorable first novel, James shares dilemmas far heftier than coming up with clever birthday card witticisms.

Buffalo Lockjaw (Hyperion, April 2009) is a debut written with as much honesty and tenderness as James, the well-intentioned if misguided main character, possesses. At 56 James' mother is a resident at The Elms, suffering through advanced Alzheimer's, a disease that she was once a respected, scholarly authority on. Now, with Ellen's mental and physical capabilities barely existent, James is rushing headlong into the only viable solution he sees and is hell-bent on garnering support from his devastated father and preoccupied sister. Yet, instead of retreating to the familiar bars that he first visited with a fake I.D. at 18, James is now determined to be fully present, to be his mother's helpful son, at last.

About much more than a son coping with his mother's illness, *Buffalo Lockjaw* is a novel immortalizing Ellen as James remembers her. By looking through her belongings and reading her letters and documents, James' account becomes one less about the way Ellen is in The Elms' D-Unit and more about the way she was as a mother, professional nurse and wife. This is also James' coming-of-age journal, a text about his passage from selfishness to selflessness, from immaturity to maturity. It's a touching story about family, love, death, courage, duty and, eventually, acting your age. Written with humor, sadness, and compassion *Buffalo Lockjaw* grips the reader with a bulldog's tenacity



until it punctures through knee-jerk immaturity and into a mindful, deeper resolution. Author Greg Ames takes the reader into the heart of James' central conflict and delivers a story told with smart, gritty humor that, at the turn of a page, changes to tender, honest descriptions of the Fitzroy family's lost wife and mother, Buffalo, NY's, people, and its history as a once-booming city. In a sense, James is fighting a solo, heroically damned battle until the novel's end: He is trying to resuscitate his mother and hometown as he once knew and loved them, both as they will never be again.

Decades past its prime, Buffalo has become a city in decline, one of many examples of progress's unswerving march toward new territories and industries. Ames brings the city into sharp focus as much more than just the book's setting through clever use of brief, first person narratives sprinkled throughout the novel. These chapters—composed from a well-intentioned, ultimately damned two-year ethnographic foray on James' part—give a humorous, tangible sense of loss and nostalgia for a bigger, better Buffalo while providing just the right amount of levity to the main story's seriousness. Always memorable and entertaining, James' Buffalo experts reminisce about everything from their town's healthy past, to the Bills, to the faltering local art and music scenes. Although not integral to the main story between James and Ellen, these hometown ruminations

are immediately related to by everyone familiar with our nation's struggling, declining towns, and work to develop James as a horribly predisposed interviewer (one gets the sense that his subjects are also his lost, 20-something, beer-guzzling pals, perched on the neighboring barstool, just telling James what he wants to hear. So much for a stringent, unbiased selection process).

In its simple complexities, *Buffalo Lockjaw* achieves what every good story should, standing on its own as a novel as resolute and sharp as Ellen's mind once was, and as honest and raw as Ames' talented, poignant writing. A book about everything that makes life painful, funny, frustrating, beautiful and worth remembering, readers will root for James, hoping he'll make decisions that will lead to a happy ending—a full, miraculous recovery for Ellen, or a peaceful, smiling death—knowing all the while that life's real endings are rarely ever so. Resting at the center of the story, the true narrative of all experiences, whether James Fitzroy's or the reader's own, is the common bit of humanity that keeps us each humble and good even when beauty and happiness are buried far beneath the snows of a merciless Buffalo winter.

Greg Ames will be reading selections from *Buffalo Lockjaw* on April 2 at 7:30 p.m. at the Barnes & Noble in Park Slope (Brooklyn, NY) and on April 15 at 7 p.m. at McNally Jackson Books, 52 Prince Street, NYC.