

Salted Rose Press

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Sample Interview with Steve Masover author of *Consequence*

A new novel, Consequence, explores the limits of non-violent activism and the moral perils of protesting outside the box.

Q: Welcome Steve, and thanks for taking the time for this interview. Let's jump right in. What does a novel about political activism have to tell us in 2015?

SM: *Consequence* is a story about people trying to walk a thin line between purely non-violent and non-confrontational protest -- marching along permitted routes, carrying signs, and shouting slogans; and protest that is not as circumspect about causing disruption or property damage, but still seeks to protect human life and safety. This is exactly what we see in our cities today. There's the #BlackLivesMatter movement that has swept the country, coast to coast, since Mike Brown's death last year in Ferguson. There's the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011 that radically changed the way we talk about inequality in the United States. We're seeing disruptive, sometimes confrontational protest occur more frequently across every region of the country, to a degree we haven't seen for a long time.

Q: What political issues does *Consequence* deal with?

SM: *Consequence* deals most directly with industrial domination of our food systems: with genetic engineering in agriculture and the food grown using these methods, known as GMOs — genetically-modified organisms. But the novel also touches on the closely-linked issue of climate change, and on the struggle between democracy and corporate domination of government and nature. These issues are all generating real-world political engagement at every level, from hundreds of thousands of people engaging in grassroots marches; Pope Francis writing radical critiques of unfettered capitalism and of humankind's failed stewardship of the natural world; people chaining themselves to the fences of rail terminals where trains are transporting tar sands oil through densely populated cities; broad-based organizing to neutralize the threat of vastly wealthy oligarchs like the Koch brothers and Sheldon Adelson, who are explicitly attempting to buy elections in the wake of *Citizens United*. Though I couldn't have predicted this when I began to write it, *Consequence* becomes more relevant with every passing week.

Q: Tell us something about the story.

SM: Christopher Kalman is a thirty-something writer and activist in San Francisco, who has little to show for the months and years of his life spent living and working with friends he made in college, and the teenage boy they co-parent. The group is mostly underemployed, but they've got a reputation as solid, protest-outside-the-box organizers for social and environmental justice.

Chris gets anonymously recruited over the internet to write a manifesto against Frankenfood — against genetically engineered agriculture — and his frustration with the impotence of marching around in circles carrying cardboard signs draws him into a more dangerous game than he and his friends can handle.

Q: What does that mean, “protest-outside-the-box”?

SM: As the novel opens, Christopher’s household — they call themselves The Triangle — is planning to hang a billboard-sized banner off a tower of the San Francisco Bay Bridge on the morning a genetic engineering conference opens in San Francisco. This is not the kind of thing you can advertise if you want it to come off, you can’t even talk about it in meetings that are open to the public. So The Triangle takes it underground, and recruits only the friends and fellow-activists they can trust to keep a secret. The plan ends up being pretty elaborate, to ensure that the folks climbing the bridge tower aren’t run over by impatient commuters.

Q: Has anybody ever done something like that in real life?

SM: The action is modeled on the first successful blockade of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1989, which was pulled off by a group called Stop AIDS Now or Else, many of whom were also active in ACT UP. About seven years later Earth First! scaled the Golden Gate bridge and unfurled banners in defense of old growth redwood forests; the actor Woody Harrelson was one of the climbers. So the action The Triangle is planning is kind of a synthesis of historical protests, amped up and relocated to the Bay Bridge, which carries twice as much traffic in and out of San Francisco as the Golden Gate.

Q: What about your own role in Bay Area activism?

SM: Well, I was a part of the 1989 blockade of the Golden Gate Bridge, for one thing. But I’ve been drawn to political engagement since I was about ten years old, during protests against the Vietnam war. I organized during the movement against South African apartheid in the mid-1980s, was part of queer liberation and antiwar movements in the years since, and helped organize a series of dramatic protests against government-administered torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, at Guantanamo, and at ‘Black Sites’ run by the CIA. That’s a sampler, anyway. I’ve also participated in #BlackLivesMatter events and in Occupy -- but more as a participant than an organizer. These days most of my organizing energy goes into climate change issues.

Q: What would somebody who isn’t politically active get from *Consequence*?

SM: Everybody decides how far to stick their neck out to confront the things they just can’t bear. Maybe you confront a school principal if your kid is getting bullied or shunned, or you go out of your way to buy something from a local business instead of on-line or from a national chain. Maybe you write a letter to the editor, or sign a petition, or support a political candidate who is trying to do something better than business as usual. Maybe you post an article or a meme about an issue you care about on Facebook or Tumblr or Twitter even if you expect it’ll rub some of the people you know the wrong way. *Consequence* is about people who are willing to stick their necks out regularly, around multiple issues, and to stick their necks out even further when

hanging out in their comfort zone doesn't get the results they're after. I think most people can identify with that dilemma. Most of us go out on a limb about something we care about at some point in our lives, one way or another.

Q: But Christopher, the main character in *Consequence*, sticks his neck out a lot further than most, is that right?

SM: Well, he gets involved with eco-saboteurs, people who are planning to destroy a research facility. The actual target is kept secret from him, the plot is carried out on a need-to-know basis. Christopher's role is to write a manifesto justifying the politics of the action, without knowing what exactly is going to happen. But he's a part of the conspiracy, and as a result things don't go so well for him.

Q: As a *Consequence*, as it were...

SM: Yes, exactly. But the novel's title also evokes the drive Christopher and his fellow-activists have to act consequentially, to have a real effect on the world. It's a two-edged sword, as many swords are.

Q: Why fiction? Why not write directly about the facts supporting issues that your characters are protesting about?

SM: There's a lot of information out there, in books and on the intertubes ... plenty of disinformation too, especially online. And I do add my voice to some of those conversations when I blog, or when I speak to reporters as an activist or organizer. Where I think *Consequence* makes a contribution is in humanizing political engagement in a style many people don't know very well. When you get down to it, emotionally and in terms of motivation, the characters are not very different from any parent who cares about her child, from anybody who walks into a grocery store and has to count the money in their wallet then choose between cheaper processed food and food that hasn't been sprayed and injected and mutated into slow-acting poison. Activists are often portrayed unsympathetically in fiction. There's a tendency toward caricature or pathologizing in books like Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*, or Philip Roth's *I Married a Communist*, or, going further back, to Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Even Ruth Ozeki's wonderful novel about food and farming politics, *All Over Creation*, portrays its activist characters as neo-hippie misfits and senile Christian messiah figures. I think that activist engagement -- and the dilemmas that pull people between the poles of peaceful but less effective protest and more confrontational modes -- that way of participating in the world deserves a more honest, nuanced, and humane look. That's what *Consequence* does for the communities of which I've been a part throughout my life.

For more information, visit <http://www.stevemasover.net/Consequence>.

About the Author

Steve Masover is a native of Chicago and a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley. His short fiction has appeared in *Five Fingers Review* and *Christopher Street*; his non-fiction is anthologized in *Our Mothers' Spirits*; and he co-wrote the screenplay for *Soweto to Berkeley*, an anti-apartheid movement documentary. Steve currently lives and works in Berkeley, California. *Consequence* is his first novel.

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