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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT // BOOKS

# Houston lawyer's debut novel spotlights 'The Best People'

By Chris Gray, Correspondent | Oct. 31, 2019 | Updated: Nov. 4, 2019 11:12 a.m.



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Houston lawyer Marc Grossberg has written a book, "The Best People."

Photo: Courtesy / Courtesy

If Marc Grossberg hadn't stepped into the women's room by mistake, his debut novel "The Best People" might have never happened.

The successful Houston tax attorney, now in his 70s, was attending a family event at the Marriott West Loop some years ago when nature called. In the restroom he began hearing women's voices, which at first he thought were coming through the vents.

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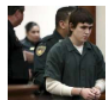
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“I realized I hadn’t passed any urinals,” Grossberg says now. “I said, ‘Oh my God, they’re gonna think I’m some sort of a pervert.’ I stealthily got out of there without anybody seeing me.”

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But his accidental eavesdropping stuck in his mind, and Grossberg began to wonder: “What would happen if somebody overheard a conversation they weren’t supposed to hear because they were someplace they weren’t supposed to be?”

The details are too hot to spoil, but a similar incident turns the plot screws of a broadly satirical novel Grossberg says was inspired by “The Bonfire of the Vanities.”

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## “The Best People”

By Marc Grossberg

Greenleaf Book Group Press, 378pp. \$23.95.

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His book isn’t quite as cutthroat as Tom Wolfe’s 1987 novel, in which a powerful Wall Street trader gets swept up in a media circus after he’s involved in a hit-and-run accident. However, it has a similar sweep that captures Houston’s freewheeling nature.

“Houston is a true meritocracy,” says Grossberg. “Anybody can come here and if they’re willing to work hard, maybe get a couple of breaks, there’s no limit to what they can accomplish.”

“The Best People” is a tongue-in-cheek title. Grossberg lobs his share of jabs at the strivers who aren’t happy unless they have the best table at the trendiest restaurant or the best seats at the charity gala. His book acknowledges a naked truth about the Bayou City: it would be a lot less interesting if people weren’t willing to do whatever it took to get ahead.

After all, they don’t call it “Hustletown” for nothing.

“People here have believed — not just recently but throughout our history —



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People here have believed — not just recently but throughout our history — that it may sound like it's too good to be true, but too often in Houston, it is true," says Grossberg. "It does happen, and so therefore people are more susceptible to something that sounds too good to be true because, in their own experience, they've witnessed it."

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Grossberg's main character, Paddy Moran, embodies Houston's scrappy, can-do spirit. A former cop with a Brooklyn-brash personality, he's two weeks removed from passing the state bar as "The Best People" opens. Driven and cool under pressure, the linebacker-size Paddy quickly rises through the field of divorce and personal-injury law.

As his payouts increase, so does the chip on his shoulder about being an outsider, and so does his win-at-any-cost attitude.

"It was just sort of his story when I started it, says Grossberg. "[I] wanted to show how somebody could come from someplace else, not know anybody, and make it."

Paddy's arc plays against the counterpoint narrative of Pilar Quintanilla Galt. A single mother from Second Ward who recently escaped an abusive marriage, her circumstances are much different from Paddy's. Still, the two share a certain tenaciousness — as Paddy struggles for a toehold in the upper echelons of the city's legal establishment, Pilar struggles to better her station in life through grit and determination.

"She knows that she's smart," Grossberg says. "She knows that she's capable and when she works hard she can get the job done. Whatever opportunity she's had, she's done a good job. She never lost a job because she didn't do it well.

"She has a great work ethic, and Paddy has a great work ethic," he adds.

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Ethics, though, are a different matter.

Paddy takes on a repugnant client whose case forces him to cross a dangerous line. After she falls in love with the enigmatic VJ Simon, a venture capitalist and one of Houston's richest men — who also happens to be married to old Houston money at the time — Pilar struggles with drinking too much and becomes addicted to painkillers.



“Both of the main characters are flawed,” Grossberg says. “They’re human, so they have some terrific parts about them, some that aren’t so terrific. Part of the drama of the book is following them through these things.”

One of the book’s key lines is “each choice forecloses other choices,” which especially applies to Paddy after a shady financial planner ensnares him and his partner, Will, in a risky tax-shelter scheme.

“He’s very stoic, though,” Grossberg says of his protagonist. “He accepts the consequences of his choices. I admire that in him. He did some bad things and he acknowledges it; he doesn’t try to make any excuses. He accepts it and he moves on.”

The author cops to permitting himself a cameo, as a tax attorney who tries to talk some sense into Paddy and Will. But as far as sketching out his novel goes, Grossberg thinks divorce law beats tax law hands down.

“I think it’s more interesting and fun to write about divorce lawyers than tax lawyers,” he says, “because of the huge number of people who have either been divorced or have been affected by divorce.

“People can relate to it,” adds Grossberg. “And there’s some insights for the readers to take, but I just thought it would make a better story.”

Besides divorce, other cases in the book include medical malpractice and a personal-injury suit that nearly derails Paddy’s career in its infancy. The details may be fictional, Grossberg explains, but the scenarios fall within the realm of plausibility.

“I don’t even know where to draw the line,” he admits. “I made up the characters and the cases and the situations, but I was totally influenced by everything I’ve heard and observed [over] 50 years of practicing law.”

The novelist also couldn’t resist tipping his cap to a pair of local institutions dear to his heart.

One of VJ and Pilar’s early dates is a poetry reading sponsored by the literary nonprofit InPrint; Grossberg has been a board member of Inprint for decades, and served terms as both president and chairman. The reading allows Pilar to connect with art in a way she never has before.

“It’s the kind of thing that can happen when you go to those readings and you hear a great poet and a great writer, even if you’ve never heard of the person,” Grossberg says. “There’s a lot of greatness that never becomes famous.”

The restaurant *Eleganté*, meanwhile, is a not-so-thinly disguised version of the venerable Greenway Plaza eatery, Tony’s. It’s the sort of place where the social pecking order can be gleaned by table placement, and reservations are a sign you’ve arrived, no matter where you came from. News of its impending closure sets off far-reaching ramifications.

Thanks to Grossberg, Tony’s patrons can now ask the bartender for the half-Indian, half-Israeli VJ Simon’s signature cocktail: a “Hin-Jew,” a martini fashioned from Bombay Sapphire gin, Slivovitz plum brandy and mango

chutney.

“For people who either won’t get admitted into certain clubs, or who just don’t want to go there even if they’re in the club, it’s a place to have fine dining and feel good,” Grossberg says. “It’s an upper-crust experience whether you’re upper crust or not.”

In the novel, he adds, “I used Eleganté as a tool to pit some people against the people who belong to the country clubs.”

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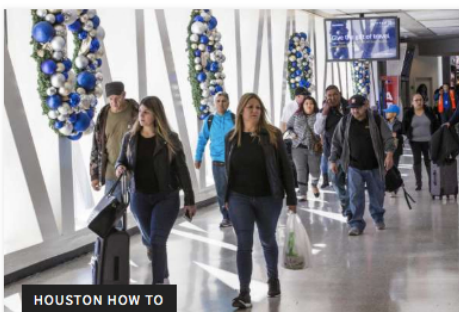
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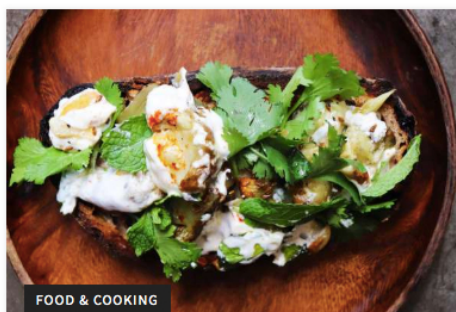
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