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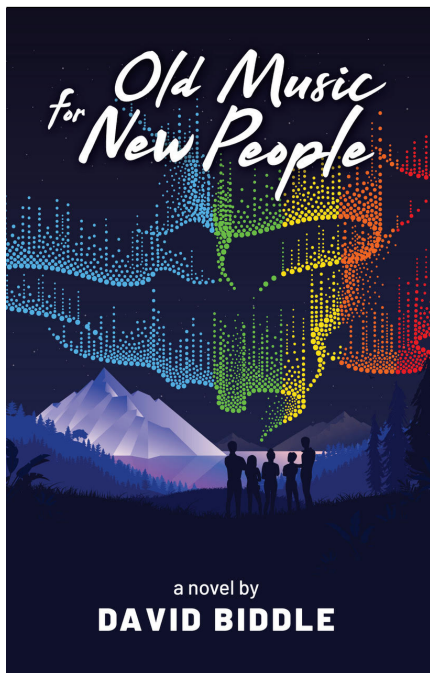
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Novel Excerpt by David Biddle

From Chapter 28 in *Old Music for New People*



Editor's Note: We're pleased to feature an excerpt from *Talking Writing* columnist David Biddle's debut novel in the TW Reading Series. *Old Music for New People* follows the Scattergood family through the eyes of Ivy Scattergood, a 15-year-old "goody two-shoes" who spends the summer of 2013 with her family at their New England vacation home. That same year, her cousin Robert comes to join them—but shows up as Rita Gomez.

Between crushing on Bailey Cooper, a baseball star, and listening to music, Ivy tries to process along with the rest of the Scattergoods the challenges of Rita's transition. In struggling with her feelings, she voices many of the concerns—and prejudices—of people unfamiliar with gender dysphoria.

For readers, Ivy's misgivings can sound disturbingly tone deaf. Yet fictional protagonists can also humanize the feelings of those with which we strongly disagree. As Biddle writes on his website:

Old Music for New People takes place during...a relatively innocent time for the gender transition movement. Here in 2021 things are much more sophisticated and public. There's a huge, dynamic national conversation going on right now about gender identity. *Old Music for New People* doesn't resolve any of the issues people are discussing, but it certainly adds to the discussion and attempts to put a lot of the points of view people have into a positive context.

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Published on Talking Writing (<https://talkingwriting.com>)

At *Talking Writing*, we celebrate the book's recent publication by [The Story Plant](#) [5]. We thank the author and publisher for their permission to run this excerpt as part of TW's Reading Series.

Don't miss "[Author Talk: David Biddle](#) [6]" a video interview with the author by John Vogel that also appears in TW's Fall 2021 issue.



Rita came in first, followed by Zaxy. His eyes were gleaming, and he kept shaking his head like he was trying to get rid of the big, slobbery smile on his face.

“Sorry I’m late,” Rita said. “I couldn’t decide what to wear.”

She had on her skinny jeans, ivory-white sandals, and the green blouse she’d worn into town that first time we went. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she had glittering green post jewels in her earlobes. She’d been careful with her makeup—low key. She was quite good at that, I decided. Regardless, she looked radiant and beautiful, lit up and sparkly. Her skin somehow had a perfect amber tint. I thought, here is my golden cousin. Could I ever look like that one day? I’m admitting that here. It felt weird to think like that. Was I being vulnerable or just giving in to something I’d fought my entire life?

Zaxy playfully pushed Rita forward through the great room to the table. There was an empty plate next to Mom, across from Uncle Edward. Rita sat down, with Zaxy plopping noisily back into his chair next to her.

“Boy, I’m hungry,” Rita said. “Starving, actually!” She helped herself to some chicken. Del passed the hamburger and

hot dog platter, then the salad bowl. Both times Zaxy held them for her while she served herself.

“Is there mustard and relish?” she asked. Del reached past Samantha for the condiments and passed them down, bottle by bottle by jar.

As Rita dribbled mustard on a hot dog, her mother, who was not looking at her, murmured, “Is that my top?”

“What? This thing? Why, yes it is, Mother. Of course, I don’t fill it out the same way you do, but I could, you know, depending on the look I’m going for. Don’t want to be greedy, though, or unnecessarily ostentatious. I’m happy with a loose fit. It feels wonderful, if you want to know. The material is so light and silky.”

Rita took a bite of hot dog and chewed with a look of enchantment on her face. After swallowing, she went on.

“The color suits me somehow. Don’t you think? It makes my skin glow, like perfect breakfast toast. It’s something about this particular shade of green. What’s it called again?”

Aunt Samantha had been looking down at her plate as Rita spoke. Now she raised her head. Her eyes swooped around the table from Daddy to me, then Bailey, Uncle Edward, then Mom, and finally to Rita, her daughter.

“Chartreuse,” she finally answered. “You know that.”

“Right. I know that. Because I helped you pick it out four years ago. At that shop on Rodeo Drive we liked so much. Our day in Beverly Hills. Just us. What was the name of that boutique?”

“Tory Burch.”

“Right. Yup. It was going to be the year of green. Do you remember? We declared that. You and I.” Rita smiled sweetly at her mother and waited a few moments. Then she went on quietly, carefully. “We also declared that it was a girls day out. Do you remember that as well, Mother? You said that. First thing, in the car. Girls day out in LA, you said. We talked the whole way up. I’d told you everything. We’d discussed it all. You said you already knew. You said you understood. You bought me this wig. I felt like we’d made it. I had no idea what came next, but I felt like we’d made it.”

Maybe she was doing it wrong. It seemed like there was so much hurt and hostility on the edge of everything coming out of our cousin’s mouth. This isn’t you, I wanted to tell her. Not you at all, Rita!

There’s no way to know if I was actually going to say that, but something was definitely about to come out of my mouth when Samantha burst into tears. So did Rita. My aunt covered her face and blubbered into her hands. Rita just shook at the shoulders a few times, then tears rolled down her cheeks. In the middle of all that, she tried to put relish and mustard on a burger. It seemed like Zaxy was going to start crying, too. When I looked over at Del, our eyes met.

I don’t know how long we all just sat there. Bailey patted my knee twice and kind of leaned into me. The silence might have lasted just seconds. It could have been a few minutes. I had time to wonder who was going to break the dead air. The answer came soon enough.

“Why can’t you just be yourself?” Samantha asked.

Rita sniffled a bit, stared down at the food left on her plate and sighed. “I am.”

“I see. Are you sure about that?”

“What do you mean? Have you got any idea—?”

“Of course I do. I see this,” Aunt Samantha waved the back of her hand in the air. “. . . this . . . other person you think you are. But what if you’re mistaken? Who the hell knows who they are when they’re just a teenager? It’s like

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someone started a rumor and thousands of you believe it. *If you don't feel normal, then maybe you're the wrong gender.* What the hell? It's just a rumor!"

My aunt sat straight up in her chair. "You feel different, right? You don't like sports or competition or talking about girls like they're sex objects. Makes you uncomfortable. Right? You don't want, you *need* to wear girls' clothes. So you *must* be a girl. That's the only answer. Right?" She glared at Rita. "Please!"

"It's not like that."

Samantha wasn't done. "What do you know about feeling different? Makeup? Stockings? Short skirts? Skinny jeans? Jewelry? Painted nails? Perfume? Heels? Breasts? Look at me. That's *me*, Roberto! I do all of that so I don't feel different from other women. Is that what you're after here? To look like every other woman in America? Is that your solution? Do you think that wearing women's clothes and makeup lets you off the 'feeling different' hook?"

She swiped a tear off her cheek. "Of course you feel different. Every one of us in this family is different— except maybe these two old men here." With a sneer, she swept a hand at Daddy and Uncle Edward. Zaxy laughed at that. Delmore had this look in his eyes, like he was watching something very unexpected on TV.

"We're *all* different here," Aunt Samantha practically shouted. "Get it through your head. We're half-breeds. We're terrible Quakers as well, I might add. We think too much, and we try so hard to care about everything. I spent my life being half a Latino girl for everybody in an Anglo school, smarter than everyone else and prettier, too. They were so scared of me. Scared! It sucked."

She wiped her cheek again with the back of her hand. We all waited for more.

Finally, Rita asked, quite calmly, "Why did you come here?"

"To bring you home. You're scaring me. Your father is scaring me, too. I've had enough."

"Mother, I'm happy . . . maybe for the first time in my life. Or I was, until *you* showed up. I'd been my *self*. My true self. It's pretty simple. Don't you understand?"

"That's what I'm talking about. That's why I'm scared." There was a hint of desperation in those words.

"Why? How can me being happy scare you?"

"You've brainwashed yourself. There's no happy in life. Not happy that stays. And there certainly isn't something called a true self. People watch too many movies and TV shows. The brain is much more complicated than that."

Her eyes swept around the table. Uncle Edward was leaning on his elbow with his hand over his mouth. The Modern Jazz Quartet continued to tinkle away in the background. I moved my hand and rested it on Bailey's knee.

"We thought you might come to your senses out here," Samantha said.

"I did. I have made my situation crystal clear," Rita said flatly.

"Do you have any idea how serious this is?" She looked again down the table at her husband.

Nonchalantly, Rita took a bite of salad, then said as she chewed, "You obviously don't get it."

"You keep saying that. Try me. Try all of us. Come, *Rita Gomez*. Tell us. Help us understand what you think we don't."



Art Information

- [“Come Together \[7\]”](#) and [“Untitled \(the Impetus\) \[8\]”](#) © Carol Jazzar; used by permission.



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A part-time professional freelance writer since he published his first article on appropriate technology education with *RAIN: Journal* in 1985, David Biddle has had work in the *Harvard Business Review*, *BioCycle*, *Huffington Post*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *GetUnderground*, *Resource Recycling*, *BuzzWorm*, and *Talking Writing*. He was also a contributing editor to *InBusiness* (the second-best sustainability publication of all time) for over a decade.

For more information, please visit [David Biddle's website](#) [9].

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