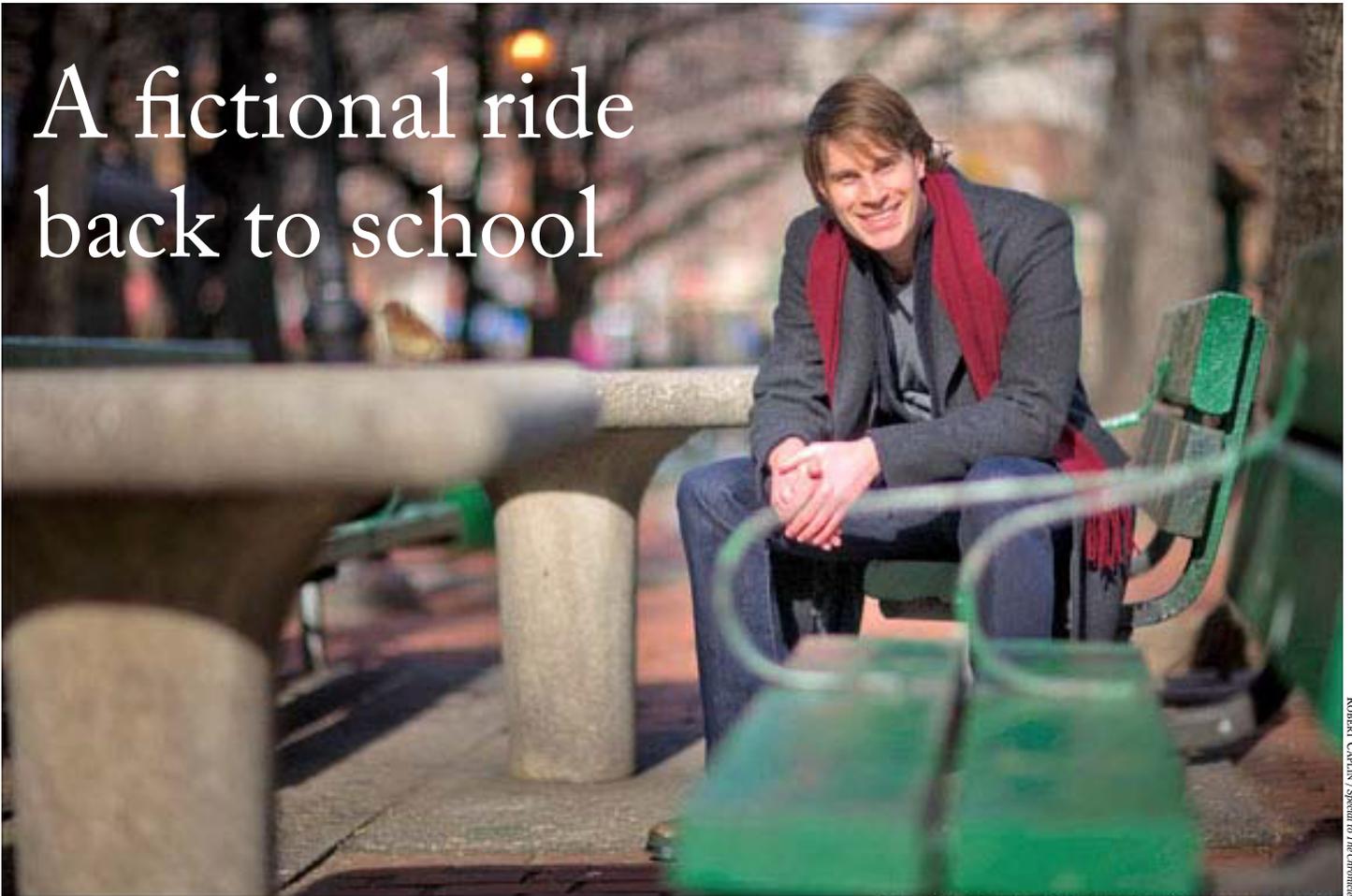


DATEBOOK

A fictional ride back to school



ROBERT CARLIN / Special to The Chronicle

Tom Dolby got plenty of press when his debut novel, "The Trouble Boy," came out in 2004, but much of it focused more on his family — his father founded Dolby Laboratories — than his writing.

By David Wiegand
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

NEW YORK — It's the day after Halloween in New York City and the streets of the West Village are littered with broken pumpkin. Flakes of glitter and pieces of neon-colored feathers have been ground into the wet pavement. A pair of colored-paper wings rests in the crook of a tree as if abandoned by an angel heading out of town.

Halloween in the Village is one big, out-of-control party — a lot like what the annual celebration in the Castro used to be before it was banned last year — but writer Tom Dolby was happy to sit it out, despite the fact that he lives right in the middle of it all in a two-bedroom apartment he bought a few years ago.

Arriving at a corner restaurant near his apartment in a pair of jeans, a blue sweater over a gray T-shirt, Dolby looks younger than his 33 years and one can almost see in his appearance

Tom Dolby has Dad
to thank for his
famous name, but
with 'Sixth Form,' you'll
know him for his words

Readings: Tom Dolby reads from "The Sixth Form." 7 p.m. Tues. (reception at 6). Books Inc., 601 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. (415) 776-1111; Friends of the San Francisco Public Library, Works in Progress series. With Dolby, Andrew Sean Greer and K. M. Soehnlein. 6:30 p.m. Feb. 28. Main Library, 391 Grove St., San Francisco. (415) 626-7512; 7 p.m. Feb. 29. Rakestraw Books, 409 Railroad Ave., Danville. (925) 837-7337.

For more info: www.tomdolby.com.

traces of the prep school life he wove into the fabric of his newly published second novel, "The Sixth Form" (Kensington Books, \$24). The book, which has already received several approving reviews, is focused on two similar but, at heart, very different boys at a New England prep school. While one of the boys is a typical jock, popular with everyone, especially with the girls, the other is bookish and introverted. One boy ends up having an affair with a predatory female teacher, while the other begins to realize he is attracted to other guys. You might think you already know which is which, but Dolby has made a point of not playing to obviousness in the book.

Dolby is tall and thin — you'd almost call him gangly were it not for his broad shoulders. His mouse-brown hair, on the long side and tousled, spills across his forehead and loops behind his ears to frame a long, high-cheek-boned face and a pleasant grin. At lunch in New York and a second interview in San Fran-

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Prep school years inspired 2nd novel

► **DOLBY**
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cisco a few weeks later, he talked about his life, about his upbringing in San Francisco and about how his family's emotional support has enabled him to make his own way in life as a self-sufficient writer and a gay man.

Dolby, the son of Dolby Laboratories founder Ray Dolby and his wife, Dagmar, was born in London but spent only a year there before his family headed back to California, where Ray Dolby had grown up. Although he had a privileged childhood, Tom Dolby says his parents were very "hands-on" in raising his younger brother, David, and himself: None of those morning head pats from mater and pater before the little ones were efficiently dispatched to the care of the nanny.

After attending a few preschools, young Tom was enrolled in the prestigious Town School for Boys in Pacific Heights, but he recalls that the selection process was different for him than it may have been for some of the other kids.

"You hear all about parents being all worried about their kids getting into the right elementary school, but for me it was, like, walk five blocks up the street. They sat me down for a little half hour test and it was like, OK, you're going there," he laughs.

Once he was in school, though, he found himself surrounded by a good many "high achieving kids (of) high achieving parents" and didn't fit in too well.

"I don't really blame the other kids or the teachers," Dolby says. "It's very hard to support a kid who's introverted and interested in writing and interested in the arts.

"I was totally obsessed with theater," he continues. "I was writing my own plays, which were totally mediocre, and acting in community theater because it was fun to do. But it wasn't athletics, so it wasn't valued, especially at an all-boys school."

Although he and his parents visited several prep schools, it was only after two years at University High School that his parents, realizing he wasn't very happy, thought the prep school experience would be good for him. That isn't to say they pushed him into going to Hotchkiss in Lakeville, Conn.

"The whole thing about pushy parents is kind of a mystery to me," he says. "You need to let your kids grow on their own."

Although he still felt introverted at the Connecticut school, Dolby found a way to express himself through co-editing a publica-

tion called the Whipping Post (named for the Allman Brothers song), which, though semi-underground, was funded by the school.

Dolby remembers feeling "scared" as a teenager but his involvement with the Whipping Post was a way of hiding his sense of being ill at ease. But there was something else that he was hiding at the time as well.

"I think I put it on the back burner because being gay didn't really feel safe" at Hotchkiss, he says now. "In my first year, a teacher had told me, in a kind of offhand way, about telling another student that Hotchkiss wasn't a good place to come out. Today, apparently, there are kids who are out, but they probably don't have an easy time of it."

Some of his experiences at Hotchkiss began to settle in his brain as seeds for a novel about boarding school life. In fact, at 18, he began making notes on the novel. At this point, one could say "flash forward to ...," except that it took Dolby more than 15 years for "The Sixth Form" to become his second novel.

That isn't to say he spent the entire time working on the book, although he admits he put the novel through multiple revisions and even ended up jettisoning an entire subplot before the book was finished.

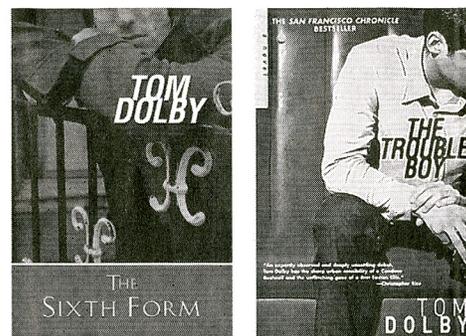
While he was at Yale University, Dolby began freelancing and working summer jobs. At 19, he held a number of jobs at the Village Voice, including working for columnist Michael Musto.

Moving to New York in 1998, after graduating from Yale, he wrote a nightlife guidebook called "CityTripping" and even launched a where-to-find-it Web site based on the book, but in his heart, Dolby knew he was meant to be a writer.

He moved to Los Angeles to get a master's degree in fiction from UCLA but didn't take well to the Los Angeles scene. After receiving his degree, he returned to New York and, although he'd done some preliminary work on the prep school book, he instead began to write what would be his first published novel in 2002.

"The Trouble Boy," a novel about a young man trying to navigate the gay social scene in New York City, received decent reviews when it was published in 2004 and a good deal of feature-story ink, some of which focused more on the author's last name and social prominence than on the quality of the book itself.

Dolby is used to questions about his background but half-jokes that, despite the fam-



"It's not like I want to write a book about my family, but bits and pieces of them have found their way into my first two books."

TOM DOLBY

ily's wealth, his father for years "used to buy his underwear at Sears" and the seats of the 10-year-old car that the family keeps in Tahoe are fuzzy with hair from a dog that died a couple of years ago.

Although he owns his own apartment in New York, which was professionally decorated and featured in a New York Times article a couple of years ago, Dolby considers himself very much a working writer, with a major emphasis on "working." One of the things he likes best about New York is that he has a number of friends who are writers, but because, like Dolby himself, they're working all the time, he doesn't see them all that often.

"Maybe for lunch once every couple of months or so to catch up," Dolby says.

Dolby's life is very much in balance these days. When he's not working, he spends time with friends or with his boyfriend of a year, to whom he has dedicated the new book. He spends most of his time in New York City but a year ago bought a 1931 farmhouse in Wainscott, in the Hamptons, where he finished the final draft of "The Sixth Form" last summer.

Although Dolby will take time for interviews and readings to promote the new book, his next projects aren't too far from his thoughts. He's finished a proposal for a young adult novel, as well as an adult novel about a California family. Yes, some of what he calls "idiosyncrasies" of his own family will inevitably find their way into the new book.

"It's not like I want to write a book about my family," he says, "but bits and pieces of them have found their way into my first two books and that made me realize that there was always this family theme in my writing."

Nowadays, though, family notwithstanding, Tom Dolby is making a name for himself.

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