

Greg Lilly's newest novel, *Devil's Bridge*, a real page-turner

By ROCHELLE BRENER
Special to Kudos

In a city that boasts some of the country's most talented writers, Greg Lilly is one of Sedona's best authors. I say that without reservation, and I am a voracious, somewhat jaded reader.

It isn't often that I become so engrossed in a novel that I resent anything that calls me away from it, but Greg Lilly's newest, "Devil's Bridge," held me in that kind of thrall. I read it, cover to cover, within 24 hours, breaking for sleep only when I started seeing double.

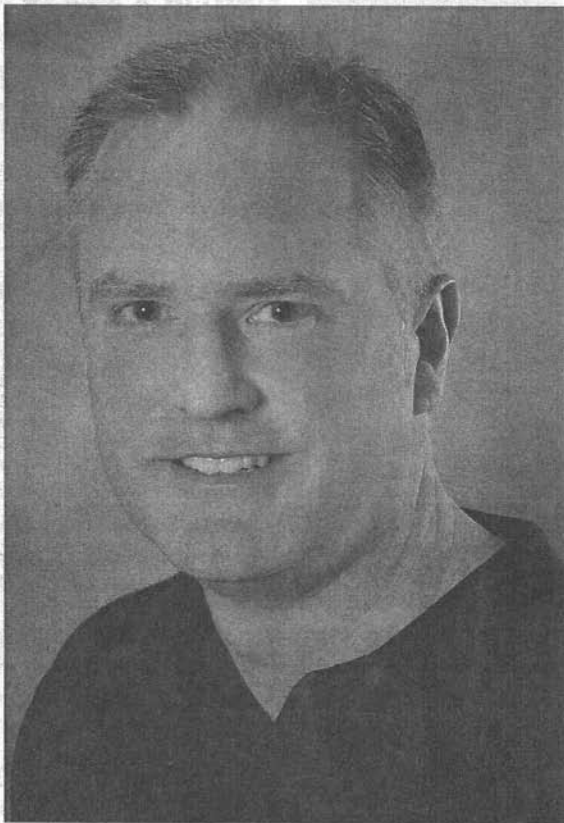
I have to admit, I've been a Greg Lilly fan since I read his earlier novel, "Fingering the Family Jewels;" but even my predisposition toward liking his work didn't prepare me for the total excellence of this one. It's about love, but it isn't your typical love story.

The quick-and-simple version is this: Myra, the female protagonist, is in an abusive marriage; her husband controls her with his violence and she has no self-esteem left. Topher, the male protagonist, has been her best friend since high school days. He is in love with a man who controls him through manipulation, and allowing this behavior makes him doubt himself. Neither Topher nor Myra see the parallels in their lives, but they both agree that the only way to save themselves is to leave their homes in Charlotte, N.C., — together.

This becomes a journey of growth and self-discovery for each of them, a story of friendship and the rediscovery of personal value. And a story about unconditional love. All I'll say at this point is that the two wind up in Sedona. How they get here and what happens along the way is for you to discover as you read the book. But I will say this: if this novel doesn't make the author a household name, America is reading the wrong novels.

Lilly himself is a gay man who hails from Charlotte, where the story begins. The interesting fact about this book is that it was really the first novel he wrote; "Fingering the Family Jewels" was written later.

"I think an author puts a bit of him or herself in every first novel," Lilly says. "But I kept running 'Devil's Bridge' through my writing group back in Charlotte. They kept telling me to add this or explain more. And when your writing group advises you to do something, you pretty much have to try it out. So I was always fiddling with it and I was never sure of it. When I finally got up the nerve to shop it around, the editors



Greg Lilly is author of "Devil's Bridge" and "Fingering the Family Jewels - A Derek Mason Mystery."

told me to cut out all the new stuff I had put in. I have to admit it gave me a bit more self-confidence than I had before."

One of Lilly's many great strengths as an author is his ability to create characters. Derrick Mason, the detective in "Family Jewels," is fully fleshed out. In "Devil's Bridge," Myra, Topher, and Gil (Myra's abusive husband) are so real you could have a conversation with them. But, the surprise element is Myra's grandmother, who takes up very little space in the book, but whose belief — that marriage is forever and that Myra should never have left her husband — mirrors that of so many women of her generation. She urges Myra to return, even if it endangers her life. Even with so little written of her character written in the novel, she is complete — you can picture her slit-line frown. What she does later comes as a shock, though it is definitely within her character.

Another of Lilly's strengths is his

ability to describe territory.

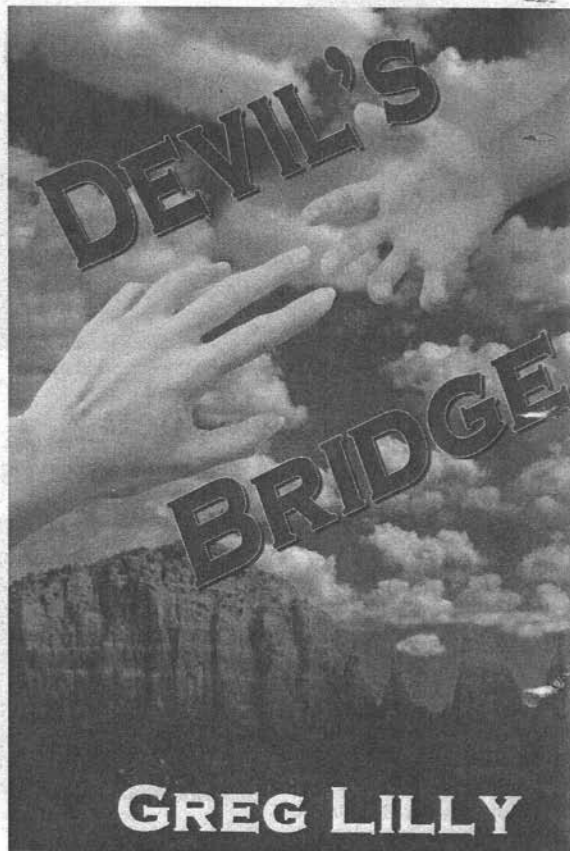
"Well," he says, "I've actually been in all the cities Myra and Topher travel through — Atlanta, Dallas, Santa Fe, Phoenix — so I have an accurate working knowledge of these places. I think it's easier to talk about a real place than to make one up. Although I have to admit that when I first set them out on their journey, I had to use a map to see what route they would take."

And yet another of his strengths is his pacing. Lilly's novels are beautifully crafted. They don't meander; they don't slow down. He writes one scene that builds upon the scene before it with elegant timing and exquisite architecture.

Lilly has gay protagonists in his novels. He is creating a new — and much needed — niche by doing so.

"I'm doing that consciously," says Lilly. "It's about time that so-called 'gay novels' stop dwelling on the pain of being 'different' and the angst of coming out."

Lilly treats his gay characters sim-



ply as people — with the same concerns and the same kinds of everydayness as everyone else. "Being gay isn't what defines anyone," he says. "It's the content of your character that tells others who you are."

At the outset of "Devil's Bridge," Lilly's characters don't know where they'll end up — anywhere far away from Charlotte is their goal. But once they see Sedona, they know they're home. "It was like that for me," says Lilly. "I came out to Sedona once for a vacation; and from then on, whenever we had vacation time, we'd come back. I think it was inevitable I'd wind up here."

At this writing, Lilly is 60 pages into his next novel — another Derrick Mason mystery story.

"This one is set in Sedona. Ruby retires to Sedona and Derrick comes too. [These are characters in "Fingering the Family Jewels."] Of course Myra and Topher are already here, and Sedona isn't all that big. They'll join up and probably appear as characters in each others' stories."

Lilly is totally in love with this

city. "I've never been in a place so dedicated to the arts. Here you can be any kind of an artist without having to justify it or explain yourself. And here, artists are so supportive of each other." Lilly is involved in more of the arts than writing. Every year, as a birthday gift, he treats himself to some sort of art-related course at the Sedona Arts Center. One year it was sculpture, this year it's watercolor. "It's not that I want to pursue anything besides writing, but I like to try new things just to see what they're like." And when a quarterly royalty check arrives in his mailbox, it's another work of art for his home. Lilly's "day job" happens to be the operations manager for El Prado Gallery in Tlaquepaque.

"Pick Up the Pace," a Greg Lilly workshop on how to structure the tempo of your writing, is offered free and open to the public at the Well Red Coyote bookstore, 3190 W. 89A, in West Sedona's old Cinedona complex, at 7 p.m. Thursday, April 12.