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FRESH AIR

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HEADLINE: Author Stephen McCauley talks about his new book "Alternatives to Sex," his career and life

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BODY:

TERRY GROSS, host:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

In the new novel "Alternatives to Sex," Williams Collins, the main character, confesses that for much of his life his addictive behavior had been of the most deeply shameful kind, obsessive cleaning: vacuuming, ironing, even secretly cleaning a sink or bathtub when having dinner at a friend's house. Then he add promiscuity to his list of obsessions. The novel is a social comedy about why and how he decides to end that obsession and practice celibacy. William is a gay man in his mid-40s who works as a real estate agent near Boston. Reviewing the novel in Entertainment Weekly, Jennifer Reese described it as a sweet and funny book, nearly perfect. My guest is the author of "Alternatives to Sex," Stephen McCauley. His other novels include "The Man of the House" and "The Object of My Affection," which was adapted into a movie starring Jennifer Aniston and Paul Rudd.

Let's start with a reading from the beginning of "Alternatives to Sex."

Mr. STEPHEN McCAULEY: "My decision to practice celibacy had nothing to do with crudery or penance, morality or manners, dysfunction or fear of disease. It had very little to do with sex. It was all about real estate. What had started out one year earlier as a bout of benign computer dating, a euphemism for online chatting, followed by brief encounters less then personal and old-fashioned anonymous sex because you exchanged fake names with the person, had turned into an almost daily ritual that had replaced previous pastimes, such as reading,

going to the movies, working, exercising, eating. I'm exaggerating, of course, but by how much I'd rather not say.

For months I'd known that my habits were slipping out of control, but I figured that as long as I acknowledged my behavior was a problem, it wasn't one. And then one rainy September morning, I woke up and decided that too much really was enough. I could feel trouble pressing down on me, like the low, dark sky outside my bedroom window. 'Do something about your life,' I told myself, a directive that's usually, in my case, translated as 'Stop doing something.'"

GROSS: That's Stephen McCauley reading from his new novel "Alternatives to Sex."

Stephen McCauley, welcome back to FRESH AIR. How would you describe why your character decides to give up sex?

Mr. McCAULEY: Well, the reason he claims is because he can't stand anymore walking into people's grim, badly furnished apartments anymore. It's just become too depressing to him. That's the rationale that he uses. I think closer to the truth is that he can't stand this combination of physical intimacy and emotional detachment, which is what he keeps encountering on these online meetings.

GROSS: Your book is set after September 11th. How does that affect your character's decision to try to be celibate?

Mr. McCAULEY: Well, you know, he says at one point that after September 11th everyone was trying to decide between doing whatever it took to combat the collective evil of mankind and do good, and on the other hand, putting all altruism aside and doing just whatever it took to feel good. And this is the conflict, the sort of moral dilemma that the main character in this book finds himself in at the beginning. And I think it's something that, you know, a lot of people that I know were feeling after September 11th. And one of the inspirations for this book was that I had this friend who called me up shortly after September 11th, and he told me, you know, I actually said, 'How are you doing?' And he said he was giving up his mistress because the whole crisis and tragedy made him realize what was important to him, which was his wife and his family. And a few months later, I bumped into him on the street, and he was with this mistress of his and, you know, later he said to me, 'Well, you know, I realized after September 11th that, you know, we could all die at any minute, and the most important thing is to do whatever you can to enjoy the day and seize the moment.' And it was a little bit of that moral confusion that I wanted to capture in the book.

GROSS: That's great.

Were you going through that at all in your own life?

Mr. McCAULEY: Yeah, I think I was. I mean, of course, you know, like everyone, I sat watching this and feeling that something big had happened, something had really changed and that nothing would be the same. And then, you know, after a few months, it was like, 'Well, yeah, but what exactly has changed? And what is different?' And, you know, like a lot of writers I know, the question quickly became, 'How am I going to write about this? And can I really write my domestic comedies and little comedies of manners in the aftermath of this?' And, for me, the decision that, 'Yes, of course, I can,' was really finding ironies like that in the way people were responding to it, which I found very funny and, on another level, kind of touching.

GROSS: Your character is also a realtor so, you know, he's addicted to finding men through the Internet, and he's also dealing with people who are selling and buying homes. So he's dealing with people selling and buying their homes and people selling and buying each other.

Mr. McCAULEY: Yeah, exactly. And there are a lot of similarities because as a real estate agent, he's invited into people's houses and he gets to look at what's in their cabinets and closets and their medicine chests. And it's a very intimate kind of profession, and people reveal a great deal about themselves, and it's the same way, you know, that he meets these guys online and then he goes and goes into their houses. So it's another way of getting into people's lives.

GROSS: Now, you know, both the online dating and the real estate profession have a lot to do with writing. I mean--what I mean is in online stuff you're selling yourself. I mean, you're flirting through your language, through your personal ad. And in real estate, like you're selling your home through the way your house is described in the classifieds. Have you given a lot of thought to how they compare and differ in the style of writing that they use?

Mr. McCAULEY: Well, that's a really perceptive question because they are really--they're very similar, you know. The essential quality of most real estate ads, as far as I can tell, is taking a potential minus and turning it into, you know, this great advantage thing, you know, tremendous potential. And the language of real estate ads is very coded. And once you begin looking at them carefully and researching them a little bit, you can tell, you know, right away what it means when it says it's a cozy apartment. Well, that probably means it's 300 square feet.

And there are similar codes that people use in their online dating ads, you know, to describe themselves in the best possible light, which usually means some kind of exaggeration or evasive language.

GROSS: And they're both about like evoking fantasies. You have fantasies about what your new life will be like in your new home or fantasies of what your love life will be with this new person.

Mr. McCAULEY: Yeah, exactly. Especially in real estate. I just know so many people who are completely obsessed with real estate these days, which is one of the reasons I wanted to write about a real estate agent. And the people that I used to spend an enormous amount of time talking about, you know, the ways that they were going to fix up their lives by finding a perfect spouse or the perfect partner, or fix up their relationships by doing this or that. It just seems to me that suddenly they stopped talking about all of that and were talking about, you know, how they're going to buy a better apartment or they're going to fix up their houses. And everything got shifted onto real estate. And I'm not sure if that's a product of age. It probably is. But there was almost like a kind of giving up trying to fix your personal life and just going straight for the concrete details like, you know, a better house, which is--but what they were really talking about, of course, was, you know, 'My life will be better if I move into a better condo or if we rehab the kitchen' and, you know, that kind of thing.

GROSS: Now, your character who is trying to be celibate and give up his online dating dating.

Mr. McCAULEY: Yeah, dating. Any...

GROSS: Dating sounds so prim, doesn't it?

Mr. McCAULEY: It does, really.

GROSS: But, anyway...

Mr. McCAULEY: I think that's what he really wants, actually. I think he really wants to be dating someone and talking to them and so on. Instead, he shows up, and there's the 40-minute encounter that has some physical intimacy. And he's always--then in the aftermath of that, he'll say, 'Oh, gee, you've got a tan. Have you been on vacation?' And the person he's with will say, 'That's kind of a personal question, don't you think?' And it's that sort of thing that really gets to him.

GROSS: Well, you know, you write about your character during the period of his promiscuity he was embarrassed and would keep intellectual books on his night table to make it seem like he spent his nights at home catching up with Simone de Beauvoir. But when he was monogamous, it made him feel unmanly and he'd cover up and tried to leave the impression he was leading a wild promiscuous life.

Mr. McCAULEY: Right.

GROSS: Could you talk a little bit about being uncomfortable with both sides, with both ends?

Mr. McCAULEY: You know, I think there is some of us who are uncomfortable with whatever we're doing.

GROSS: right.

Mr. McCAULEY: And, you know, that if you're being promiscuous, it seems like it's a bad thing somehow. And, you know, if you're being monogamous then, you know, that seems unmanly, that you should be more aggressive sexually. And, you know, 'What's wrong with me that I'm able to be faithful, you know, for a long period of time?' And so that's the kind of character that this is, and those are the sort of ironies of people's behavior and attitudes towards themselves that I just love writing about.

GROSS: My guest is Stephen McCauley. His new novel is called "Alternatives to Sex." We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

GROSS: My guest is Stephen McCauley is called "Alternatives to Sex."

Your character William is also obsessive about cleanliness, about cleaning and ironing. He'll even do other people's ironing because he's so into it. Why did you create him that way?

Mr. McCAULEY: I love the idea of someone whose emotional life is basically a mess who spends enormous amounts of time cleaning up their physical surroundings. And I did a lot of--well, I don't--I wouldn't say a lot of research, but I did do a certain amount of research into cleaning. You know, and there are volumes, Terry, of books out there about the proper way to house clean. And there's a great book called "Home Comforts" by Cheryl Mendelson, which is about 900 pages, and it tells you everything you ever need to know about the way to fold fitted sheets and so on and so forth. And then there's a whole subcategory of books that tell you how to clean the house with a lot of food products, for some reason. It's like, you can use lemonade mix and Coca-Cola to clean the sink. And I began buying a lot of this stuff and doing a lot of house cleaning using these products, which seemed completely insane. And after a while I figured, you know, and there's something about--it's sort of this alchemy, you know, that you're taking one product that's designed for one thing and using it for a completely other purpose, and it seemed really interesting and really amazing to me. And then, you know, one morning, I decided it would really just be easier to use Ajax instead of hauling all this food out of the cabinets and, you know, try to wash the bathtub with it.

GROSS: So did you...

Mr. McCAULEY: I don't know if that answers the question.

GROSS: Do you do a lot of cleaning yourself at home?

Mr. McCAULEY: I do a fair amount. I'm a pretty messy person, but I do like to clean. It gives the illusion that, you know, you've really accomplished something when you--when you've cleaned the bathtub or something. In fact, it's one of the reasons that I almost never write at home because I find that I'm often, you know, house cleaning instead of writing, so.

GROSS: Is it incompatible for somebody to be obsessive about, you know, cleaning their surroundings, you know, a sparkling kitchen, a totally clean bathroom, dining room and at the same time have lots of sex with strangers they have no idea who these people are?

Mr. McCAULEY: I think it's completely in keeping. I think that people compartmentalize their lives and don't make sort of those connections. Or because they feel a little bit uneasy about that, you know, entering a stranger's house and having physical contact with them within 10 minutes, then they go home and try to do a Lady Macbeth routine, you know, and clean the sink and start vacuuming obsessively, so.

GROSS: One of the men whom your main character sees is--you describe him as 'a right wing nut whose politics were in such conflict with his erotic appetites, it felt almost like my moral duty to have sex with him from time to time to point out to him what a hypocrite he was.' Do you know people like that?

Mr. McCAULEY: Absolutely.

GROSS: People whose politics and sexual behavior are completely at odds with each other.

Mr. McCAULEY: You know, I have a couple of friends who are married who are out having sex with other men at the same time, and there's something about the Internet that makes this kind of behavior possible and, in a way, "safe," quote-unquote, because you don't have to really reveal your identity and so on. And these are just people I, you know, actually talk to and have friendships with. And when the issue of gay marriage came up in Massachusetts, which is where I live, just took such a hard line on it, you know, about that this was destroying the family and the sanctity of marriage. And, you know, this is someone who had just told me these lurid stories about how he'd spent the weekend connecting with people online and so on. And that kind of hypocrisy is just something that I find, you know, completely appalling and outrageous and at the same time sort of hysterically funny, to tell you the truth, so.

GROSS: Now, your main character's closest friend Edward, you describe him as the only child of a pair of religious fanatics.

Mr. McCAULEY: I wanted to have a character who was, in a way, a little bit damaged by this religious fanaticism because he is rejected by his parents and they make life very difficult for him. And at the same time, he just wants to

continue trying to please them and makes great efforts at taking care of them when they're sick and they're elderly and so on. And, you know, I think that this is true for a lot of people, maybe especially true for gay kids who are raised in families where there is this kind of religious fanaticism. It's very damaging. It's very hurtful in a lot of ways. And it seems so completely out of keeping with the-- at least in theory, the principles that the family is trying to live by.

GROSS: Let me read something that your character says about his thoughts on religion and spirituality. He says, "For the most part I am baffled by spirituality. Religion, spirituality's sturdier cousin, has its drawbacks, for example, being the cause of 85 percent of violent conflict in the world. But at least religions have specificity, systems of punishments and rewards that are spelled out in detail. Religions have a narrative drive in them and they have, in some form or other, God, that main character to end all main characters."

Do you agree with your character here about religion and spirituality?

Mr. McCAULEY: Yes. I think one of the reasons I write is I like putting my opinions and my observations on things into my novels and into the mouths of these characters who resemble me in some ways but in most ways do not. But, yeah, you know, lately my view of religion is just I'm really baffled by people's attitudes towards religion and the way they use it as an excuse for so many things. And also, again, you know, after September 11th, it seemed that people were becoming more religious when it seemed to me, 'Well, gee, isn't that one of the causes of this problem right now?'

And as for spirituality, I really have no idea most of the time what people are talking about when they talk about spirituality and they say they're on a spiritual quest. And it usually involves some slightly tacky elements like, you know, scented lavender pillows and weird music that's completely atonal. And it's just stuff I don't really get.

GROSS: Have you ever had religion or spirituality in your life?

Mr. McCAULEY: I was raised Catholic, so I'm not sure what that means. I'm not a particularly religious person, and I don't know if I'm spiritual or not because I don't really know what spiritual means. I spend an enormous amount of time doing yoga and I have since I was about 15 years old, and the only--one of the main drawbacks of it for me is when I see people kind of, you know, gazing off into the distance with this blank stare as if they're having a kind of religious experience, when it seems to me it's a perfectly interesting and useful way of exercising. I can't take it too much further than that.

GROSS: Stephen McCauley's new novel is called "Alternatives to Sex." He'll be back in the second half of the show.

I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(Announcements)

GROSS: Coming up, "The Disposable American." Louis Uchitelle talks about layoffs and their consequences. And more with novelist Stephen McCauley.

(Announcements)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR.

I'm Terry Gross back with Stephen McCauley. His new novel "Alternatives to Sex" is about a 40-something gay real estate agent who is obsessed with cleaning and with cruising the Internet for casual sex. The novel follows his attempt to give up the second obsession and become celibate. McCauley is also the author of "The Object of My Affection," which was adapted into a movie starring Jennifer Aniston and Paul Rudd.

How old were you when you came out, and was it a big deal in your life or was it kind of obvious and everybody already knew and was comfortable with it?

Mr. McCAULEY: No one was comfortable with it at all. I think I was probably about 16 when I realized what my sexual inclinations were, you know, in my own head and sort of made peace with it. And I saw it as somehow connected to all of the political turmoil and the social movements, you know, feminism and civil rights in the '70s. And then when I began the process of coming out in a more public way, such as, you know, to my family, I was probably about 19 or 20. And that was very difficult, and it was very painful. My parents, who have always been extremely loving and supportive and very warm people, were somewhat conservative politically and had a little, you know, religious Catholic way of thinking about things, and it was very difficult. And there were several years where we didn't communicate very much and, you know, I lost contact with one of my brothers for a number of years. So it was kind of a painful experience in a lot of ways.

GROSS: Did your parents have the attitude that if you really cared about your family you would change?

Mr. McCAULEY: Yes, actually. That was stated in those terms. And, fortunately, I didn't really see that as an option. And so I just kind of felt, 'Well, you know, this is really who I am.' And it's funny because I always think of myself as having, you know, incredibly low self-esteem and not much of a sense of who I am. But I think the reality is that it's sort of like being a writer, you know, I find it very difficult and I think this a totally crazy profession. And every once in a while, I sort of haul out these materials about applications to nursing schools and so on and so forth, but I guess, you know, there's something in me that makes me feel like, 'You know, writing is really what I want to do and what I have to do.' And

that being gay is just an integral part of my personality and who I am and probably has since birth.

GROSS: How old were you when you knew you wanted to write?

Mr. McCAULEY: I think I probably always knew that I wanted to write. I was always reading when I was a kid, and I was always writing when I was a kid. But it wasn't something that was especially encouraged in my family, oddly enough, and I think it was seen as a little bit subversive because no one else in my family really read for recreation. And so I was always been told, you know, 'Put down that book' and 'Why aren't you watching TV like the rest of us?' And that kind of thing. But it seemed like a very audacious goal, you know, to want to write books. And so it took me until I was in my probably mid-20s to begin to do it seriously.

GROSS: Did you have any writing jobs before you started writing books?

Mr. McCAULEY: No. Before I started writing books, I taught kindergarten and worked in a travel agency for a long time. But, no, I really avoided writing in every possible way. And I teach off and on. Right now, I'm teaching at Brandeis. And I tell my students that, you know, when I was in college--and this is really true--every semester I would sign up for a writing class and I'd go to the first class, and they'd say, you know, 'Go home and write something and bring it in next week.' And I would rush down to the registrar and drop the class because it was just so intimidating to me. So I avoided it for a long time.

GROSS: Your writing is really funny and your perceptions about people just really make me laugh. Are you able to like go through life that way, too? Does life often seem like a comedy to you or is it only when you sit down to write that you can force it to be funny?

Mr. McCAULEY: You know, like a lot of people I know who write things that they intend to be comic, I'm really depressed most of the time, and, you know, sort of drag myself through my days and never find what I'm writing even remotely funny because the process of putting it down on paper is so painful to me. So, I guess, no.

But, on the other hand, it comes--you know, taking a comic or ironic point of view on things has always been my number one defense against things that make me uncomfortable or unhappy. And so, I don't know, maybe I've just contradicted myself.

GROSS: Well, no. As a matter of fact, I wanted to read one of your sentences that combines the depression that you say you have with your humor. And this is about antidepressants. And your character says, 'I was embarrassed by the fact that I wasn't taking any mood-altering drugs myself. It seemed so arrogant not to be depressed these days.' I think that's hysterical.

Mr. McCAULEY: Well, you know, I took antidepressants for about six months. And the reason I took antidepressants was because, of course, everybody I know is taking antidepressants, and everybody is saying that, you know, they just felt like finally they've tapped into their full potential and they had become, you know, the person that they could become. They had become the best that they could be. So I took antidepressants for about six months, and I thought, you know, 'If I have finally tapped into my full potential and become the best I can be, that is really depressing.' So I had to get off those pills right away.

GROSS: One more thing. Again I'm going to quote your main character, William. And he says--and I want to remind our listeners that, among other things, he's obsessed with cleaning and with other men. And he says, "I always try to give the impression that I was above superficial concerns about age, weight, sex, laundry and most of the others things I was obsessed with." And it just leads me to wonder, did you ever go through a period of writing where you thought you shouldn't be writing certain types of social comedy that other people might think of being shallow in their concerns, you should tackle like the great issues of the day?

Mr. McCAULEY: Terry, that's why it takes me, you know, five years to write a book, because I think there's a part of me that assumes if, you know, I'm writing this, it must be shallow and insignificant. And so, therefore, I have to, you know, stop and start all over again. And, at a certain point, my deadline is just--you know, there are so many deadlines piling up behind me that I've missed that I just have to forge ahead.

But, yeah, I mean, I really like writing about the daily lives of rather ordinary, not particularly heroic, people. And I think there's a real virtue in that. On one level, those are the kinds of books I tend to like to read, you know, Barbara Pym and Anne Tyler and those sorts of writers. But if I'm doing it, I think, 'God, this is so shallow and insignificant and, you know, I really should be writing about, you know, global issues.'

GROSS: Do you ever try it?

Mr. McCAULEY: No. Well, you know, I try to slip in a few observations here and there that does seem to have some greater significance than the daily lives of these characters.

GROSS: Your novel "The Object of My Affection" was made into a movie. Was it like 1998 or something?

Mr. McCAULEY: Yeah, exactly.

GROSS: With Jennifer Aniston and Paul Rudd. So are you like buddies with them? Does it make you good friends when they star in an adaptation of your book?

Mr. McCAULEY: Not exactly. You know, I went to see a play in Vermont who had Tim Daly, who was also in the movie, in it. And I went up afterwards, and I introduced myself, and he said, 'Well, you know, we were all told not to read the book because we would just find it confusing.' Because the movie was so different from the book that, you know, there were characters that weren't in the book and there were characters in the book, of course, that weren't in the movie, and everyone's motivation was entirely different. So, no.

I feel a little bit guilty because, you know, every time Jennifer Aniston's life takes a difficult turn like, you know, Brad Pitt leaves her for Angelina Jolie, the movie shows up on TV again, and there's this tiny, tiny little spike in book sales. So I'm sort of secretly a little bit pleased, even though I don't wish her any, you know, bad luck, of course.

GROSS: Stephen McCauley, thank you so much for talking with us.

Mr. McCAULEY: Thank you.

GROSS: Stephen McCauley's new novel is called "Alternatives to Sex."

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GROSS: Coming up, three myths that have been used to justify layoffs. We talk with Louis Uchitelle about his new book "The Disposable American."

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