



Blue Eyed Stranger

Alex Beecroft

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Martin Deng stands out from the crowd. After all, there aren't that many black Vikings on the living history circuit. But as the founder of a fledgling historical re-enactment society, he's lonely and harried. His boss doesn't like his weekend activities, his warriors seem to expect him to run everything single-handedly, and it's stressful enough being one minority without telling the hard men of his group he's also gay.

When Billy's and Martin's societies are double-booked at a packed county show, they know at once they are kindred spirits, united by a deep feeling of connectedness to their history and culture. But they're also both hiding in their different ways, and they need each other to be brave enough to take their masks off and still be seen.

Blue Eyed Stranger Details

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From Reader Review Blue Eyed Stranger for online ebook

Kaje Harper says

This second book in the series gives us two more interesting characters, and a fun immersion in the world of historical re-enactment.

Martin Deng is a history teacher, and a Viking re-enacter. He left his old society and founded a new one where he hopes, one day, to be able to be a gay, black Viking without the jibes and personality conflicts that kept him in the closet so far. But at present his fledgling society is struggling, all the work and weight is on his shoulders, and he's keeping his head down. He's also in trouble at work, where his efforts to teach history that might matter to his diverse students, rather than the white, bland history of the textbooks, results in him being fired. With no job, no money, and a hobby that often pays less than it brings in, Martin is under a lot of stress.

On the field of a re-enactment, he meets Billy, member of a Morris dance group, and fellow authenticity-lover. And fellow gay man. But Martin's attraction has to be tempered by his fears for both finding a teaching job and running his society, should his orientation come out. His closet still feels like the safe place to be.

Billy Wright loves his dance performances. Behind the classic black-face and costume, he's free to be the bold spirit he can't manage in his own skin. He meets Martin while in costume, and manages to make a connection that is both desire and mutual admiration. But keeping something going between them, when the mask comes off and real life presses in, is more difficult.

It doesn't help that Billy battles clinical depression, every day of his life. Some days are better, some are far worse, and it doesn't take much to derail him into a downward spiral. Martin may be the best thing he's found, or the thing that breaks him completely.

I loved both characters. Billy's depression was believably portrayed, as were Martin's conflicts, and understandable self-absorption. This was another original story, one that had both characters and atmosphere that didn't fit the common mould. I read it straight through, and I'm looking forward to the next one.

namericanwordcat says

This is a well done romance between two compelling heroes: Martin and Billy.

We get dual points of view in this book and that gives us deep into Billy's depression and Martin struggles with being fully out.

The depiction of depression is especially vivid and just as vivid is the love of history and place that inhabits the story. I love learning as I read and this details of Morris dancing and Vikings as well as early music are a treasure.

I also like how Billy's mental health issues are not make more powerful than Martin's layers that get revealed as the book goes on. Each of the men's troubles are as much a part of them as the rest of who they are.

Even though both Billy and Martin have groups of friends through their activities they are both loners. It would have been a richer book with some others that the heroes were close too and the romance could have bloomed a little more but it is a good pace of falling in love. and a good book.

Ulysses Dietz says

The second of the Trowbridge Blues series, we are once again dropped into this charming, fictional little city somewhere in what I assume is the UK's heartland. With Beecroft's elegant prose, we are also dragged into a world few of us know: the community of historical re-enactors, who recreate the things and activities of long-gone cultures. It's wonderfully geeky, and I suspect more educational than I realized as I read it.

Our heroes are unconventional, in that we deal not just with men carrying emotional baggage, but men marginalized for reasons other than being gay. Martin Deng—trying to lead a band of Viking battle re-enactors—is half British and half Sudanese. Reinventing himself as a historically plausible black Viking is a proud achievement, but not one his father nor his employer appreciate. As a result, Martin is unhappily closeted.

Billy Wright, on the other hand, is all-English and of gold old Trowbridge stock. Out and proud, his problem is clinical depression, which he alleviates by throwing himself into the motley embrace of a morris-dancing troupe. But Billy's black dog seems to be triggered by sensory overload, which suggests a kind of autism spectrum aspect to his depression.

There's a rather harsh meet-cute when Billy's dance troupe and Martin's battle clan get double-booked at a country fair, leading to a near-disastrous altercation. Both Martin and Billy step up to the plate and avert disaster. Thus the spark is lit, and our boys begin a halting courtship hampered by their respective emotional hurdles.

Lots of sharply sketched supporting characters appear to fill in the background, but the focus is really always on Billy and Martin. They reveal themselves to be deeply drawn and profoundly good guys with flaws that get in the way of their happiness. The historical background that illuminates their unconventional hobbies is both fascinating and adds to our understanding of how these two men suit each other. Both of them are drawn to authenticity and historical accuracy--something they cannot achieve in their personal lives due to very modern-day issues.

We all know where we want things to go, and watching Beecroft steer the narrative there is like appreciating a well-painted landscape. Every stroke of her pen adds to the picture, making both Billy and Martin ours.

We have just a very brief glimpse of a character from the first Trowbridge Blues—Fintan Hulme, the charismatic gay owner of a bookstore in which Martin and Billy seek refuge during one of Billy's attacks. I wistfully found myself hoping that at some point in this series these varied gay men will all find each other and become part of a larger Trowbridge-centered community.

Keep it up, Alex.

Vanessa North says

Really, really nice writing here.

Back when I was in college, I had friends who did all kinds of re-enactment stuff and always tried to get me to do it with them. Socializing in costume is basically my idea of hell, however, so I usually managed to avoid it, with the exception of a themed wedding I really couldn't say no to. So the idea behind this book? I was worried I would have a difficult with it. However, being a Beecroft fan and a fan of the first book in this series, I decided to give it a go anyway.

I am pleased to say I actually enjoyed the story quite a bit, and I found the romance between Martin and Billy sweet and all around lovely.

Also, hottest masturbation scene I've read in AGES.

Maja says

This book is so REAL in ways that I don't usually associate with romance novels, tackling depression and racism in such a raw and head-on way just within the first couple of pages that I was totally thrown for a loop. The former especially gets dealt with in such a shockingly deep and true way that I've almost never seen in writing before, and even if I hadn't liked this book, I would have respected the hell out of it for writing such a realistically depressed main character, because oof, did I ever feel for Billy. It's a brave decision to make, writing such an unpretty depiction of mental illness in a romance, and I'm really glad Alex Beecroft made that call.

Having said that, it does mean that there is just... a LOT going on in this book. Racism! Depression! Two different sets of fun cultural hobbies! Prejudice! Family and money troubles! Outing drama! There's just SO MUCH, and pretty much all of it overshadows the actual romance. I like the actual plot so, so much, and I like every aspect of it that's featured, but it just makes it feel... much less like the romance novel I wanted? There's barely any build-up to Billy and Martin being together, and while I love them together a lot, every aspect of their initial attraction and later relationship, it does feel like it's moving very quickly and so smoothly, the rest of the plot really takes precedence, which was a disappointment. I feel like maybe if it had been longer and the actual romantic build-up had gone more slowly, it would have been a lot more my particular type of book. As is, I did enjoy it, it just wasn't quite what I wanted or expected-- it's less a romance novel and more a lowkey dramatic story about two men who just happen to end up in a relationship, among everything else going on in their lives. And if that's what you want and what you enjoy reading, this book will be a delightful experience for sure!

Maria says

Mh.

What I liked about this one is the portrayal of MI and how love does not conquer all and is not the cure for struggling with your mental health issues.

What made me struggle with the romance even with that in mind was that some parts of the relationship felt... tricky? Maybe? It's hard to put my finger on the exact moments and actions, and I can acknowledge that this might have just been a timing problem for me. With things and upheavals going on in my own life I might have been extra sensitive and biased.

But some aspects did raise red flags that screamed "This could turn into a codependent disaster so fast." And it made me uncomfortable and prevented me from really enjoying the story or developing an emotional investment in their relationship.

I can't really speak on the experience of a Black queer teacher in the UK. All I can say is that A) the struggle with the whitewashed and exclusionary curriculum as well as the administrative side felt very real and well portrayed, but that I'm B) not willing to give extra praise for an (afaik) white author writing about the experience of a Black man with racism.

And while the historical backdrop of the story was as fascinating to me as it was close to my heart (since I'm no stranger to reenactment), some of the discussions of historical facts vs. moral and ethical issues made me uncomfortable.

Hence the "Mh."

Richard Derus says

Rating: 4.5* of five

I suspect a lot more of us are familiar with hiding the agony of depression than we're willing to admit or discuss. BLUE EYED STRANGER blows that set of closet doors wide open. Add in a peek at the culture of historical re-enactors, the second-generation syndrome, and hefty dollop of sex packed in the water of love, and the winning formula is complete.

My review is live now.

Wart Hill says

Things I Find While Shelving

I received a free ARC via NetGalley

Another beautiful love story from Alex Beecroft. Billy is dealing with crippling depression on his own, coping with his work with a morris dance group. Martin is a school teacher who moonlights as a reenactor of viking battles. They meet at an event and it's love at first sight. Pretty much literally, which is why this book is only getting 4 stars instead of 5. Their romance was just. BAM! TOGETHER!

That being said, I love them together. I love that love doesn't fix Billy, that even if Martin is good for him his love doesn't magically make Billy's mental illness go away. This book was, at times, heartbreaking - a

lot of the thoughts Billy was thinking are thoughts I've had myself. Add to that Martin's struggles - a black man raised by a father who taught his children not to give anyone a reason not to respect them so Martin isn't out - and this was another up and down read like Trowchester Blues.

But in the best way possible. Beecroft is wonderful at crafting these love stories. I think she's going to be added to my list of favorite authors.

Feliz says

Billy Wright has a problem: he's only visible when he's wearing a mask. That's fine when he's performing at country fairs with the rest of his morris dancing troupe. But when he takes the paint off, his life is lonely and empty, and he struggles with crippling depression.

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When Billy's and Martin's societies are double-booked at a packed county show, they know at once they are kindred spirits, united by a deep feeling of connectedness to their history and culture. But they're also both hiding in their different ways, and they need each other to be brave enough to take their masks off and still be seen.

This book was at once wonderfully entertaining and incredibly informative, at least for me. I'm nuts for reenactment events, and both main characters are involved in that: Martin's group focuses on ninth century Vikings while Billy does morris dancing, some kind of ritualized English folk dance that started in the fifteenth century.

Martin was a really interesting character. He was so proud of his ancestry and the history of black people in Britain but at the same time very aware of the fact that, as a black gay man, he belonged to not only one, but two minorities at once. Since the color of his skin is too obvious to hide, he is firmly in the closet – first, because he's a teacher after all, and also because he doesn't think being gay has a place in the macho world of his Viking warrior society. It was touch and go for a while if he'd ever find the courage and/ or the right incentive to stand by himself and his lover.

Which would be Billy, who is struggling with serious depression. His condition is portrayed very well, in my opinion, down to the fact that he feels unworthy to the point of invisibility unless he can hide behind his dancing mask, which allows him to connect to his own inner strength. I loved his character, plain and simple, his resilience despite the almost crippling disease and his seemingly never-ending ability to forgive. I wanted to smack Martin upside the head several times for how thoughtless he treated Billy at times. But they were also a wonderful fit as a couple. There was no magical cure, no healing power of sex. And yet, the love both men feel for each other as well as for their mutual hobby, offered realistic hope for a positive outcome.

I learned a lot about historical reenactment from this book, about the motivation of the people behind it and why it might seem so important to get it exactly right even if the details border on ridiculous at times. Much of this was described in this author's compelling prose, which I happen to like a lot but others might find

tedious, especially those not interested in history or reenactment.

There wasn't much sex in this book, which I thought fit both main characters' personas well. Their relationship was definitely not platonic, but not focused on mattress sports either.

This was a rather quiet read, sweet rather than raunchy and thoughtful rather than action-packed, beautifully written and featuring a lovely romance. Highly recommended.

Alisa says

I am quickly becoming a big fan of this author. There is just something about the way that she writes that I find unique and compelling. In this second book in the series Martin is a black school teacher who spends all his free time acting in Viking re-enactments. Martin is also gay and very much in the closet. One weekend at an event he meets Billy, a Morris dancer (and yes I did have to Google Morris dancing) and the two men instantly hit it off. They quickly fall in to a relationship (which probably wasn't very realistic but I enjoyed it anyways). Both men are struggling with personal issues. Billy struggles with a lifetime problem of depression and Martin is having problems with his work. The two men are going through very difficult periods of their lives but somehow they provide the strength for the other to get through it.

The plot was unique and I thought the author did a good job portraying Billy's depression. The information about their re-enactment companies was interesting without being too detailed. The ending was such a beautiful "aahh" moment. I loved it. Can't wait to read more in this series.

review copy provided by the publisher through Netgalley in exchange for a honest review

Elsbeth says

I received this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

At first I rated this book 2.5 stars, but, now that I have let the story settle in, it has dropped down to two. It just left me feeling a bit uneasy; that the relationship between the two main characters was unequal. Billy, one of the main characters, is severely depressed, and by severely I mean can't get up and move, locked in his head, a hair close to suicide depressed. The only thing that gets him moving is dancing with his Morris troupe. So him having a meet cute with a quick HEA, with no medical help, and without serious therapy, was too unbelievable for me.

Well I can't say that he has no help, Martin makes him seek help at the end of the book just before he moves in. Martin, at this point, has just lost his job, has little to no income, has just come out of the closet, and has been looking for work to no avail.

I mean I want to look this as a cute story of two flawed men finding love, but all I can see are red flags of codependency.

The second star is for the back story of Morris dancing, which I found fascinating, and I spent quite a while searching for images, and videos on the internet.
Beautiful.

I wish I could find a better gif to do it justice.

~☆~Dαni(ela) ♥ ?? love & semi-colons~☆~ says

Alex Beecroft's writing is poetry: lyrical, evocative, and properly British.

Both the MCs, Martin and Billy, are involved in reenactment societies, Martin in one focused on ninth century Vikings and Billy in one with a focus on morris dancing, a type of choreographed English folk dancing that started in the fifteenth century.

The men eventually create a new music/dance troop, and their passion for their hobby is contagious.

I am a history buff, and British history is my favorite, so I loved the descriptions of costumes, music, battles, and dances. A few years back, I went to a medieval reenactment, complete with full-scale battles, at Caldicot Castle in Wales, and it was BRILLIANT.

Fair warning, however: If you are not interested in history and historical reenactment, the constant descriptions might prove a bit tedious.

Martin and Billy don't date in the traditional sense of the word. They meet and immediately delve into a serious relationship.

Martin, who has a British mother and a Sudanese father, is deeply in the closet. Right after he meets Billy, he loses his teaching position. The head of the grammar school claims he spends too much time on his hobby, but it's clear that she's a racist bitch who tells Martin that his braids "smell" and suggests he cut them off.

Billy suffers from severe depression; during his lows, he goes into a kind of stupor where he can't force himself to move. We get both men's POV, and the depiction of Billy's depression is powerful and visceral.

Beecroft doesn't hold back, sugarcoat it, or provide a magical cure, and I applaud her for that.

Billy and Martin's relationship is one of comfort. They come to rely on each other. But Billy hates being relegated to "friend" status in public, and Martin becomes unhappy and unsettled when he can't find a new job.

There is almost no steam in this book, just the barest hint of it in a couple mild frotting scenes. There isn't even much sexual tension or kissing. The relationship feels strangely platonic.

This bothered me, but the sweetness, beautiful writing, and romantic HEA won me over anyway.

It was probably the most English thing Martin had ever done – morris dancing on the village green in front of the pub, while the drinkers who had come out from the bar to watch heckled them good-humouredly, and the ducks on the village pond quacked out of time with the thin fragile music of the harp.

Kazza says

Twenty six year old Martin Deng is a history teacher who is also involved with a re-enactment group. He's a black Viking when in his character of Ametel, and he's gay. Feeling like a bit of a minority, Martin is very much in the closet. The school he teaches at is run by a principal who doesn't much care for him or his hobbies. He's heard plenty of 'poofster' jokes around re-enactment campfires so he's worried about members of his group, Bretwalda, getting wind of his sexual orientation. And his dad is Sudanese and quite conservative – he must have a good job, marry a nice girl, settle down and be sensible. It seems that gay is not an option anywhere in Martin's life.

"She's wondering when she's going to get grandchildren." He could hear the narrowed eyes even over the phone.

Twenty four year old Billy Wright has inherited his parent's property and converted it into three flats. He rents two out and lives in the third. To supplement that income he works odd jobs when he can. Billy also suffers from fairly major depression. He finds himself in bed more often than he should when he needs to zone out of the world around him. But he's a Morris (folk) dancer and it's something he never misses. It gives him purpose and it gives him routine. The thing is, Billy feels invisible. People talk over the top of him and no one seems to need his opinion. He lacks a sense of self-worth, something people definitely struggle with when depressed.

Martin and Billy meet under somewhat combative circumstances at a fair when re-enactment and dance clash. But Martin is intrigued by Billy's blue eyes and Billy finds a warmth and a strength in Martin. From here on in they are, I suppose, an item. It isn't traditional dating but they aren't necessarily traditional guys, which sounds funny given they uphold tradition and customs from the 9th (re-enactment) and 15th (Morris dancing) centuries.

The biggest dilemma in *Blue Eyed Stranger* – a fitting title because of Billy's eyes and a song he dances to – is how you deal with one man in the closet and one man deeply depressed. And Martin ends up with the rough end of the pineapple at the school he's been teaching history at. It could have been angst-ridden or frustrating. However, it isn't either of these, it's sweet and gentle storytelling with a realism injected that made it even better. Martin's sister, Sheena, also suffers from depression so he understands it and can empathise. Both men have history in common and embrace each other's passion. There is a resolution to one issue, Martin coming out, and the beginning of hope for the other, Billy's depression. The author doesn't make everything suddenly and magically disappear but both men move forward positively.

The second instalment in the Trowchester Blues series is a nice back-up to book #1, *Trowchester Blues*. I

still have such affection for Finton and Michael, and it was nice to see Finn and his bookstore make a cameo appearance as well as James, an MC from the next book. Billy and Martin are lovely and add their own flavour to this series. I also admire and respect that Alex Beecroft gives a brief thanks to her therapist and mention of her own depression at the beginning. It's fitting leading into a book where one of the MCs is battling the *black dog*. The more we talk about it, the less stigma there is. Recommended reading for those looking for a book that is pretty much angst free, has interracial MCs as well as depression well written, and pays homage and respect to British history in a modern world. 4 Stars!

Review also at

K.J. Charles says

I love Alex Beecroft's writing, and I love this book.

Martin is such an interesting character, combining pride in his ancestry and black British history with a vivid awareness of himself as a minority. He can't hide being black, but he can hide being gay, and does. You can really see the accumulated affect of all the microaggressions on him, especially from the 'bantering' of the very macho world of Viking reenactors, which makes his situation very real. Meanwhile Billy is struggling with very serious depression. This was portrayed really well, with hope offered but no unrealistic healing powers of sex.

That sounds really gloomy. But actually this is a very funny book at points. It's also amazingly interesting. The worlds of reenactment and morris dancing are conveyed vividly and sympathetically, with an awareness of how it seems absurd at times, but also why it's important to people, and the book very lightly brings in a huge amount to think about in the discussions of history and tradition. This is a very *English* book in the best possible way, with ancient tradition meeting the modern mixed society, all underpinning a lovely touching romance.

Not star rating because professional connection.

Mark says

Modern day Saxons and morris dancers; I must admit while reading this book I actually learnt so much about what people get up to in their free time, how people keep history and traditions alive, etc. it introduced a whole new world to me. At the beginning I didn't have a clue about the different traditions in morris dancing and its history or how the whole re-enactment scene brings history alive so spectators like myself can get a real impression of history first hand. By the end of the book I was totally enriched about traditions and pastimes, although I knew they existed, never really bothered thinking too much about. Do you need to be a history buff or need an in depth knowledge of British culture to understand this book? No, not at all. It is all perfectly explained throughout the book, but slowly so you'll need to be patient until things become clear if you're not familiar with any of this for a story setting.

Martin is an history teacher who just loves to bring his history lessons alive and enthuse the children he teaches. Well, he definitely manages this and teaches them a history that is exciting, real and somewhat unconventional. Showing them the rich tapestry of different heroes from different, cultures, race and creed

and not the generic, white anglo-saxon history that the syllabus dictates. Why? Well, Martin is black and feels that he needs to teach and show an all inclusive history. As a teacher myself I thought this idea was absolutely wonderful!! However, the school is run by a somewhat conservative regime under the headmistress and inevitably two world's collide. In his free time he belongs a started a historical re-enactment club, Bretwalda, whose period is the saxons and frequent shows around the country entertaining the public with shows of battle scenes and saxon encampments.

Billy belongs to the local morris dancing side (team), the Griffins, another tradition going back to 15th century England. Kept alive all this time by the numerous clubs around the country. But even here there are regional variations and Billy's team belongs to the Border Morris who dance with blackened faces.

I must admit it took me a few chapters to get into the whole scene of both of their hobbies not having a clue about either. But whether it was intentional or not, at the beginning as a reader I was kept guessing a little as to what all this could be until things are gradually revealed and it is perfectly clear. I loved the second chapter where Billy is introduced, mystical and mysterious and asking myself what exactly has he been doing sat in a graveyard all night. However, as I read further I realised that this was part of the ploy to bring across the suffering of Billy's illness and works perfectly. I don't know how Alex did it but she had me feeling sorry for him from the very first time we read about him. Then when we find out what he is suffering from it makes everything all the more poignant but there are brighter times ahead for him which made my heart lift by the end of the book.

Martin and Billy first meet when the organisers of an event double book them which leads to an altercation of soap opera dimensions. I loved this, these guys all in their respective traditional get-ups fighting out whose slot it is. It was just comical to think of these guys arguing in their get-ups while the public is looking on. Anyway, when Martin and Billy meet, Martin is taken aback by the shy and unassuming Billy. Billy has good days and bad days, and despite what happened this was one of his better days.

I loved the way that they both had their issues they had to overcome in order to find their HEA. Billy with his illness and Martin not being able to come out due to his parents, his job and fellow club members. After all Saxon warriors are real men, rough and tough, not gay. Oh the prejudices I could have screamed especially with the conservative school he was working for. No wonder he was banged up in the closet when he first meets Billy. But his love and care for Billy changes all this.

I also felt Billy's pain, always putting himself down, believing himself to be worthless, always doubting himself and others, no self-confidence to speak of which would have him running away from everyone and anything. Cocooning himself up in his flat and shutting the rest of the world out. He would have days where too many people, too many noises, too much sensory input would have him running scared. My heart just wanted to reach out to him.

When these two were together you could just feel that they were so right for each other, but they both have to overcome their obstacles in their own way. In doing so they find a greater love for each other that just flourishes until they get to their HEA. Oh my I have read a number of HEA in my time as a reviewer but this one really was exquisite! Had me oohing and aahing all over the place for days.

Although this is the second book in the Trowchester Blues series it can be read perfectly OK as a stand alone. We meet one of the characters from the first book, Finn, when they have a cup of coffee in the bookshop. But there is no need to have any knowledge of Finn from the previous book as these guys don't know him and just see him as the colourful bookshop owner that he is. So it's more like a series of books based around a town and the individual stories of its inhabitants.

Another great addition to the Trowchester Blues series and can't wait for the next one to be released. I'm seriously invested in this series now.
