Banned in the U.S.A.

Aussie AIDS author alienated

January 1, 1996 By Bert Archer

April Fool's Day is Bryce Courtenay's book about his son Damon and his experience with AIDS in Australia, and despite being a bestseller in the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, if the New York City publishing cartel has its way, it will never be published in the United States.

This is doubly strange because Courtenay is the author of two international bestselling novels, including *The Power of One*, which Hollywood made into a film starring Stephen Dorff in 1991. Yet when Courtenay took his book to his American editor, Kate Medina at Random House in New York City, she "wouldn't even entertain the idea of it," he says. "They said that the concept of a heterosexual getting AIDS is simply unacceptable to their middle American readers." He received similar responses from all the other major New York houses he took it to.

America's loss.

April Fool's Day, named for the day Damon died, is the story of his life, first as a hemophiliac, then as a hemophiliac with AIDS. It is a stark tale, oddly told. There are few filters between the book and the events it describes, making such instances as Courtenay's first experience of his son's oncoming dementia -- told in pared down prose, blow by ridiculous, sad blow -- more than usually haunting.

Though the book is ostensibly about Damon -- whose illness, because of its timing, more or less charted the evolving topology of the Australian HIV and AIDS scene -- the insight it gives in understated glimpses of the progression of its author is truly fascinating.

Born in South Africa, but living for most of his life in Australia, Courtenay is a very typical sort of dad. Small and sprightly and gray at 62, he'll regale you with stories, one a slight variation on another, until you're thoroughly convinced he's mystical -- or really hard-up for an anecdote. And he's really quite the expert on more or less anything the conversation seems to be steering towards, from geography to modern technology. He's not my dad, but he could be.

As it happens, he was Damon's dad. In 1966, the year Damon was born, Courtenay was a hard-drinking, hard-smoking, 33-year-old ad executive with one of Australia's biggest ad firms -- a self-described "expert avoider of the too-difficult moment." He spent most of his time either at the office or out drinking with his mates, leaving his two young sons and his wife pretty much to themselves. When Damon was born with a bruise older than he was, Courtenay had to begin to

learn to be the parent of a hemophiliac. Which didn't change him all that much. But it did change him just enough to turn him from a really quite ordinary dad into something extraordinary.

In the way of these sorts of changes -- these slight, almost imperceptible personality shifts -- Courtenay began to merge his Australian-style savoir faire (which includes considerably more shoulder-jabbing and reference to one's loins than the original French version) with the commonplace desire of a father to move mountains to help his child. The outcome was a radically altered, radically improved health care system. And that was before his son got AIDS.

When Damon came downstairs one day in 1985 after getting a call from one of his doctors and told his dad he was HIV positive, not too much was known in Australia, by doctors or anyone else, about the virus. "Some people seemed to be dying," Courtenay recalls, "others not." Then the Courtenay's learned that AIDS would probably kill their son. Neither Bryce nor Damon were to take this new wrinkle sitting down.

Through his role as longtime spin doctor to most every Canberra politician, Courtenay achieved in Australia more or less what GMHC and ACT UP did in North America. That is, a move toward rational health care and general treatment of AIDS and those living with it, and a gradual acceptance of the syndrome as a syndrome, not a divinely concocted punitive plague.

As a result there are now dedicated AIDS wards, round-the-clock visiting hours, gay nurses for gay patients and several doctors assigned to each patient to cater to the variety of AIDS-related problems. There was considerable resistance to these developments from the medical community, but, Courtenay says, "it's a wonder what you can do with a quiet word in the right places when things get stuck."

And since his son's death in 1991 and the writing of *April Fool's Day*, Courtenay has become an unlikely activist, giving speeches, opening an AIDS-focused exhibit of gay artists' work at Australia's National Gallery, and creating a foundation, made up of all royalties from *April Fool's Day* (which now, even without U.S. distribution, total something over A$1 million), to give out about A$100,000 annually to help the families of PWAs, and, as he says, generally militating against "ignorance, stupidity, bigotry and secrecy, the components which most often combine to cause the human immunodeficiency virus to be spread through the community."

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