Beach Reads

July 1, 2002 By Nina Herzog

Summer's bustin' out all over, especially in the retroviral reading department, where African and African-American works are on display. From Harlem to Botswana, Cali to Texas, these writers illuminate both the cracks in the soul and the world caused by HIV and the "We shall overcome" responses that sometimes succeed.

In ***Getting Unstuck*** (Soden What's Next? Publishing), **Conscious** -- an HIV positive former bodyguard to hip-hoppers -- offers an unvarnished memoir of hell in the 'hood (including female-to-female HIV transmission) and how she prevailed (see "Mind Trip").

Also standing solidly in page-turner territory is ***The Devil Inside*** (West Beach Books) by three-time Lambda Literary Award nominee (and HIVer since 1988), **Randy Boyd**. His hero, Kordell Christie, a distinguished black gay businessman in Santa Barbara, runs into a childhood friend who mysteriously (read: suspiciously) appears out of the blue. All's dandy (and steamy) until the "friend" is accused of being a child molester. Boyd is taking on a timely issue that raises some unanswerable questions. "If you haven't read it, don't ask," Boyd quips about the cliffhanger. "If you have read it, don't tell."

In ***Far and Beyon'*** (Aunt Lute Books), first-time novelist **Unity Dow** takes the reader to Botswana, a Southern African nation that boasts staggering diamond wealth but also devastating poverty and the world's highest rate of HIV. Dow, who is a human-rights activist and Botswana's first female High Court Judge, offers the African teen coming-of-age story of Mora, who buries two bros with AIDS and drops out of school pregnant. Like a Jamaica Kincaid heroine, this plucky pioneer gets caught between a confining but magic ancestry and a generic modernity promising possibilities for women.

Tragedy is not the exclusive domain of the poor, as **Robert Taylor** attests in ***All We Have Is Now*** (St. Martin's Press). His protagonist, Ian McBride, an actor for the Capitol Rep in Washington, DC, loses the love of his life to AIDS and spends 12 years grieving before he loses his heart again -- this time, to a young heart-throbic fellow actor named Jimmy, who returns to his homophobic small Texas town only to be -- well, you get the picture. This is a formula we have seen before. So, the question is...where would you rather spend your summer: redneck Texas or boundless Botswana?

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