

Bodies In Motion

July 1, 2000 By David Bahr

Long after learning his HIV status at age 19, *Plato's Garage* (St. Martin's Press, \$23.95, 264 pp.) author Rob Campbell went into a state of "autodenial." "I realized I was obsessing about it, so I decided to take it easy, and then I was able to almost forget about it," he says. Even though he had lesions in his mouth and no energy, Campbell explains, "my mind was so shut down to normal communication, I wasn't hearing people trying to help me or tell me things."

Then one day, an alarm went off—the oil pressure signal of his V.W. Jetta, that is. For Campbell, who has always felt a certain spiritual synergy with his automobiles (he's also owned a Brown Pinto and a '72 Fiat Spider), this technical glitch was a wake-up call. "I felt like my car was speaking to me," says the 34-year-old Californian. "That red alarm light went off and everything started to make sense in my head." Initially reluctant to take anti-HIV meds, Campbell went on a drug cocktail. After weathering severe side effects, he says he has finally found happiness on a Sustiva/Ziagen/ ddI regimen.

As Campbell's health rebounded, his fledgling writing career took off. His first book, *Plato's Garage*, is a collection of humorous, highly original personal essays about cars. Campbell not only writes about the role automobiles have played in his own life but visits others for whom cars are synonymous with sex and identity, like a transsexual auto-engineer and an HIV positive mechanic. "For me, cars have always meant freedom," he says. Indeed, *Garage* opens with Campbell having sex in a guy's van on the beach. (He avows a preference for sex in other people's cars. "I've always owned small, crappy cars where the seats wouldn't go down all the way.")

Before *Plato's Garage*, the itinerary of Campbell's life read like a trip without a map. After graduating summa from UCLA, he worked a string of colorful, short-lived jobs including office manager, English teacher and porn star (a.k.a. Johnny Rhodes). His first foray as a writer—a piece about his stint as a sex- screen idol—never saw print. However, his perceptive and playful pen landed him gigs at the L.A. Times, Buzz and Genre, and then a book contract with St. Martin's Press. "Writing *Plato's Garage* cured me of my aimlessness," says Campbell, who is hard at work on his next book, a novel. "I've always gotten great delight from the miniscule things in life, but never had any real vision or direction. Now I know what I want to say."