Love’s Labor

Tales of the City creator Armistead Maupin’s latest novel has entirely new characters but strikes some enduring chords. Kief Hillsbery asks the author how his art imitates his life.

January 1, 2001 By Kief Hillsbery

Marcel Proust wrote that “love is space and time made perceptible to the heart”; Armistead Maupin has chronicled the contours of that space and the ticking seconds of that time for a generation ravaged by plague. After an eight-year hiatus, the celebrated writer has returned to fiction with the absorbing narrative of Gabriel Noone, a radio storyteller who can’t confront his own relationships until a 13-year-old fan named Pete shows him how. *The Night Listener* explores the notion that what Maupin calls “the most durable thing on earth” -- love -- is also the most amorphous, the most impossible to contain and identify. At the start of a six-week book tour, Maupin talked about AIDS’ impact on his life and work.

POZ: *The Night Listener* revolves around the narrator’s emotional entanglements with three people: his father, his estranged boyfriend and Pete, a precocious boy he’s never met. Two have HIV. Why did the favorable notice in *Publisher’s Weekly* fail to mention that?

Maupin: I find it very puzzling that people manage to make AIDS invisible today, even when reviewing a work that deals with its impact on life. But it’s not an uncommon phenomenon. There seem to be a lot of people with blinders on these days.

Gabriel says he tells stories to create order where none exists. He calls it “a mechanism for fixing things that can’t be fixed.” Does your storytelling have special resonance for HIVers?

I’ve been told that it does by any number of people who stand in line at my book signings around the world. Because [*Tales of the City* character] Michael Tolliver is perpetually living with AIDS -- I didn’t kill him off in the last episode -- a lot of readers see my novels as a sign of hope and continuing life. In *The Night Listener* I attempted to incorporate AIDS in such a way as to not allow it to overwhelm the narrative, but to reflect the enormous impact it continues to have on everyone’s life. *Tales* began in 1976 as a mainstream popular entertainment, and my job was to show people -- who might otherwise not have cared -- why this scourge should matter to them. *Babycakes*, my fourth *Tales* novel, was the first fiction about AIDS to appear anywhere; John Fielding’s was the first fictional AIDS death. And when it was serialized in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, many people complained that I had spoiled their morning entertainment with my political agenda.

Gabriel’s assistant, Anna, tells him, “When somebody knows you really well, you just have to hide things even more.” The parallels between your life and Gabriel’s make me wonder if you’re consciously reversing that process through certain passages in the novel.

I’ve always used my fiction as a way of saying deeply personal things to the people I love. *The Night Listener* was heavily colored by my relationship in 1984 with Terry Anderson. Our romance ended about four years ago, but we are still very much family members and soulmates and professional partners. I was aware when I was writing this that I was recording a phenomenon that would be of interest to a lot of people: what happens with a serodiscordant couple when the guy who expected to die has a shot at living. There’s a term I use in the novel -- cocktail divorce -- that I heard several times around town, and I felt a sense of relief that there was an applicable expression for what was happening to Terry and me. Both of us think there’s something to be said about the way in which gay families often allow the form of their love to change in order to continue as a family.

The climax is a stunning depiction of the “terrors of love.” For millions of people, AIDS has added further depth to those terrors. What has HIV taught you about love?

When HIV seemed to impose a death sentence on Terry, I was able to experience the love I felt for him in an intense daily way that I had never thought possible. But I had another lesson to learn when the new drugs gave Terry a chance to live, namely that love has a lot to do with freedom, and the ability to grant that to the people we care about.

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