Once and Again

February 1, 2001 By Clifford Chase

Guess Again

By Bernard Cooper
Simon & Schuster
208 pages, $21

At one point in Bernard Cooper's *Guess Again,* a lonely artist at a party decides to paint a "diagram" of the subtle lines of feeling, both good and bad, that he detects among the other guests: "He saw, against a backdrop of muddy color, filaments of glowing emotion." This precisely wrought collection of stories itself fairly glows with such tender diagrams: A gay man with AIDS helps his best friend (and ex-wife) keep tabs on her latest ex; a pregnant young single woman finds herself gradually bonding with her father's gay lover; a haircutter estranged from his aged father dons a barber's sheet on Halloween to pose as a very tall trick-or-treater on his dad's doorstep.

In each case, comedy is carefully balanced with deeper, more somber themes. "One of the things that interests me in the stories is the challenge of making certain preposterous situations believable," says Cooper, who spoke to *POZ* by phone from his Hollywood home. "There were places where I did get a little shiver of pleasure by taking them over the top." He laughs easily. "And it kind of matches my sense that the most ordinary experiences are usually pretty darn weird."

Truth was indeed stranger than fiction in Cooper's first three books, the memoirs *Maps to Anywhere* and *Truth Serum* and the autobiographical novel *A Year of Rhymes.* It's only recently that he began seeking truth through fiction, in short stories. "I realized that there's a danger in being an autobiographical writer, in that you risk mining yourself out of business," he says. "I thought it was time to open up the territory." Cooper, who is HIV negative, found it particularly illuminating to enter into the lives of positive characters, not only because of friends lost to the virus but because his lover of 17 years, Brian Miller, has AIDS. And whether the story is about an HIVer struggling to catch a breath or a widow who discovers her husband's secret life with men, Cooper sees the art of fiction as an exercise in empathy: "I want to achieve an intimacy not only with the reader but with the character, by jumping into their skin."

He hasn't entirely abandoned autobiography: In *Guess Again* the story "Exterior Decoration" -- a designer with AIDS takes it upon himself to repaint one neighbor's garage door and rearrange another's poinsettias -- was inspired by Cooper's lover. Miller is a psychotherapist, not a designer,

but after his first testosterone shot, he decided that the retaining wall across the street was an ugly green and simply repainted it terra cotta. “At first he was arguing that it was a perfectly reasonable thing to do,” Cooper recalls, “and then when he realized that maybe it was the testosterone, we were just weeping with laughter.” He’s chuckling on the phone as he tells the story, a sound as generous, frank and radiant as the 11 stories in *Guess Again.*

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