See Emily Play

Carter is the real thing in an era of expensive imitations

August 1, 1999 By Becky Minnich

It was only a year ago that writer Emily Carter struck a pose on the cover of POZ*'s first annual fiction issue. And Carter's prose is as seductive a mix of toughness and tenderness as her pose. Although she has a new man now, and a collection of short stories due out this fall from Coffee Table Press, her main focus is still on keeping body and soul together. Carter, a member of New York City's Roiphe (mom Anne, sis Katie) literary clan (Carter is her middle name) survived drugs, drink and other adventures of the go-go decade to turn it all into fiction for* The New Yorker, Open City *and other literary journals. "I was not a rebel—I was a fuckup," Carter, 38, told* POZ *about her youth. True enough, perhaps, but the result is a gritty, witty and immediate style that conveys both the highs and the lows, from being "a different kid, a little psycho" to dancing in topless bars to testing HIV positive.* POZ *caught up with Carter at home in Minneapolis, where the self-described "bad PWA"—she turns her nose up at the latest treatment news—adds the same spice to her treatment as she does to her stories: equal parts pride, pluck and orneriness.*

What's new?

Wow, all kinds of changes. I moved in with someone I've been seeing and got a part-time job at a Dayton department store. My writing is progressing. I'm not doing as many live readings anymore, mostly just writing from home.

Why Minneapolis and not Manhattan?

New York City is out of the question for me because it's too expensive and too dangerous for my sobriety. I spent many years there, taking lots of drugs and, frankly, I know where to get them. It would be too tempting to slip back into that again. The winters here are absolutely brutal, very extreme, and I'm a lover of extreme things.

You told *POZ* that isolation and inertia are part of who you are.

What I meant is, I'm not a joiner—of groups, communities, collective identities. I've never joined a PWA support group. I've never gone on a special diet for the immunosuppressed. I'm not careless—I don't go four days without eating or sleeping anymore, but basically I eat when I'm hungry, sleep when I'm tired, drink when I'm thirsty. I've been incredibly fortunate in that I haven't

had any opportunistic infections. I'm on AZT/3TC (Combivir) and nelfinavir (Viracept). My viral load is undetectable, and my CD4 count is between 250 and 300. Which is good, because it dropped below 100 a few years ago. But CD4s aren't my main concern. Maintaining my sobriety has always been the big challenge for me.

Has your focus on sobriety rather than on HIV been good for your health?

I'd be very careful about assuming that. We know so little about the relationship between body and mind. I know HIV positive people who are completely self-centered, neurotic health fanatics—some stay healthy and others are sick all the time.

I started reading about AIDS a few weeks after I tested positive in 1989. That's when stories first started coming out about people who were HIV positive and staying asymptomatic. I allowed myself to be totally influenced by that idea. I told myself I would be like that—I wouldn't get sick. It was a kind of healthy denial. And it allowed me to keep the focus on my sobriety. Maybe I just got lucky. I'll never know.

Do you pay more attention to news about HIV now?

I'm reading more about it these days, but I have to say I'm outraged at how little is in the media about what AIDS is doing to the Third World. I'm less concerned about all the new drugs coming out in this country than I am about the 16-year-old hooker in South America getting kicked out of her brothel to die in the streets. I see it as a huge devaluation of women's lives on a world scale.

So much for your isolated and inert nature.

Yeah, well, I'm not somebody who can just tune the rest of the world out. I guess that's a good thing.

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