Sex and Sickness in the City

January 1, 2006 By Josh Sparber

POZ talks to a book award finalist author Mary Gaitskill, 50, was caught off guard in October when she became the first-ever National Book Award finalist with an AIDS- themed novel, Veronica (Pantheon, $23). Set in the mid-'80s, Gaitskill's protagonist, a young model named Alison, befriends her HIV positive office coworker Veronica, an abrasive eccentric 20 years her senior. The book lost the award but has won raves from PWAs—and people who love an edgy, chillingly crafted story.

Why make Veronica a PWA?
A friend of mine was one of the first people to die of AIDS. She was kind to me when I really needed kindness and had almost forgotten how to relate to people. I really wanted to capture that.

What were your artistic influences?
When I was younger, I hated when people would link sex and death. I would see it in D.H. Lawrence stories and feel a degree of scorn. I felt like we had gone past this, and AIDS made people feel like "My god, here it is again."

How did the book come together?
When I wrote the first draft in 1992, I looked at the disease with extreme fear and horror. When I worked on it again in 2001, I wanted to keep those elements, but also give it a more modern point of view—it's no longer a death sentence.

So you think mainstream culture feels more detached about it?
HIV no longer seems as shocking to me and, like most people, I'm afraid it has somewhat dropped off my radar. It's still horrible, but it doesn't have that gothic feeling that it had when it first appeared.

Does that make Veronica a period piece?
I hope not. The shock of really brutal illness is going to be with us for a long time.

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