The Plot Thickens

A Crime Novelist Shares the Facts Behind His Fiction and Discloses the Secrets of His Most Intimate Mystery

April 1, 2006 By David Thorpe

Award-winning author John Morgan Wilson, 60, has penned seven mystery novels starring HIV positive sleuth Benjamin Justice. As his latest installment, Rhapsody in Blood, hit shelves in March, Wilson surprised the public with his own positive status.

This interview marks your first public disclosure. Why now?
I was diagnosed with HIV in 1995, the same week my brother was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. I decided never to tell my very distraught father, because I didn't want to overload him. Also, I pay the bills as a TV writer—a physically demanding job with long hours. I thought disclosure might make employers think I couldn't handle it. But then my father died in 2001, and I've been so frank about HIV in the Ben Justice books that I assumed many readers thought I was positive anyway. But I still felt that I was being personally dishonest. I decided I should talk about it.

How has your personal experience with HIV influenced the content of your books?
I wrote the first one shortly before my diagnosis, when I was dealing with my lover dying of AIDS. So that book was about grief. My character Ben wasn't infected until the third book. After I tested positive, the novels became a lifeline. I could get what was going on inside of me out—on paper. One of my themes is how harboring painful secrets, like HIV, can wreak silent damage over time. I suspect that writing a series so dark and hard-edged costs me more readers than it gains me. But I have a strong following. Once, a man asked me if the books are available on audio. He was going blind with CMV and would no longer be able to read. They're not. But he said, "It's all right. My friends promised to read them to me after I can't see." That really validates my work.

What HIV-related health issues does Ben face? Are they similar to yours?
I've been on meds for ten years, and I've had wasting in my face and from the waist down. In my last book, Ben loses weight and has to deal with side effects. He's a really tough guy—an ex–college wrestler, quick with his fists—so it messes with his identity. AIDS also really wallops Ben when he's diagnosed. He goes into a deep depression. I was in emotional turmoil at first too, and my health nose-dived. Therapy and Prozac saved my life. Ben's also been on Prozac, and it caused sexual dysfunction. My editor at St. Martin's Press asked recently, "Is Justice ever gonna get laid again?"

How about Rhapsody in Blood? Does it reflect your life?
Ben gets involved with a closeted Hollywood star and knows he has to disclose before they have sex. It's the first book where he is comfortable with HIV and living life naturally. I've also learned to accept HIV as part of my daily life and not dwell or obsess about it. Of course, Benjamin Justice is hairy and bald—and I'm neither!

HIV isn't exactly commercial gold—did Ben's HIV affect sales?
Limits of Justice, where he first has HIV, was the first book to go into a second printing. USA Today did a five-column rave review. My editor gave me a lot of freedom, and nobody complained about the sexual frankness.

Who would play Benjamin Justice in the movie?
Someone once suggested Bruce Willis, but he's too old now. Another person who optioned one of the books for film mentioned Woody Harrelson. He's both attractive and dangerous. That's Benjamin Justice for sure.

Do you know of any other openly positive mystery writers?
No. HIV's nothing to be ashamed of. But I also understand that it's not something one necessarily wants to talk about constantly or announce to the world.

Now that you're an openly positive writer, how do you feel?
This isn't as big a deal as you might think. I'm physically and emotionally in a good place, and it just seemed like the right time. I also have a new novel, so it's somewhat self-serving. I always try to promote my book!

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