The Viral Lode

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*How would E.M. Forster have written about AIDS? Two master fiction writers with new novels out in October -- David Leavitt (*The Marble Quilt*, Houghton Mifflin) and Joan Silber (*Lucky Us*, Algonquin) -- talk about infection, irony and the uses and abuses of illness in literature*

Joan Silber: My novel, *Lucky Us*, is about a woman engaged to get married who tests positive. There's always a risk that using an illness in fiction will lead to sentimentality -- to the disease-of-the-week movie with a soggy plot and saintly characters. One way you avoid sentiment in your writing is to go for irony instead -- I am thinking of the story in *The Marble Quilt* in which a man who might be HIV positive dies in a plane crash.

David Leavitt: Humor and irony seem to me essential tools for tackling these matters. They are also the tools that -- in my experience, at least -- people with HIV most often employ as they wage their own battles. I once met a woman in Los Angeles -- very sick with AIDS -- who, when I asked her how she'd gotten infected, said, "Well, it could have been my boyfriend, who was gay. Or it could have been that I shot heroin for five years. Or maybe it was all those blood transfusions after the car accident..." Real heroism is not antithetical to irony -- it requires strength, which in turn requires a sense of humor. The thing to avoid is the sanctification of the ill and the fact of illness that, in my view, mars so many well-meaning but finally banal novels and films -- I'm thinking in particular of *Philadelphia*.

In "The Infection Scene," you write about a man with an insistent wish to contract HIV from his lover, and you use a parallel scene from the boyhood of Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde's lover, when he sought to infect a friend with mumps so they could be sick together. This made me think a good deal about the circle of illness -- who's inside it and who's out -- and how the outsider feels. It's a question I've chewed over both as a novelist and as a buddy at GMHC.

Oddly enough, when I started writing this story, I wasn't thinking much about HIV. I was thinking of infection in a purely metaphorical, even moral, sense -- and then the obvious parallel with HIV came into my mind. In certain communities at certain times, it is possible to perceive *not* being sick as a kind of exclusion. To try to become infected with HIV is to commit what Wilde called "a long and lovely suicide" -- Andrew Solomon has written about this -- yet it is also, in a very real and reprehensible sense, to take advantage of those who are HIV positive, to implicate them in one's suicide efforts.

Late-19th-century settings are featured in two of the stories in *The Marble Quilt*. In "Crossing St. Gotthard," you are straightforward about the tutor's sexual feelings for his boy pupil -- what's

under the surface in the fiction of Henry James or most of E.M. Forster is on top here. How do you think late-19th-century novelists might have written about the AIDS epidemic?

With James it's hard to say -- he was so evasive and so timid when it came to the erotic. Wilde's work seems to me full of premonitions of HIV -- especially in *De Profundis* -- and certainly the sexual ambience of the *fin de siecle*, with the constant threat of syphilis, suggests some strong parallels with AIDS. Forster, I think, would have tackled the matter head-on or not at all -- silence was his preferred mode when he felt that he could not do a subject justice.

You've written about illness before. Has writing about HIV seemed different?

Yes, but writing about cancer differs from writing about HIV. Whereas cancer comes up, quite literally, of its own volition, people become infected with HIV because of something they did or something that happened to them. The old joke that Freud got cancer of the tongue from talking too much seems featherweight compared to AIDS, where the finger can be pointed so much more precisely and cruelly. When you write about AIDS, you have to contend not only with grief, sickness and bravery, but with risk, blame and guilt. That HIV found its way gradually into the backgrounds -- and sometimes the forgrounds -- of so many of the stories in this book probably reflects the fact that they all take place in the early '90s. If I'd sat down with the plan of taking on HIV, I probably would have worried more, but I didn't. For me, at least, the back door is usually the best way into the house of fiction.

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