POZ Picks—December 1997

December 1, 1997 By Edited by Phil Geoffrey Bond

Pick of The Litter

Home for the Day
Anderson Ferrell

Throughout America's history, some of our greatest novelists have sprung from the South, and in recent times AIDS fiction has also produced its share of literary greats. This revealing book is a significant contribution to both categories.

In language that shimmers with vibrant texture, Ferrell tells the story of an AIDS widower who wants to bury his lover's ashes in a private cemetary owned by the widower/narrator's family of faded southern arisocrats. Memories of his lover, a world-class tap dancer, are juxtaposed with details from his childhood in North Carolina. Indeed, Ferrell's description of a long ride to a carnival on the back of a bad boy's bicycle perfectly captures the nuances of adolescence: Thrilling, sexy and tender.

Steeped in loss-both from AIDS and aging-*Home for the Day* is a novel of quiet brilliance.

--Dick Scanlan

Books

First Comes Love
by Marion Winik
(Vintage Books)

In Marion Winik's memoir, the two segments of the U.S. population most affected by the epidemic, IV drug-users and gay men, are brought together in a moving love story. Winik, a recovering IV drug addict who is a heterosexual woman, meets a gay man-also an IV drug-user-in New Orleans, a town where anything goes. Mysteriously and magnetically attracted to each other, this seemingly odd couple forges a bond that leads to marriage and children.

Like most great love stories, their feelings for each other aren't easily explained, and Winik wisely

chooses not to rationalize their connection. What emerges in her exploration of their relationship is acceptance in the face of pain, and a joyful justification for throwing caution to the wind when love comes along. Winik's straightforward style is simultaneously elegant and devoid of self-pity. Her words illuminate how love has changed her, and how it changes everyone.

--Chris VanGroningen

Unbound: A Book of AIDS
by Aaron Shurin
(Sun and Moon Press)

If AIDS has provided us with its own terrible and beautiful vocabulary, Aaron Shurin's exquisite book provides a historical context for that vocabulary by fashioning a kind of tone poem made up of small essays. In the most seamless writing possible, Schurin brings back his favorite ghosts-Whitman, Cavafy, Joyce and Chaucer-and presents them with his own stories about men who have lived such baffling contemporary lives.

The writing in *Unbound*-mostly having to do with AIDS in the bodies of lovers and friends-is achingly beautiful, intelligent and cynical. It leaps off the page with the vision of AIDS that first haunted Shurin, rendering him an unwilling but, ultimately, impassioned witness. More than any other longing that guides the pages in this book is the one of turning away from staistics to face the meaning of AIDS. Through startling language and painstaking focus, Shurin is able to find a singular way to deal with the complex nature of loss, friendship and love.

--Michael Klein

Marijuana: Not Guilty As Charged
by David R. Ford
(Good Press)

David R. Ford's virulent but giddy contribution to the debate on the decriminalization of marijuana makes a thoroughly convincing case against the lack of logic that underlies America's drug war. Both sobering and provocative, the book blows smoke in the face of legalization's stubborn opponents, effectively easing the apprehensions of those who are ill-at-ease with the concept of marijuana as medicine-not just as an accessory to the occassional P-Funk All-Star reunion show.

Most likely, Ford's favorite film of 1997 is *Conspiracy Theory*-he sees government plots everywhere he looks. Fortunately, he's got the documentation, even though one expects to learn that disinformation agendas were covertly responsibile for those "Keep Off The Grass" signs littering out elementary school lawns. *Not Guilty As Charged* casts the current criminalization of marijuana in the same mold as the disastrous ban on booze earlier in this century; Ford urges us not to make the same mistake twice.

--Sony Aronson

Recordings

Stephen Schwartz: Reluctant Pilgrim
(Midder Music)

With this unique new CD, the Oscar- and Grammy-winning composer of *Pippin, Godspell, Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* has made his mark on pop music.

Schwartz brings out the best of what music should be, regardless of the medium. Each piece is a tiny three-minute three-act play, at once narrative and accessible. Each of the 11 tracks on his new album, for which he also provides the vocals, is a testament to the strength of his writing-fresh and funny songs that also reverberate within the soul of the listener.

Haunting images that document Schwartz's very personal experience with AIDS are captured in "Life Goes On," a ballad about a man who is forever changed after the passing of a friend. Schwartz does not romanticize the disease with his lyrics about "bruises and tubes in your chest...patches of skull in your hair...the bones through your skin...as you struggled for air."

Stephen Schwartz was long ago guaranteed a place in songwriting history. Broadway divas have been belting out his tunes for decades. Now, we get to hear from the man himself.

--Phil Geoffrey Bond

Sex, Death and Grief
Ann Silversides
(CBC Radio)

The heart of this work lies in the words of those who have faced the epidemic head-on. Toronto-based Ann Silversides assembles a diverse group of gay men and their families, along with Dr. Walt Odets and the poet Mark Doty, for a sometimes heartrending and always thoughtful conversation about living in the age of AIDS.

The tapes serve as an oral history of the time before the hope/hype of protease inhibitors. Consequently, the political cant of what we now call the AIDS industry is notably absent; the people here are too busy with the matter at hand-surviving.

--Kevin O'Leary

Theater

The Last Session

Jim Brochu/Steve Schalchlin
(Currican/Playful Productions)

For all the drama that the epidemic has produced-both on stage and off-it's interesting that there are surprisingly few "AIDS musicals."

The Last Session focuses on Gideon, a successful songwriter who is failing various HIV therapies. At the start of the play, we learn that he will take his life the following morning. It then becomes the task of the other characters-three vocalists and one technician, who have gathered in a recording studio for (you guessed it) "the last session"-to convince him that life is worth living.

Steve Schalchlin's extraordinary gospel-flavored music is the nucleus of the piece. It is the mismatched electrons (that is, the book) that run away from the score at warp speed. Debates concerning religion ("Can't I be a *fag* and a *Christian* at the same time?") and attempted wit ("I don't want to be the one to make you put the *sin* in *sin*ger"), do not succeed in shedding new light on anything in particular.

Still, credit is due the producers and creative team for turning out a new piece that examines AIDS musically. It's anybody's guess what lies in store for *The Last Session*, which recently moved to a larger venue-the 47th Street Theatre. As Gideon puts it, "I guess it's not the end of the album, just the end of Side One."

--Phil Geoffrey Bond

Cyber POZ

Up In Smoke

With frontline AIDS doctors arguing its benefits for wasting and nausea, with thousands of patients going public with testimony, it's a wonder that marijuana is still ranked alongside heroin as one of the U.S. government's worst bogeymen. You can learn about all facets of the pot controversy in an ever-growing harvest of sites on the Web. For medicinal uses, check out articles under "Alternative Medicines" in The Body, Being Alive, Project Inform and most other privately sponsored AIDS info sites. To learn about the political and legal fights going on, there are upward of 20 groups, ranging from Marijuana Policy Project to the Lindesmith Center and the marijuana evangelists at the San Francisco Buyers Club, founded by gay civil-rights activist Dennis Peron.

Alliance for Cannabis Therapeutics
www.marijauna-as-medicine.org

Californians for Compassionate Use
www.marijuana.org

Cures Not Wars

www.cures-not-wars.org

Lindesmith Center
www.lindesmith.org/mmjmain.html

Marijuana Policy Project
www.mpp.org

The Medical Marijuana Archives
www.alpworld.com/HEALTH/Prop_215/index.html

--Jeff Dawson

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