Live Through This

In his blog post titled “Where Madonna, Queen Bey, Sexuality, Love, Race, HIV and God Intersect,” POZ deputy editor Trent Straube shares his observations about essays by author Clay Cane. Below is an edited excerpt.

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A big buzzword of the moment is intersectionality. In loose terms, it refers to a theory by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw that explores how social identities overlap and create interconnected systems of discrimination. For example, consider the kinds of challenges facing an HIV-positive Black lesbian living in poverty in the rural South.

I kept thinking about the topic as I read Clay Cane’s collection of autobiographical essays, Live Through This: Surviving the Intersections of Sexuality, God and Race. Clane is gay, has a white mother and a Black father and grew up in poverty and in the Black church; the latter is the subject of his 2015 documentary, Holler If You Hear Me: Black and Gay in the Church. More important, he’s a talented and insightful journalist willing to report on his own life (full disclosure: Cane and I were colleagues nearly a decade ago at HX magazine, a weekly gay guide to New York City).

At the beginning of Live Through This, Cane writes: “As I grappled with various identities and survived hostile environments, in my lowest moments, I would ask: ‘Can I live through this?’ I did. My lifeline for survival was understanding the nuances of race, class, gender, sexuality, and faith. My very being exists in intersectionality.”

His strength and success lie, in part, in his ability to bring those identities and intersections out into the open. He divides the essays into five categories: sexuality, love, race, God and intersections. But he never gets bogged down in the theoretical and the analytical. That would be a bore. Instead, he uses engaging storytelling to let you know what it’s like to actually experience a life of intersectionality.

He navigates the diverse and nuanced subjects with a voice that’s clear, accessible and inviting, even when the stories turn dark, such as when Cane describes his father’s violence or the time a (white, older, heterosexual) doctor shamed and terrified him by saying the acne on his face was probably from AIDS, a conclusion the doctor apparently made once he learned that Cane was gay. (You can read a related excerpt from that same chapter, which is titled “I Am HIV,” here.)

But there’s a lot of fun stuff too. As a white middle-aged gay dude, I was surprised at how often I related to Cane’s story, particularly when I read about his mom’s obsession with Prince’s Purple

Rain phase and about Cane's own love and appreciation for Madonna—whose Truth or Dare documentary was a gay benchmark and recently became an HIV touchstone too. Live Through This also offers a dose of inspiration.

In writing the book, "my intent was to free somebody a little bit, the way Prince freed me," Cane recently told journalist Keith Boykin at a Q&A at Bluestockings bookstore in New York. (During the talk, I learned that the book title also references the 1994 album Live Through This by Hole, released a week after lead singer Courtney Love's husband, Kurt Cobain, died.)

But let's get back to Cane and intersectionality. "I can't dismiss the residue of poverty, losing friends to HIV, the blows of words like nigger and faggot, or surviving spiritual violence," Cane writes in an essay about his father. "We carry the past and the present. The scars of our past are a piece of our intricate imperfections. These experiences not only form who we are; they shape our fears and burdens. That's the other part of intersections—they're not solely the identities, they're the fights we may never win, which are unavoidable in the journey." That journey, as Live Through This illustrates, can be lightened by sharing our stories.

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