Poetic Justice

Lambda Literary speaks with Emanuel Xavier about the club scene, HIV/AIDS and the reissue of his cult novel.

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Emanuel XavierCourtesy of Lambda Literary

The Black and Latinx New York club scene of the 1980s and ’90s is having a 2019 moment. With TV shows like the New York house scene–centered Pose and the ball culture callbacks embedded in RuPaul’s Drag Race, this moment of unadulterated queer expression is tapping into the current zeitgeist.

With perfect timing, Queer Mojo recently released the 20th anniversary revised edition of Emanuel Xavier’s cult novel Christ Like. An urban bildungsroman set in the ’80s and ’90s, the novel follows Mikey, “a spirited but self-destructive survivor of sexual abuse, a gay Latino native New Yorker caught somewhere between Catholic guilt and club kid decadence looking to fit in as part of a

family.” Navigating a landscape of petty thieves and clubheads, Mikey’s hero tale is one filled with a powerful mix of unfettered pleasure, squalor and excess.

William Johnson, online editor of Lambda Literary, spoke to Xavier about writing Christ Like and why now is the perfect time to revisit it. Below is an edited excerpt.

What inspired you to write the novel?

I was working at the time at an LGBTQ bookstore in New York City called A Different Light and reading a lot of queer fiction. I wanted to write a novel that would speak to my own experiences as a gay Nuyorican who had been part of the ball scene and club culture, but I had nothing other than a poetry chapbook, Pier Queen, under my belt. I had absolutely no education or training as a writer, but Leslie Feinberg encouraged me to read his book Stone Butch Blues.

After reading that and also Hubert Selby Jr.’s Last Exit to Brooklyn, I felt I could publish something raw and imperfect that could still be considered artistic. It didn’t matter that I had no editor and no literary experience.

Except for the works of Essex Hemphill, Assotto Saint and perhaps a few others, there wasn’t that much in regard to the experiences of queer people of color in the late ’80s and early ’90s.

Parts of the book seem personal. How did friends and family respond?

My closest friends loved it because they could relate to some of the characters and had fun trying to establish who I was writing about. Others considered it blasphemy that an insider was detailing so much.

My own family didn’t read English, so there wasn’t any resistance there. Either way, it was my reality, so I never felt compelled to seek approval for sharing my truth, especially because this was a fictionalized account.

Why was this cultural moment important to document?

I wanted to write our history as nightlife creatures and house children from our own perspective in a way that was genuine and real.

Except for Paris Is Burning, there was not much out there documenting our lives and struggles as queer people of color in the ball scene. Yet our words, our voguing, our fashion, our influence was appropriated by the wider gay culture and eventually by mainstream society.

Back in 1999, I thought it would be significant for somebody who was not white or privileged to tell a story from his own viewpoint about the world we lived in. We were also losing people we loved to violence and AIDS, and yet we were often invisible within our own LGBTQ and people-of-color communities.

I did have issues with the original printing of the book, especially because one of the characters, Janet X, who is trans, was referred to with the wrong pronoun. That was a publisher decision that

was corrected, among other things, with the 10th anniversary edition, which eventually brought the book back into the market.

The 20th anniversary edition features a new cover but keeps that sensibility. If anything, this documents the fact that some of us were ahead of our time when it came to the current discussion about gender.

Before social media, going to a club was like going to church. Hence the title Christ Like, which confused people who thought it was a religious book.

Why do you feel this revisiting of AIDS is happening now?

In a world where there are people out there who actually believe and try to convince others that horrors like the holocaust or slavery are hoaxes that never happened, it is important for new generations to be reminded of how inhumane people can be. We can't remain silent because something does not affect us directly.

We lost many people to AIDS, and it is a disease that continues to elude us. The AIDS epidemic was a tragedy that brought us closer as a community because we had to step up for our brothers and sisters who were dying around us while mainstream society and the government looked away.

After all the people I had personally lost throughout the years, including a stepbrother, it was the loss of my friend Willi Ninja [from Paris Is Burning] that hit me the hardest. It was 2006, and this was still happening!

The last time I saw him, he asked me to read my poem "Legendary" to him. It was just the two of us in that hospital room, and I cried while reading it because we both knew it would be the last time I would see him alive. He died just days later.

I think there is a whole new generation that now has an opportunity to understand what it must have felt like for many of us to lose our closest friends like that, mostly during the same time period.

Not to mention more compassion for those who are HIV positive and continue to face daily challenges. It is crucial that our history is remembered and never forgotten.

What do these projects get right or miss about those years?

There is truth in that there was so much inaccurate information out there that people were afraid to kiss or even touch someone who tested positive. People would think twice just to share a restroom. A cough could have you labeled "tick tick boom" by some vicious queens.

Many died heroically in that they wanted the world to know what they had struggled with and helped send a clear message to others to protect themselves. Others died quietly in fear of being judged.

I think what might be missed and [what] Christ Like highlights is that not everyone became an activist during that time. The main character, Mikey X, traveled in a world where AIDS was rampant and affecting many people around him.

Like many young gay men coming into their own, for better or worse, he just wanted to have fun and escape the reality of the world around him. He somehow endured, if only by chance. He is already a survivor of child abuse, and so he has a distorted take on sex during one of the most dangerous times in our gay history.

How does your book inform current conversations?

The book did well when it first came out 20 years ago. It was even a Lambda Literary Award finalist, but it never really resonated beyond the underground NYC arts scene.

RuPaul's Drag Race and Pose have helped popularize the house and ballroom community. This title could speak to a new generation of young gay men as another alternative insight [into] what it was like for some of us to come of age in the late '80s and early '90s.

Much has changed in the last few decades, but it helps to understand how far we have and/or haven't come. AIDS-related deaths may have declined and treatment options have improved, but access to treatment is still an issue.

Many of the narratives highlighted come from white perspectives, so it may also be worth considering the stories people of color have shared throughout the years.

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