POZ Awards 2021

In an article titled “POZ Awards 2021: Winners,” the POZ editors compiled the winners, as voted on by readers, of the Sixth Annual POZ Awards, which spotlighted HIV/AIDS in media and culture. Below is an edited excerpt.

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Best Celebrity Advocate: Miss Universe Andrea Meza

Crowned Miss Universe 2020 in May 2021, the stunning raven-haired beauty from Chihuahua City, Mexico, is more than just a pretty face. Miss Meza is a women’s rights activist, a software engineer, a certified makeup artist, a model and a fitness and health aficionada. Also on her list of passions: sexual health and HIV. Last September, the 26-year-old was named the Madrina (madrina means “godmother” in Spanish) of the Latino Commission on AIDS, which has a long relationship with the Miss Universe Organization.

Miss Universo 2020 Andrea MezaCortesía de La Comisión Latina sobre el SIDA

Best in Visual Arts: U Equals Fucking U

From the brain and, ahem, other parts of gay adult film star Kayden Gray comes this super sexy, funny and informative romp (or roll?) of a two-part film. Part porn, part romance, U Equals Fucking U pairs Gray with avant-garde performance artist Bishop Black. The couple navigates truly hot sex while educating viewers about HIV and the fact that someone living with HIV who maintains an undetectable viral load via successful treatment cannot pass on the virus sexually, a fact known as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U). Gray has also issued a PG version (sexless, alas).

U=U has never been so hot!

Best in Film or Television: It’s a Sin

Written and created by Russell T. Davies of Queer as Folk fame, this British miniseries follows a group of young, cheeky, gay men and their friends as they navigate sex, love and friendship while the threat of a mysterious virus looms. A sometimes funny and sometimes tragic depiction of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s in the United Kingdom, It’s a Sin—like The Normal Heart and Angels in America before it—has quickly become part of the canon of HIV cultural history.

Promotional art for “It’s a Sin”Courtesy of HBO Max and Channel 4

Best in Literature: My Unexpected Life: an international memoir of two pandemics, HIV and COVID-19 by Martina Clark

Martina Clark was diagnosed with HIV when she was 28 and was told she had five years to live. With her life plans waylaid, she dived into activism. She had no idea that in 1996 it would lead her to become the first person living with HIV to work for the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. Her career had her traveling around the world spreading HIV facts and advocacy and educating everyone from students to dignitaries to hotel housekeepers. In the book, she weaves in parallels between the HIV pandemic and our newest virus, SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19. She tells her story with humor and insight.

Best Virtual Event: HIV Stigma and Faith Summit

Produced by GLAAD (the advocacy group focused on LGBTQ representation in media) and launched in February 2021, the first-ever virtual summit to host discussions on HIV and faith in the South aimed to educate participants about HIV issues in the Southern United States. The three-day event featured panels and workshops intended to bridge the gap between religion and HIV and sexuality as well as discussions on race, queerness and HIV stigma.

Best Reason to Keep Acting Up: HIV Criminalization

In the majority of states, it remains a crime to expose someone to the virus, with or without motive, intent or transmission. Thirty-seven states still have laws on the books that mainly target poorer populations, people of color, trans people and sex workers. Prosecution of these outdated and biased laws causes irreputable harm to the accused—whether or not they are convicted. Although some states—for example, Illinois, Virginia, California, Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada and North Carolina—have made great strides and modernized the language in their laws, much work remains to be done to get these unfair laws completely off the books.

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