

Essential AIDS Fiction

BY ERNIE MCLEOD

Fiction requires perspective. Perhaps this is why so many novels return to childhood and adolescence, and why the coming-out story formed the prototypical gay novel.

When AIDS hit in the early '80s, gay artists were suddenly confronted by that which could not be understood. For how can a plague be comprehended from its midst? It would be like attempting to grasp a hurricane's path of destruction from the eye of the storm, the devastation of war from the battlefield. Gay writers—many on the front lines of the battlefield—were faced with a dilemma: the only thing more impossible than responding to the AIDS crisis was not responding to it.

In many ways, journalism and nonfiction are better suited to describing events that seem horrific beyond imagination, particularly when (despite reports to the contrary) there is no end in sight to the horror. Much of the most powerful AIDS writing has been nonfiction—whether investigative reporting like Randy Shilts' 1987 *And the Band Played On*, or intimate memoirs such as Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time* and Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast*. Nonfiction does not necessarily demand distance or resolution. It can say "Look, I am a witness. This is how it is."

The expectations for fiction, on the other hand, are that it will transport you to a heightened world where life truths are revealed precisely because they needn't conform to the limitations of reality. Fiction that merely tries to duplicate reality seems, oddly enough, unconvincing. Sadly, many early AIDS stories and novels, while important testaments to the astonishing will to create amid even the most dire circumstances, won't stand the test of time because, ultimately, disease and death are predictable. Fiction must surprise, or even the most heart-rending subject matter becomes cliché.

Here are five fictions from the battlefield that surprised me, works that should remain

essential reading long after the war is over:

The Body and Its Dangers (St. Martin's Press, 1990) was Allen Barnett's first and only published book. As it did with far too many artists, AIDS ended his career just as it was beginning. Fortunately, he left behind the six beautiful stories in this collection, most of which chronicle the effect of AIDS on relationships among lovers, former lovers, and longtime friends. Barnett poignantly reveals the enormity of the disease by illuminating small, sometimes trivial moments in lives under siege. The collection's centerpiece,

THE BODY AND ITS DANGERS

AND OTHER STORIES



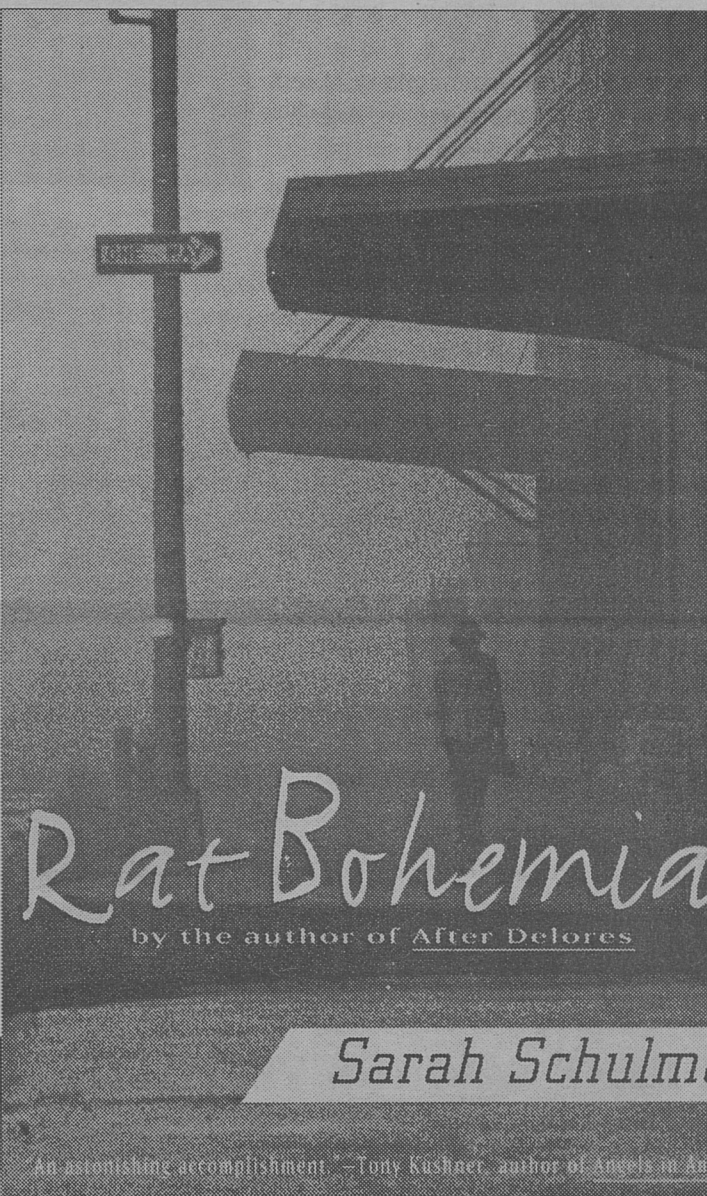
ALLEN BARNETT

you have to start over. The stories you make up for yourself don't seem to have any relevance to the life you lead; the horrors you imagined pale beside the ones you experience, and in your mind there's a battle as it tries to find something to grab on to, whether it's a memory of something that happened or a memory of something you imagined, a story you told yourself."

Wearing activism on your sleeve can be deadly to fiction writing. Too easily, the propaganda line is crossed and the characters become cardboard mouthpieces for the previously converted. If Sarah Schulman weren't such an unflinching writer, she might walk the line less successfully than she does in her 1995 novel *Rat Bohemia* (Plume). Reading her work, you've little doubt she's been in the activist trenches for the past two decades. But her characters come alive, and she's one of the few writers to put gay men and lesbians together on the page, warts and all. It takes brutal compassion to write this honestly: "One thing I know for sure is that AIDS is not a transforming experience.... We expect that once people stare down their mortality in the mirror they will

understand something profound about death and life that the rest of us have to wait until old age to discover. But that's not what happens. Actually, people just become themselves."

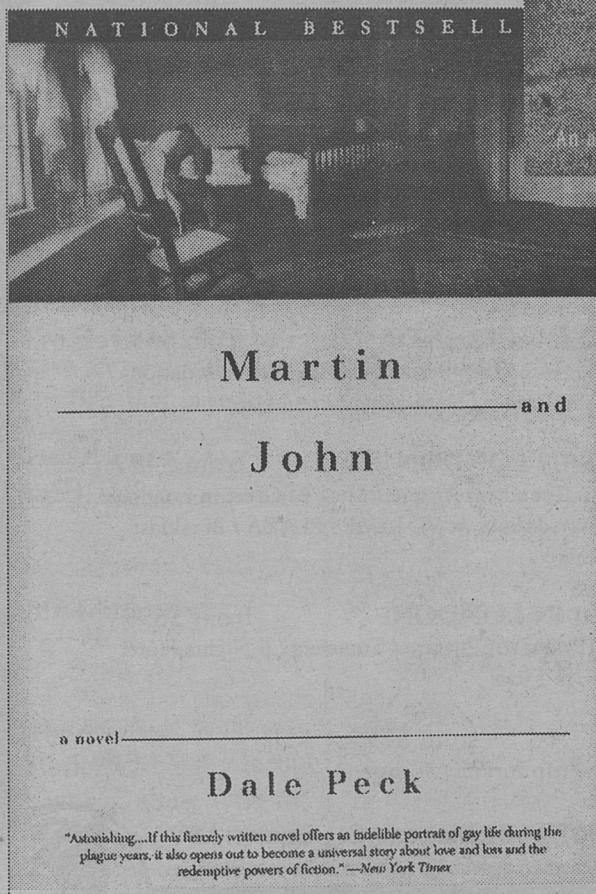
Irish writer Colm Tóibín's most recent AIDS-themed novel, *The Blackwater Lightship*, is currently receiving a lot of mainstream attention. His previous novel, *The Story of the Night* (Henry Holt, 1996), was set against a backdrop of political tensions in Argentina, and was his first to feature gay protagonists. Tóibín's characters, unlike those in *Rat Bohemia*, reside far from the epicenter of queer life and of the epidemic; for them, the personal is not political, at least not by choice. I found *The Story of the Night* deeply romantic (and erotic) in part because Tóibín's characters are so completely isolated from American notions of identity. His style is unadorned to the point of



An astonishing accomplishment — Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America*

"The 'Times' As It Knows Us," mines familiar, even stereotypical territory—a group of gay men dishing in the Pines—yet remains one of the most moving, nuanced pieces of literature I've ever read.

The fragmented structure of Dale Peck's first novel, *Martin and John* (HarperPerennial, 1993), is at first confusing. Characters named Martin and John mutate from one chapter to the next. Sometimes Martin is dying, sometimes he's well; at one point Martin is John's stepfather, at another he's John's wealthy older lover, at yet another he's a teen-aged boy. What unifies the work are its recurring themes—a parent's death, sexual abuse, the relationship between violence and sexuality, AIDS—and Peck's consistently fresh, fearless voice. At the book's conclusion, a grief-numbered narrator/author eloquently describes our struggle to articulate the unimaginably real: "Sometimes



"Astonishing.... If this fiercely written novel offers an indelible portrait of gay life during the plague years, it also opens out to become a universal story about love and loss and the redemptive powers of fiction." —New York Times