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## Paul Monette: A Writer's Life and After Life

An interview

BY ALLEN SMALLING

Luxurious doesn't do justice to the new Four Seasons hotel on Chicago's North Michigan Avenue. Inside the richly marbled lobby, well chosen antiques make subdued statements of authority. The help is courteous but never intrusive. Gaggles of grey-flanneled men and women go about their business, shuttling from silent elevator to muted meeting room to tasteful multilingual phone bank (each phone equipped with matches, ashtray, notepad and pen, all courtesy of the management).

Despite room rates that begin at \$225 a night, the Four Seasons has no trouble attracting affluent CEOs and power shoppers who only have to cross the street for Magnin's, Bonwit's, Lord and Taylor. Bloomingdale's is even less trouble — it's downstairs in the same building. In a metier sense at least, this is the best Reagan's America has to offer, the quintessence of the Eighties.

It all seems totally different from a gay activist's existence — the world of ACT-UP rallies, constricted research budgets, medical conferences, financial sacrifices and alternative politics. But writer/activist/gay man Paul Monette knows both worlds intimately. His publishers sent him to Chicago to promote his two newest books, the novel *After Life* and the 1988 memoir of lover Roger Horwitz's death by AIDS, *Borrowed Time*, which has just been re-released in paperback. The Four Seasons has superior access to media, so Monette stays here.

Inevitably, Monette's 43rd-floor aerie has a sweeping, power-and-money view of Chicago's Near North Side and Lake Michigan. He greets me warmly — remembers our previous interview two years ago — and tactfully points out a factual error made then ("You flattered me by saying I had written the screenplay for *Predator*. I only did the novelization").

Whenever possible, Monette swings the conversation around to the politics of AIDS and ACT-UP. But he'll talk on almost any subject and is always interesting. Our edited interview follows.

*How's the tour going?*

The reception across the street yesterday [a bookstore in Water Tower Place, an atrium mall] was dismal. I signed maybe six books in the whole hour. The experience at Unabridged Bookstore [North Side, gay-owned] was delightful.

It's hard to enjoy the constant barrage of radio interviews. I did a talk show yesterday on [Chicago] AM radio. One person called up and said "You're abnormal." But someone else called in and said this was the best hour of radio he'd ever listened to. That's because Ted Lauderback [the host] was not afraid to talk about his feelings about achieving intimacy. It was a straight man talking to a gay man about common interests, common conflicts. And that's fascinating! Straight men and gay men should do that all the time.

*I agree.*

The only talk show I've turned down was one out of Berkeley. This station reaches way out into the hinterlands, and the calls are always so disgusting and filled with hate.

*There seems to be a lot of unfocused hatred in the country.*

The situation is worse than before. You mean worse than pre-plague?

Worse than just a few years ago. What's happened more than anything is that things have polarized.

Before Stonewall, homophobia was entrenched. Now, these [bigoted] people are out spewing their venom. I just try to stay calm and say things like "Listen, this rage and fear that's coming from you usually comes from the fact that you have someone gay in your family that you can't deal with. There's someone in the closet — a child, a brother, someone — and your cage is rattled about it. I ask these people: "Have you talked to your children? Have you inculcated your hatred in them the same way?" You just try to raise it as an issue of bigotry.

Sometimes even people who like us, who call into a radio station to say how much they like gay people, will then say something like "I don't think my friend would choose to be gay; it's a really hard life." I always say, "Excuse me, if I had any choice I would be gay. I like being gay. Gay is who I am. Gay is fabulous."

"Oh, it's such a tough life." Hah! It's such a tough life to live in Ethiopia.

*I don't normally like prepackaged questions, but here's one Crown [Publishers] gave me that's good: "In general, do you support the often vehement strategies of ACT-UP"?*



I definitely support the "often vehement" strategies of ACT-UP (laughs). I have a dark pessimism in me about the nature of the plague and the course of it over the next several years. I think the holocaust is going to continue and that it will continue to devastate the community the way it has because so many of us are seropositive.

Where I am a cockeyed optimist has to do with gay life after the plague and the marvelous connections between gay men and lesbians within the plague. I think that ACT-UP is one of the places that's happened. I think the agenda of ACT-UP is already a revolutionary agenda, already

*"Where I am a cockeyed optimist has to do with gay life after the plague. . ."*

beyond AIDS: these young, fiery people who understand their connection to issues like women's rights and abortion rights.

I support ACT-UP's guerilla theater very much. It is unfortunate that someone stepped on the host at St. Patrick's Cathedral. I do not want to be accused of using the same tactics of hatred against my enemies that they use against me. For my purposes, that was going too far. But, as Larry Kramer says, when you've got 500 people at a rally you can't control what all 500 will do. This is the case for pro-life rallies as well.

*I'll ask you a red herring question: Supposing ACT-UP blocked a vital bridge leading from one part of the city to another and because of that, an ambulance was not able to get through and someone died?*

Well — that would be tragic. Even without that ambulance, that wouldn't be doing very good PR among the people. I think there are ways of preventing that agenda that would get people on your side, but ACT-UP is a democratic organization and the general flow of the organization has to do with confrontation. I mean, there are really people who wanted riots at the international conference in June. If that's where it goes, that's where it goes.

I feel there will be a coalition of rage in the Nineties, and it won't be just gay people affected by AIDS. It thrilled me to turn on the TV a while back and see the parents whose children had died in the Lockerbie disaster [midair explosion] challenging the ambassador and calling him a liar.

*So rage is a good thing, sometimes? Yes.*

*How do you define "rage"? It's seen that the word has been co-opted and used as a buzzword of fashion. Nearly every big city has a nightclub called "Rage," for example. What does rage mean to you?*

Rage means not being impotent. Rage is something that seeks articulation, and I hope it seeks community. What we hope for in the AIDS activist community is that rage will seek political passion and political courage.

*"What we hope for in the AIDS activist community is that rage will seek political passion and political courage"*

At least we have some political freedom in this country to fight back at our oppressors.

There were a lot of gay people in Russia before the Revolution. We must never forget that we are loathed as deeply on the Right as on the Left; that the Communists and the Fascists equally want to put the electric prods to us.

*Are you a libertarian?*

No, but I don't trust anybody among politicians in making a coalition. I'm a