

INTERVIEW

MAPPING HIS EMOTIONS

San Francisco novelist Fenton Johnson unveils his first memoir, *Geography of the Heart*

by Daniel Vaillancourt

It's not an AIDS memoir. It is a love story in which one of the persons happens to have HIV," says Fenton Johnson of his autobiographical *Geography of the Heart*, recently released by Scribner. "Even though significant portions of the book are engaged with the facts of Larry's illness and his death, equal or greater portions of the book are engaged with how two strong-willed men set up a relationship and build a love in the late 20th century."

Books

Fenton Johnson—Kentucky-born, raised Catholic, the youngest of the nine children of a whiskey maker and his wife—met Larry Rose—a teacher, born and raised in Los Angeles, the only child of German Jews who survived the Holocaust—at the August 1987 memorial of a mutual friend in their adopted San Francisco. Tentative at first, Johnson ultimately yielded to Rose's passionate pursuit. On their third date, Johnson informed Rose he wasn't quite ready to commit. An instant later, Rose revealed that he was HIV positive. The men continued to see each other. Offers the author: "Lesson one of the geography of the heart: how love chooses us, if we will let it, rather than the other way around."

Johnson and Rose lived separately for the first two and a half years of their relationship. On March 1, 1990, they both moved into an apartment in San Francisco's Bernal Heights. Less than eight months later—in the midst of the couple's third journey to France—Rose died unexpectedly in the intensive care unit of the American Hospital in Paris.

"Love can be, in some ways, the most political of acts," says Johnson, who believes he is not as overtly polemical a writer as Michelangelo Signorile, for instance. "In writing this book, I felt that the most powerful political statement I could make was to tell what is a love story—a very powerful love story—as simply as I could, with as little embellishment as possible."

Johnson has succeeded in his mission.

"It's possible to live a lifetime of love in three years—for many gay men in these times, not only possible but necessary," he writes in the Prologue/Postscript to *Geography of the Heart*. "What follows are stories from those years: how [Larry], a teacher, taught me how to love; how, slowly, I learned what he had to teach."

Recently, from his home in San Francisco, Johnson—42, currently single, and still HIV negative—spoke to me further about love, Larry Rose and *Geography of the Heart*.

Having written two well-received novels—*Scissors, Paper, Rock* and *Crossing the River*—what made you decide to write a memoir?

Well, this book had to be written. I started

writing it, literally, on the plane on the way back from France after Larry died. I had no choice but to write. Even though I had barely slept in three weeks or so, I couldn't sleep on the plane. And so, I turned to what I do when I'm on a plane, which is to write. I wrote a eulogy for his memorial service in Los Angeles. I knew it had to be good, because I was speaking to his parents, who had just lost their only child.... I did manage to say something that helped to comfort them, and that became the foundation for the book. I was, at that point, halfway through *Scissors, Paper, Rock*, and I spent the next couple of years concentrating on finishing [it]. But I always knew that this book was going to be written. Significant portions of the book are inspired by letters I had written during the time I had known Larry, and after that. I've always been conscious of using letters as a form of journal. Some people keep a journal; I write letters, and keep copies of the letters.

You spent little more than three years with Larry. In the memoir, you write, "Anyone who's had the good fortune to love and be loved for 10 or 20 or 40 and more years may doubt the significance of such a short time, and in light of those years, I understand. But love doesn't measure itself by the calendar." Tell me more about what your time with Larry brought you, taught you.

[Laughs] You won't think me flip when I say, of course, that the answer to that question is, "Read the book." I suppose the essence of what it has taught me is to live for the moment, of course. To worry less about what is going to be happening in the distant future, and more about what is happening in the here and now. I think that is the great lesson that most HIV-positive people have to teach, and most teach it quite well. Incidentally, I want to emphasize that I think that Larry's access to that lesson came partly from his HIV status. But it also came from having been raised as the only child of Holocaust survivors. I know that to be true.

The other thing that I learned, which had nothing to do with HIV, is the power of love. And



Fenton Johnson

that, of course, sounds clichéd, particularly in late-20th-century Hollywood-driven culture, but I think it's particularly relevant for gays and lesbians because I think many of us devalue or undervalue the power of love in our lives in ways that we're hardly conscious of. Even when we're engaged in a powerful love—whether it be a romantic love that has a sexual component, or other kinds of love—at times we may undervalue that because of the subliminal lack of respect, and certainly a cultural lack of celebration, of our loves. The power of [love] was so large

and all-encompassing that it demonstrated to me manifestly the importance and significance of men's love for men, and women's love for women. That is, in fact, another reason why I wrote this book. We need that kind of history.

I love the part in the book where you are driving along the banks of the Loire River. You turn to Larry, whom you describe as so silent and so ill. You ask him if he is in pain, and he answers, "I'm happy being quiet here with you."

Speaking of what I learned out of the relationship, that was a profound place to get to. Is it possible to define love any more accurately than that? I don't think so.... I would hope that someone would finish this book with a sense of peace and comfort. Bharati Mukherjee, who gives a blurb on the dust jacket, says "I wept without being depressed." When I read that, I thought, "That's exactly the reaction I would want people to have to this book."

Throughout the book, you share with the reader how close you and Larry were to your respective parents, and to each other's family. Many gay men and lesbians are not so fortunate. Any comment on gay men, lesbians and their families of origin?

I've been interviewing people around the country as part of a piece I'm doing on lesbian and gay marriage, and I've specifically sought out people who do not live in Los Angeles, San Francisco or New York. I've tried to find people who live in

small towns. I think gay people are much more engaged with family than is often presented to be the case. Now, what you discover in those places where people have stayed close to their biological families is that in many cases they are not out to their families, and in at least as many cases I would say everyone knows but no one talks about it. That situation is extremely common. It is common within my own family. There are members of my family, whom I know to be gay, who are not publicly acknowledged as such within the family.

Another motivation—not only just in writing this book, but in my writing as a whole—is to try to provide those people the courage to live their lives in a way that is appropriate to them, to push that envelope. Not to do what they cannot do, I would not ask that of anyone. But to push the envelope of what they can do. And in that case, I think that means, in fact, bringing one's family—both biological and chosen—more intimately into the circle of what one's life and loves are about. I guess that's a more complex way of saying "to come out." But I think the phrase has a sense of a single moment. You tell somebody with whom you've not spoken about it that you're gay, and that's coming out. Whereas what I'm trying to describe is something that's much more complex and ongoing.

"Being" out, perhaps?

Yeah. And one thing I think it's important to acknowledge—that we don't acknowledge enough—is that that's a very different state of being in Topeka, Kansas, than it is in Los Angeles and San Francisco. I'd like to think that this book has something to say to people in Los Angeles and San Francisco, but also something to say to people in Topeka who might read it and think about the possibilities of engaging both their chosen and biological families more intimately in their lives.

As an HIV-negative man, in light of your experience with Larry, would you shy away from again becoming deeply involved with someone who is HIV positive?

Well, of course, that question is hanging out there. I've thought about how to answer it. I really can't answer it because it is a question of ongoing significance in my life. I have answered it in different ways with different men since Larry died. And I assume that will continue to be the case. It's really just too personal of a question to answer in some public medium, because it depends so entirely and totally on the circumstances. In order to answer the question, I would have to have gotten to know reasonably well this hypothetical man you're speaking of. So I guess the answer to the question is, "It depends."

Geography of the Heart by Fenton Johnson.

Scribner, 1996; \$22 cloth.

Johnson will read from his new book at 7:30 pm on Tuesday, July 9, at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W Burnside St. The event is free.

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