

Living to tell the tale

Celebrated author Tom Spanbauer to read from his first novel in 10 years

BY MARC ACITO

"The reason I write is because I can't cry and talk at the same time," says Portland author Tom Spanbauer, the man behind the acclaimed novel *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon*.

Spanbauer has had good reason to cry of late: He nearly succumbed to AIDS four years ago and last year saw his 11-year relationship with his partner fall apart.

He has channeled his grief, though, into his newest novel, *In the City of Shy Hunters*, a work his editor at Grove Atlantic doesn't hesitate to call "brilliant" and a "masterpiece."

Publication is slated for spring of 2001, but fans of Spanbauer's writing can get a sneak preview when he makes a rare public appearance to read from the new novel June 23 at Barnes & Noble.

In the City of Shy Hunters takes place in Manhattan between 1983 and 1988. Despite the setting, however, the novel still promises to deliver the same kind of trippy lyricism that made *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* something of a cross between *Dances with Wolves* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Magic realism suffuses Spanbauer's work, as in the novels of Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison, to whom he has been compared.

"We call it magic realism, but that's so ethnocentric" says Spanbauer. "It's the white guy making the decision that anybody who doesn't write about parties at the pool is all of sudden writing about magic. My reality is very spooky, and full of ghosts and memories and images."

Among the ghosts in his new novel is the hovering specter of a plague: "That horrible feeling we all felt when AIDS first struck—that panic," says the author, "I've held that close to me these past 10 years, remembering how that was, so I could tell it."

He also says the book, which explores the question of whether we can control our destiny, will certainly "piss a lot of people off. I mean, it's about faggots," he adds by way of explanation. What should enrage the average homophobe will likely delight gay readers, as Spanbauer says the novel is most accurately described as "a love story."

Spanbauer doesn't think of his books as being "gay novels," however, although he does believe they reflect a "gay sensibility."

"This kind of macho, sport-minded, insurance-company world out there," he says, "that white-male-dominated thing is just real hard for me to understand."

He cites a characteristically quirky example: "I'll be watching TV and I'll think, 'Oh, this isn't a bad channel,' and all of a sudden the network identification will come on and it'll go 'The Woman's Channel.'"

Born and raised in Boise, Idaho, in 1946,



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Spanbauer underwent several hippie rites of passage in the late-'60s, including becoming blood brothers with a Shoshone Indian and serving in the Peace Corps. After a tour of duty in Kenya, Spanbauer returned to Boise and got married.

But eventually nature followed its own true course and Spanbauer left the marriage (and Boise) and took off for Key West, Fla., which was about as good a place to come out as one could imagine.

Having grown tired, however, of the scene in Key West—"You can only talk about suntans and blow jobs so long"—

and ready to advance himself as a writer, Spanbauer moved to New York City in 1983 to earn his master's degree in fiction from Columbia University. He wrote both his earlier novels, *Faraway Places* and *The Man Who Fell in Love with the Moon* while working as an apartment building superintendent in Manhattan.

"New York would always slap me around real hard," Spanbauer says.

But the turning point came when, already ailing from HIV, he passed out in the middle of Penn Station. Lying on the floor, alone in a sea of strangers, Spanbauer made the decision to get the hell out of New York and to try to save his own life.

The fledgling author came to Portland with his partner in 1990, but his health worsened as his national reputation grew. By 1996, he had only 17 T cells left and his weight had dipped 60 pounds. Fortunately, at his darkest hour, the triple "cocktail" therapy became available.

"I was released from the hospital the same week *The Wall Street Journal* ran the article on protease inhibitors," he says, citing the drugs that have kept him alive ever since.

Today, Spanbauer's T cells number over 400 and his viral load remains undetectable, but the healing continues to be a slow, laborious process.

"After having AIDS and almost dying, getting a new body, coming back, I feel like I'm totally new," he says. "And now having left my relationship of 11 years, I really don't know what I think. I'm 53 and I don't know how to get there from here."

One thing is for certain, however—that kind of rigorous honesty is bound to make *In the City of Shy Hunters* well worth the wait.

■ *The Literary Triangle* presents TOM SPANBAUER at 7 p.m. June 23 at Barnes & Noble Lloyd Center, 1231 N.E. Broadway. For more information, call (503) 331-1307.

MARC ACITO frequently contributes to Just Out. He wishes that the person to whom he loaned his copy of *The Man Who Fell in Love With the Moon* would please give it back.

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