

BOOKS

Five Quarts: A Personal and Natural History of Blood

by Bill Hayes; Ballantine Books, 2005; \$23.95 hardcover

In *Five Quarts*, Bill Hayes examines the role of blood in myth, science and history. And most eloquently, he shares his personal experiences with blood: as a child, as a brother of five sisters and as a partner to Steve, who is HIV-positive. Hayes describes his book as "a personal odyssey through the history of hematology."

The title comes from the fact that the average person has about five quarts of blood running through his or her veins. This kind of observation—and the way people arrive at such measurements—fascinates Hayes.

The book's natural history entries run the gamut, from the ancient practice of bloodletting to the physical mechanics of arousal. Page by page, it's hard to guess what Hayes will touch on next.

Though many of the scientific passages go into considerable depth and technicality, Hayes' clear and clever descriptions keep the eyes from glazing over, at least most of the time.

For example, when describing viral load testing, he writes, "It worked by searching the blood

for a discarded part of HIV, a method akin to determining if a McDonald's burger has been eaten by rummaging for the tossed wrapper."

Despite all the fascinating historical and scientific tidbits, Hayes' personal insights are the most engrossing. He tenderly portrays his partner's courage and persistence while living with HIV and candidly shares his own strengths and weaknesses throughout their relationship.

Though this combination of history and memoir may sound awkward, Hayes has successfully woven the pieces together. For instance, a paragraph about the treatment of menstruating girls in British Guiana segues from a portrait of Hayes' sister Shannon on the day she first gets her period.

In another scene, Steve is bleeding from the head after being hit by a falling iron. Hayes freezes, conflicted between helping his partner

and protecting himself, until Steve breaks the moment by forcefully telling Hayes to put on gloves. Steve sinks to the ground to wait while Hayes rushes to find the gloves. After his head stops bleeding, Steve comments that his mega-hold hair gel probably protected his head from

worse damage.

Hayes' talent for conveying the intensity of such tableaux makes *Five Quarts* a moving and frequently funny story, as the couple manage the sometimes-grim happenings of their daily life with humor.

—Rebecca Ragain

Moira Orfei in Aigues-Mortes

by Wayne Koestenbaum; Soft Skull Press, 2004; \$14.95 softcover

Wayne Koestenbaum, author of numerous books of nonfiction and poetry, makes his fiction debut with *Moira Orfei in Aigues-Mortes*. The novel centers on Theo Mangrove, an HIV-positive concert pianist who is planning a comeback after suffering a breakdown during a performance five years ago. Aigues-Mortes, the city of "dead water," becomes his destined stage. The story unfolds through a series of notebooks written by Theo in preparation for this comeback, which, he determines, must include Italian circus diva Moira Orfei.

From his home on Mechanical Street in East Kill, N.Y., where he lives with his disenchanted wife, reclusive sister and domineering

mother (when she is not playing concerts in Buenos Aires), Theo details his life and obsessions, which include the piano, Moira Orfei and sex. He gets 20 erections a day, which he satisfies with hustlers, teachers and relatives regardless of gender; his sexual forays are more blunt than erotic.

In one entry Theo writes, "I cannot tolerate music that moves forward; my Aigues-Mortes recital must eddy and retreat." Likewise, the entire book eddies and retreats with Aigues-Mortes and a reunion

with Moira Orfei hanging elusively on the horizon like Samuel Beckett's Godot.

Koestenbaum is a competent, lyric writer, skilled at character portraits delivered in a fragmented, diary-like manner. In a single notebook entry, Theo plays Chopin at his grandmother's funeral, blows a man with a micro-penis at Camera Baths and sits in the kitchen with his mother, home from tour, while she tells him about his childhood bowel movements. Although readers who like plot may be disappointed, the book, rich in symbolism, is complex enough to merit multiple reads if one can get through it the first time.

—Karen Kudej



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