



## Barnett, Allen (1955-1991)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Allen Barnett is the author of *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories* (1990), a collection of short stories unlikely to be surpassed for its depiction of gay life at the height of the AIDS pandemic. His stories are distinguished for their meditations upon the gay body in time, and by their consciousness of how the past both clashes with and informs the present.

Barnett writes with a lyric sparseness in which emotional drama is both etched with a diamond-like sharpness and illuminated by a diamond-like brightness. One story in particular, "The *Times* As It Knows Us," has been repeatedly singled out for the depth of its mediation on what "it is humanly possible to do" in the face of the "unacceptable behavior" of others, and even of oneself, in a world that has itself been rendered "unacceptable" by the violent disruption of everyday life by AIDS.

### Biography

Barnett was born on May 23, 1955, in a small town near Joliet, Illinois, the oldest of seven children. In an interview with Philip Gambone, Barnett records that his mother never married his father, and that his siblings were the products of her subsequent marriages to two other men. Barnett described his family as "dysfunctional." His mother temporarily put all seven children into a Roman Catholic orphanage when she found herself unable to care for them.

In 1973, Barnett enrolled in Chicago's Loyola University as a theater major, having earlier attended a thirteen-week summer drama workshop for high school students at the University of Iowa. He spent two of his undergraduate years in Rome, the site of his story "Succor."

Following graduation, Barnett moved to New York City, initially to seek work as an actor, but eventually enrolling in a Master's degree program in liberal studies at the New School. In 1979, he transferred to the Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing at Columbia University, where he studied with such literary notables as Elizabeth Hardwick, Daniel Halpern, and Manuel Puig, before graduating in 1981.

During the 1980s, Barnett was active in gay literary and social circles, summering on Fire Island, and making friends with and receiving professional advice from such diverse talents as Robert Ferro and Richard Howard. In 1985 he helped to found the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD).

In the late 1980s Barnett worked for opera agent Herbert Breslin, who was impressed by Barnett's writing. Breslin asked a mutual friend, Sandra McCormack, to forward Barnett's stories to Michael Denneny, an influential editor at St. Martin's Press, where Denneny had founded the Stonewall Inn Editions, a groundbreaking series in gay and lesbian letters. Denneny not only contracted to publish *The Body and Its Dangers and Other Stories*, but placed one of the stories ("Philostorgy, Now Obscure") in the highly influential *New Yorker* magazine in advance of the book's publication.

Barnett had less than one year to enjoy the resulting acclaim. He died on August 14, 1991, of AIDS-related

causes, having earlier been treated for Kaposi's Sarcoma in the lungs.

### **"the sensitive logic of pain"**

The most insightful comment on Barnett's writing is by fellow fiction writer Philip Gambone: "Like the bird in Robert Frost's 'The Oven Bird,' Barnett's stories pose the question, What to make of a diminished thing? 'What do you make of the present, the condensed, the concentrated moment?' the cancer-ridden narrator asks in the title story ["The Body and Its Dangers"]. The pull of each story is toward some kind of 'unquestioning faith in the present tense,' toward some accommodation of 'This is you now,' even though the present world may be unacceptable, and past unhappiness and the dread of what's to come continue to haunt. In avoiding making AIDS a metaphor and, at the same time, finding in his stories a language to describe the dreadful urgency of every moment, Barnett made an enormous and beautiful contribution to contemporary gay literature."

Barnett's stories analyze with exquisite precision what the narrator of one story calls "the sensitive logic of pain." In "Snapshot," a man who never knew his biological father suffers the breakup of his relationship with an older man and mentor, leaving him caught between the desire for detachment from all human feeling and the dawning recognition that such a willed disconnectedness "would not be without its own kind of terror."

In "Succor," Kerch, the protagonist--famous in New York City in the early years of the epidemic for opening his spare room to homeless people with AIDS--seeks consolation following the death of his latest apartment mate (a Roman Catholic priest defrocked and left to fend for himself in his illness after his church learned of his sexual activities) by returning to Rome, the so-called "Eternal City," where he himself first came alive emotionally and sexually.

And in "Philostorgy, Now Obscure," a man, following his diagnosis as HIV-positive, revisits his college roommates and a former lover, trying to reconcile the person he once was with the person he has become.

In every one of Barnett's stories people are forced to confront "a pain" which is so "utter" (as one character quotes Emily Dickinson as describing) that "It swallows substance up." That pain can be located in the body, as in the case of the lesbian protagonist in the title story whose breast cancer has spread to her lungs and bones, providing her with the occasion to meditate upon the "cause and effect" that has shaped her life thus far, and how her eventual absence will continue to shape the lives of those closest to her.

Similarly, in "The *Times* As It Knows Us," seven gay men who share a summer house on Fire Island, and who are in various stages of AIDS infection and loss, grapple to maintain "these connections to others, to what it is humanly possible to do" in "an unacceptable world [that] can compel unacceptable behavior."

More subtle is the pain that stems from the emerging consciousness of what one has left behind to reach the richly complex but ambivalent present moment, or of what one must now forsake in order to move forward.

Like his near-contemporaries Andrew Holleran and Edmund White, Barnett fashions narratives in which pain is caused in part by what Barnett calls "the space of your longing"--that is, by the distance between the desirer and the object of his desire, and by the yawning gulf between the brief moment that it took to become overwhelmed by a stranger's beauty and the seeming eternity that one spends under the influence of that moment.

### **"more than we want to know"**

Barnett is an erudite writer, the effect of his stories being enhanced by the reader's familiarity with such cultural monuments as the philosophy of Spinoza, the paintings of Caravaggio, the aesthetics of baroque architecture, and such texts as Augustine's *Confessions*, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and historian of gnosticism Elaine Pagel's *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. Two of his stories depend for their titles upon poems written by Thomas James, an eccentric and otherwise unknown gay writer who mentored the teenaged Barnett in Joliet.

The reader of Barnett's stories is forced ultimately to consider how well people are capable of knowing either themselves or others, and to recognize the ineffable parts of gay experience that cannot be put into words.

Thus, in "The *Times* As It Knows Us," Clark spends his weekends scrutinizing obituaries in *The New York Times* for evidence of a man's sexual orientation and cause of death because in the 1980s the nation's most authoritative newspaper still refused to print the word "gay" or to acknowledge gay partnerships, while the families of many AIDS victims, embarrassed by the manner in which a son or brother presumably contracted the virus, often tried to disguise the cause of his death. The general indifference of the medical establishment leaves Clark and his housemates to piece together whatever information is available concerning the source of the virus and the treatment of various opportunistic infections as they monitor their own health and care for that of others.

Similarly, as the title of the story "Philostorgy, Now Obscure" suggests, Barnett possessed a philologist's fascination with the origin and meaning of words, and contemplated in his work what words can and cannot deliver--or contemplated, more precisely, the surprising, even unintended, ways in which words deliver meaning. "You do not understand this. [. . .] You will never understand," a young actor, deaf since birth, angrily tells the hearing director of a play being presented in sign language, insisting upon the limitations, even, of human sympathy.

The epigraph to Barnett's collection is taken from a poem by Thomas James: "If I could reach you now, in any way / At all, I would say this to you . . ." James's employment of a conditional clause indicates that the speaker accepts the inevitability that his friend, lover, or the poet's audience in general is beyond his reach, despite his resorting to every possible means of communication ("in any way"). The message that the speaker would deliver dissolves into an ellipsis, the message itself fading as mysteriously as the person(s) to whom it is supposed to be delivered.

The epigraph thus signals the sense in Barnett's stories of living on the brink of dissolution where no effort at communication can ever fully succeed, where the message itself is too complex, the audience too distant, and the speaker's voice too faint.

But it is in the very mystery of their ellipses that Barnett's stories communicate so profoundly, delivering, perhaps, "more than we want to know."

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### **About the Author**

**Raymond-Jean Frontain** is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.