



## Feinberg, David B. (1956-1994)

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"In an absurd world, humor may be the only appropriate response," reflects novelist David B. Feinberg in a 1992 essay published in *The Advocate* and later collected in his *Queer and Loathing* (1994). "Humor is a survival tactic, a defense mechanism, a way of lessening the horror," he continues. "I would probably go literally mad if I had to deal with AIDS at face value, without the filter of humor. Once you joke about something, you appropriate it; you attain a certain amount of control over it."

In a pair of thinly veiled autobiographical novels, Feinberg anatomizes the world of the urban gay man who came of age in the climate of sexual and social liberation that followed the Stonewall Revolution; who adventurously explored the expanding parameters of gay life in the 1970s, experimenting with sex, drugs, and the creation of alternate social institutions; who unexpectedly found himself called upon to care for sick and dying friends as the AIDS epidemic first manifested itself in the early and mid-1980s; and who was challenged by his own deteriorating health to find alternate ways of fashioning himself as a gay man.

Few novelists have told as memorably as Feinberg the giddy story of exercising the new-found sexual power that American gays experienced in the 1970s, and the ignominy of having to plead for one's very life from intransigent, even belligerent, political and commercial entities just a decade later.

At a time when medical science struggled to understand how the HIV virus replicated itself and could spread as quickly as it did--and when bureaucratic indifference to the mounting death toll rendered the world nightmarishly absurd--Feinberg's dark humor proved a powerful act of resistance. In Feinberg's world, a gay man's body may indeed be humbled and eventually destroyed by the combined force of an insidious virus and an inhumanly malevolent institutionalized homophobia. But by joking in the face of his imminent demise, however, that man is able to distance himself from the threat and, thus, resist the possibility of being further paralyzed by despair. Laughter, Feinberg understood, manifests a gay man's final act of defiance, a refusal to capitulate to a fate that he nonetheless understands is inescapable.

### Biography

Born on November 25, 1956, David Barish Feinberg grew up in a Jewish household in Syracuse, New York, the younger of two children. After graduating in 1977 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in mathematics, he moved to southern California, where he explored his sexuality and came out to his family.

Feinberg returned to the east coast in 1979 to undertake a Master's degree in linguistics at New York University. By 1981 he had settled into a studio apartment in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood and begun work as a computer programmer at the Modern Language Association of America, a professional organization serving college and university language and literature professors. He would maintain the same apartment and employment for the remaining thirteen years of his life.

While an undergraduate at MIT, Feinberg studied creative writing with novelist John Hersey. Feinberg

completed his first novel, "Calculus," before returning to New York in 1979. It remains unpublished--and rightly so, Feinberg joked in an interview, calling it a novel that only a math major could conceive.

From 1986 to 1987 Feinberg contributed a monthly humor column titled "Tales from Hell's Kitchenette"--about gay life in Manhattan to *Mandate* magazine. His columns became the basis of his first novel, *Eighty-sixed* (1989), in which in Part One Feinberg presents a gay male in his early twenties named B. J. Rosenthal exploring the raucous sexual possibilities that a city like New York offered in 1980; and in Part Two, which is set six years later, anatomizes the community's growing awareness of the horror that is AIDS. The novel, honored with an early Lambda Literary Award for gay fiction, was followed by *Spontaneous Combustion* (1991), which examines the manner in which B. J. copes with his own diagnosis and "comes out" to his family as HIV-positive.

Following Feinberg's own diagnosis in August 1987 as sero-positive, he joined the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), participating in numerous demonstrations against drug companies who were withholding experimental treatments for AIDS-sufferers, and against political and civic leaders whose indifference, if not outright opposition to AIDS-education and health care programs, worsened the plight of the AIDS-sick and dying. These demonstrations included, most famously, the disruption of a mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral celebrated by the censorious, highly conservative, and politically influential John Cardinal O'Connor, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York. Feinberg's activist writings were collected in *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Raging AIDS Clone*, which appeared shortly before his death from an AIDS-related illness on November 4, 1994.

Following his death, Feinberg's papers were housed in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library. These include his personal photograph albums, some of his correspondence, and the manuscripts of all his unpublished material, including the play and a memoir on which he was working at the time of his death.

#### **AIDS: "a thick black cloud of despair"**

Feinberg borrows as the epigraph for *Eighty-Sixed* a statement by semiotician Roland Barthes: "What I claim to live to the full is the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth."

Indeed, both of Feinberg's novels deal with the "contradiction" inherent in a very particular historical moment when gay men, who had made a cult of physical beauty, should suddenly waste away; when the physical touch that enlivened and stimulated should be revealed also to carry death; and when gay "clones," whose perfection once lay in their seeming detachment, should melt with compassion for the suffering of others. Sarcastic humor, Feinberg's B. J. acknowledges, is "the only way I can cope" with "the black cloud of despair" that settles so quickly upon his community. Yet, however absurd the contradiction that he is forced to live, he has no choice but, like Barthes, "to live [it] to the full."

Part One of *Eighty-Sixed* documents B. J.'s search for a boyfriend-- at the gym, the baths, the beach; in the Central Park Rambles and the backroom of a leather bar called The Stud; and through a personal ad placed in the local gay newspaper--at a time when the sheer number of available men creates a welter of comic complications. At the baths, for example, "there seemed to be a strict hierarchy of beauty and desirability. Everyone was looking for someone more attractive than himself. Everyone thought he was more attractive than he was in fact. The syntax of desire and seduction was amazingly convoluted." Although B. J. remains unattached, he does contract in the course of his search recurring cases of amoebic dysentery and herpes.

If Part One of *Eighty-Sixed* maps B. J.'s welcome sexual liberation following his arrival in Manhattan at age twenty-three from a conservative Jewish household in upstate New York, then Part Two--which is titled "Learning How to Cry"-- traces his unanticipated but ultimately more consequential emotional liberation.

B. J. appears at the outset of the novel so out of touch with his feelings that, he jokes, "frequently I take

opinion polls from my friends to determine my attitudes, opinions, and actions." Indeed, he arrives in Manhattan aspiring to be a clone, whose appeal lies primarily in his emotional detachment: "The clone speaks in monosyllables. He dances alone in the discotheque, pinching his own nipples. The clone is self-sufficient. The clone is hot sex. He never stays over for the night."

Ironically, the man who hopes to avoid emotional attachment finds himself in the midst of the breaking AIDS epidemic, where he is quickly so benumbed by the senseless suffering that he daily witnesses that he becomes desperate not to feel anything at all. "I think I killed all of my emotions," he tells his friend Dennis after reluctantly agreeing to help care for Bob, a former trick, who is dying. "I'm already dead; I'll never die because I'm already dead."

Although his analyst encourages him to allow himself to cry and thus release the deep emotions that he had dammed up within himself, B. J. repeatedly complains that he is unable to do so. Bob's death, however, and the diagnosis of yet another friend as sero-positive, opens a floodgate.

The novel's haunting final lines, which echo Gabriel Conroy's epiphany at the close of James Joyce's *The Dead*, refer both to the apocalyptic flood of death and suffering that has been unleashed upon the land, and to B. J.'s own tears which, once they start falling, cannot be stopped: "It begins as a gentle rain. Just a drop, for each illness, each death. And with each passing day it gets worse. Now a downpour. Now a torrent. And there is no likelihood of its ever ending."

A subtly orchestrated apocalyptic horror pervades *Eighty-Sixed*. In the penultimate chapter, as the family sits down for Thanksgiving dinner, B. J.'s increasingly senile grandmother is agitated by how quickly it has grown dark outside. "It gets so early dark. I can't believe it. . . . Funny, when I came, it was so light, and before I looked around, it was pitch dark. . . . I don't like it when it gets darker." Although B. J. wisecracks about her obsession with "the effects of daylight savings time," his grandmother functions as the chorus in a Greek tragedy, crying out against the darkness that is enveloping B. J.'s world.

Day after day he scans the obituaries in the *New York Times* and counts the names of patients in the AIDS ward that have been erased from the board at the nurses' station since he last visited Bob. "It's unfathomable. It's incomprehensible. It's beyond human comprehension," a former trick sits muttering to himself in a bar. "It's endless, I tell you, endless. I don't see any end to it."

Perhaps because of its underlying tone of impending apocalypse, *Eighty-Sixed* remains the most powerful existential drama to emerge from the AIDS pandemic. It is a haunting record of an individual's determination to survive in an absurdly inhospitable world.

When experiencing anal sex for the first time, B. J. comments: "I wanted it. It still hurt a little, but I wanted it. He moved in and out. Slowly, maddeningly slowly. I wanted it deeper. I wanted him inside me. To fill the hole--I wanted him to fill the hole completely." The hole that cannot be filled refers most immediately to the sexual ache from which B. J. suffers, which no number of encounters can satisfy. More suggestively, however, the "hole" indicates the emotional emptiness that B. J. feels. Indeed, a friend counsels him that he is an emotional black hole into which all his experience falls but from which nothing constructive ever emerges.

"B. J.," which is a nickname formed from the protagonist's full given name, Benjamin Jacob, is also abbreviated slang for male oral copulation ("blow job"), which happens to be the character B. J.'s favorite sexual activity. "Will you be so kind as to present me with your member, that I might draw sustenance from it?" the narrator asks the reader. Feinberg reaches much the same conclusion reiterated by playwright Tennessee Williams, that in the face of the world's heartlessness and life's absurdity the only comfort to be found is in the warmth of another person. AIDS--the black hole into which American gay life seemed to be disappearing in the late 1980s--challenged Feinberg to find a way to justify human existence.

## "everybody's connected"

"See that guy on the beach over there?" one of B. J.'s friends asks him after B. J. has reminded the group of the importance of having only protected sex. "Listen, his name is Anthony. My new boyfriend, Raul, used to be his boyfriend last year. Everybody's connected. It's a human chain. It's a little too late for damage control." On one level the passage suggests how easily the virus is transmitted through shared sexual contacts, gay Manhattan proving such a small world that there are only two, or at best three, degrees of sexual separation between any two men.

But, Feinberg also suggests, gay men are connected in other ways as well. "I was a thirty-seven-year-old male homosexual living at the epicenter of the worst epidemic of the century," B. J. declares in *Spontaneous Combustion*. Fearing that under such pressure he will spontaneously combust and evaporate into steam, he is reminded by a recovered message on his answering machine that "if I kept on despairing, I might as well have been dead." "I can't be a fatalist. There must be something I can do," B. J. argues to himself. And in *Spontaneous Combustion* he becomes a gay rights activist, joining the community of those people fighting to hold back the encroaching darkness.

*Spontaneous Combustion* displays a more overt political consciousness than *Eighty-Sixed*. In it Feinberg challenges the founding principles of "Middle America: Mom, apple pie, bigotry, and hatred." He rails against the public distinction then being made between "innocent victims" like Ryan White (a young heterosexual hemophiliac who died after contracting AIDS through a clotting agent) and those afflicted gay men thought by a significant percentage of the population as being rightly punished for their sexual excesses.

He is disgusted by the American news media's refusal to report on gay health issues even as they fed the public's fascination with "Reagan's asshole" at the time of the president's colon problems. He is infuriated by the hypocrisy of Cardinal O'Connor using his pulpit at St. Patrick's Cathedral to comment negatively upon gay-related political issues with Mayor Ed Koch in attendance, the same mayor who was widely rumored to be a deeply closeted homosexual and whose administration's efforts to fight the epidemic and assist the sick and dying were negligible compared to those in San Francisco. And Feinberg dramatizes the gratuitous cruelty of the police who deprived demonstrators arrested at St. Patrick's Cathedral of their AZT, and who used plastic handcuffs to minimize physical contact with those whom they arrested.

But more impressively, B. J. fights back through humor, maintaining a wry distance from his experience that allows him to record the maddening horror of his life without being overcome by despair. The two novels form a rich comedy of manners for an absurdist age as Feinberg comments, for example, on how to supply a stool sample of an acceptable consistency to an indifferent lab technician ("I didn't know which was worse, to be insulted for your feces or complimented on them"), how to gracefully cruise someone standing next to you whom you can only see in your peripheral vision, and how to have safe sex in an age of anxiety.

Feinberg's humor can be directed at gay manners as well as at the absurdity of life in the age of AIDS. Photographed marching with a friend from New Jersey in Manhattan's annual Gay Pride Parade, B. J. is worried, not that he'll be publicly labeled a homosexual, but that people may think he's from déclassé New Jersey.

When B. J. is arrested following the demonstration at St. Patrick's, the outrage of the police denying sick men their AZT in jail is tempered by the conversation that B. J. has with his cell mates. "We discussed the typical New York topics: homoerotic art, apartment rents, the pros and cons of outing, the size of various activists' members and where they might be found at any given time, favorite tearooms." And B. J. is alert to the dark irony of a gay porn producer's capitalizing upon the success of Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Terminator" movies by titling his latest release *Sperminator*, which he notes makes for "an unintentional AIDS title: death by sperm."

No matter how wrenching the transformation Feinberg records as a generation of bar-hopping clones becomes a community of effective care givers, the poignancy of the situation is invariably undercut by a wisecrack. Such joking does not mitigate in any way the horror of the epidemic or palliate the pain that gay characters feel at their isolation from their birth families; it serves, however, to keep in check any tendency to despair.

B. J.'s friend Gordon confesses to feeling that "I'm living in a state of shell shock. Nothing much affects me immediately anymore. I usually get a delayed reaction." B. J. himself compares their situation to the Jews in Nazi Germany where "people are dropping like flies." The greatest danger to living in the midst of such darkness and daily horror is losing one's ability to feel.

Feinberg's mix of raunchy sexual comedy with heartbreakingly poignant tragedy allows the healing fountain of emotion to flow, as W. H. Auden wrote of William Butler Yeats and the function of poetry in an age of anxiety.

### **Influence**

At the height of the AIDS epidemic Feinberg perfected the tragicomic mode of gay literature, creating the occasion for gay readers to laugh through our tears. His strategies were successfully appropriated by a number of writers who are now better known than Feinberg himself.

For example, the opening scene of Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* (1993), in which six men negotiate their sexual encounters when "life is suddenly . . . radioactive," seems a dramatization of Feinberg's satiric guide to "Safe Sex in the Age of Anxiety," which appears as a chapter in *Eighty-Sixed*.

Likewise, Rudnick's flamboyant Father Dan, who gropes Jeffrey as he is praying in a church, appears to have descended from B.J.'s perpetually randy, alcoholic clerical friend Dennis on whom *Eighty-Sixed* shockingly opens in the act of carrying out one of his pastoral duties in a highly unorthodox manner: "The priest rarely masturbated during confession. For one thing, it was too cramped, too confining." The fact that Dennis "rarely" does so allows that he does indeed masturbate occasionally. More shocking to the uninitiated reader is the fact that the priest is restricted from masturbating, not by any moral imperative, but simply by the physical inconvenience of the confessional.

Feinberg's humor allows him deftly to challenge the moral authority of the censorious Roman Catholic Church even as he asserts the naturalness of the sexual urge, supplying Rudnick with an example that he deftly exploits.

Similarly, in his mix of apocalyptic foreboding with free-wheeling diatribes against political figures like New York City Mayor Ed Koch, President Reagan, and closeted hate-monger Roy Cohn, Feinberg anticipates the mode of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning *Angels in America* (1990-91).

Feinberg provided an influential model for how resentment can be released, yet tempered by humor, so as to keep the gay writer sane. By persistently undercutting the tragic seriousness of the situation, Feinberg was able not only to mock his own extreme behaviors, but also to rage against the absurd injustice that he and his contemporaries suffered. Humor helped preserve him from going mad with despair.

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### **About the Author**

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