



Reed, Paul (1956-2002)

by Mark John Isola

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By writing the earliest novel to respond directly to AIDS and subsequently producing innovative journal and sex writing, American author Paul Reed made several significant contributions to glbtq literature, especially as it struggled for relevancy during the early days of the AIDS epidemic.

Biographical Context

Reed's biography helps illuminate his work, especially as it reflects his intimate experiences with the emergence and evolution of AIDS.

He was born Paul Hustoft to Sigurd William and Melva Hustoft in San Diego, California on May 28, 1956. Reed, whose biological father died when he was five months old, also had a sister, Karen Hustoft, and a stepfather, who was a Baptist preacher. Reed legally changed his last name in 1969.

As a child and adolescent, Reed studied the organ and harpsichord, and as an adult, he obtained a B. A. in Sociology from California State University, Chico in 1978 and an M. A. in Social Anthropology from the University of California at Davis in 1981.

Reed attended his first gay pride parade in San Francisco in 1980, and moved to the city in July 1981. He remained in the Bay area for the remainder of his life.

Reed's move to San Francisco occurred one month after the Centers for Disease Control published "Pneumocystis Pneumonia: Los Angeles" in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, the report that introduced the medical world to what would become known as AIDS.

Reed entered the Castro gay urban subculture as post-Stonewall gay liberation zeal gave way to the sobering realities of the AIDS epidemic. The sense of this change is reflected in his somewhat autobiographical novel *Longing* (1988), which narrates its protagonist's similar move to San Francisco. The specter of the epidemic looms within the novel and, indeed, permeates all of Reed's writing. This consciousness is a direct result of Reed's life experiences, for in addition to writing during the emergence of the HIV virus, Reed also survived the transformation of AIDS from an acute to a chronic condition.

Reed claims in *The Redwood Diary: A Journal* (1995) to have known he had AIDS at least as early as 1981. Reed's understanding may well be retrospective, however, since AIDS was not named until midyear 1982; nonetheless, Reed HIV-seroconverted during the early years of the epidemic.

Surviving until 2002, Reed lived to witness and benefit from progressive advances in antiretroviral therapies. More specifically, when Reed's T-cell count dropped to 120 in late 1987, he benefited from the Federal Drug Administration's approval of AZT, the reverse transcriptase inhibitor he credited for his recovery. Similarly, when Reed's viral load (the amount of HIV in the bloodstream) rose to an incredible 1.1



A portrait of Paul Reed by Steve Savage. © Steve Savage. Image courtesy Steve Savage.

million in early 1996, his health was restored through the use of Saquinavir, the first protease inhibitor to receive FDA approval in 1995.

In addition to being a person living with AIDS, Reed participated in experimental HIV treatments, such as the Compound Q trials, which he recorded in his diary *The Q Journal* (1991).

Reed also experienced the waves of AIDS bereavement common to the early years of the pandemic, having lost his lover Tom in 1990 and several acquaintances, peers, and friends--notably his intimate long-term friend Cap in 1996. This personal history and epidemiological context informs all of Reed's writings, as they document the changes and challenges facing a writer living with AIDS.

Reed himself succumbed to complications of AIDS on January 28, 2002.

Reed's Literary Motifs

Reed's primary rhetorical mode is first-person and autobiographical, even when working in fiction. Something of Reed's life echoes through nearly all his work, as is evidenced by the recurrent references to his friend Cap, which are peppered throughout his fiction, nonfiction, and sex writing. Although a fairly common characteristic of writers, this blurring of the line between fact and fiction takes on specific resonance in AIDS literature, revealing the primacy of first-person reportage in AIDS writing.

AIDS figures as a poignant and powerful topic in nearly all of Reed's work, but it is not his only subject. His writing also explores the nature of longing, love, attraction, friendship, masculinity, aging, spirituality, monogamy, sex, eroticism, activism, politics, commercialism, and Americanism--to catalog just a few of his other frequently explored themes.

All of Reed's themes are narrated against a rich tableau of closely observed and artfully recorded climate conditions. The world of weather, the primary motif that permeates all of Reed's writing, also serves as its most prescient metaphor, for the omnipresence of climatic conditions underscores the ubiquity of the disease in the Age of AIDS.

The aptness of this tropic formation forms the metaphoric heart of Reed's novel *Facing It: A Novel of AIDS* (1984), where the opening lines establish the morgue as the one place its medical hero and principal protagonist can escape the searing heat wave that continues throughout the novel.

Reed's Journal Writing

Reed was a life-long journal writer, and three of his journals were published during his lifetime. Reed's first published journal, *The Q Journal: A Treatment Diary*, records his life from March to October 1990. Having buried his lover Tom in January of 1990, Reed recorded his grief and the facts of his own declining health, as he participated in an experimental treatment study.

Reed's second journal, *The Savage Garden* (1994), was self-published. It records Reed's life from June 1991 to June 1992, as he transitioned physically and psychologically from being a person dying of AIDS to become a person living with AIDS.

Reed's third journal, *The Redwood Diary: A Journal*, records his life from April 1995 to March 1996. During this year, Reed retreated to a cabin in the California Redwoods to write a novel only to find his health rapidly deteriorating. Much of *Redwood Diary* reads like a life review, as Reed faces his mortality only to find his health restored, thanks to the development of protease inhibitors.

Reviewing Reed's *Redwood Diary*, Andrew Holleran likens it to the work of May Sarton, an esteemed author and friend of Reed's, and characterizes the diary as "ruminations in solitude." However, this description does not reflect the social impulse behind Reed's published journals, for as Holleran notes in his earlier review of *The Q Journal*, Reed's diaries are "Not the sort of journal you keep for yourself, but a journal written for eventual publication."

With this insight, Holleran points to a major impulse behind Reed's memoir writing, the need to witness. As Reed writes of the silences that surround his illness, "Isn't this one of the most curious issues about AIDS . . . ? Hasn't the need for 'propriety' been an enemy of prevention and treatment all along? People have died by the thousands because nobody wanted to talk about such 'unseemly' topics! In that sense, then, this diary contradicts my more natural impulse to keep things to myself. And it declares that I'm not going to treat this disease as though it's something shameful or necessarily private, any more than a diabetic would think of concealing that condition from coworkers."

This impulse to witness suggests that Reed's journals are ruminations in activism rather than in solitude. In this way, Reed--like Sarton, whose journals reflected an independent woman-identified artist--broke new ground in the genre of memoir by expanding it to include an unconventional subjectivity. This endeavor required a careful calibration of the writing, as it alternates between discretion and temerity.

Perhaps, this point is best evidenced by Reed's self-reflective comments in *The Savage Garden*, his most provocative journal: "There is certainly nothing wrong with full disclosure, and a clear record of sexual adventuring and obsessive compulsion. But the honesty and worth of any journal has less to do with this reportage of these baser aspects of life and more to do with the fact that the important stuff is happening at a much deeper level."

In his journals, Reed grapples with issues that face glbtq memoirists generally, especially the attempt to reveal honestly the private emotions and actions to a resistant, if not hostile, public.

Reed's Novels

The ever-evolving nature of HIV epidemiology and the physical and psychological challenges faced by people living with AIDS are explored in nearly all of Reed's writing. This perspective is particularly present in his three published novels: *Facing It: A Novel of AIDS*, *Longing*, and *Vertical Intercourse* (2000).

Reed's novels draw their narrative impulse from the negotiation of AIDS through personal transformation. The effects of the rapid changes experienced by individuals living with AIDS are often alleviated through an expansion of feeling in Reed's work, and a burgeoning sentience concludes each of his novels.

Reed credited Dorothy Bryant's *A Day in San Francisco* (1983) as the first novel to reference the disease, which it did while the epidemic was still in its embryonic stages, but Reed's *Facing It* was the earliest one to name and focus directly on AIDS.

Contracting HIV before it could be accurately diagnosed much less treated, protagonist Andy Stone finds himself enmeshed in a medical mystery. As Andy's condition deteriorates, his partner, David Markman, and his doctor, Walt Branch, who also delivered Andy, fight to understand what is infecting him. The mystery of Andy's illness is revealed through the inclusion of two medical extracts and the deployment of a changing diagnostic language, which progresses from "gay plague" to GRIDIS (Gay Related Immune Disorder Syndrome) and inevitably to AIDS.

By the novel's conclusion, after Andy reconciles himself to his life and identity, he faces his death as an act of exhalation rather than expiration.

Reed's second novel, *Longing*, ends with a similar expansion of self. In the early 1980s, just as San Francisco's gay community is awakening to the pandemic, the novel's unnamed protagonist moves to the Castro to pursue a decidedly gay life. The protagonist adopts a gay urban lifestyle, but eventually becomes disillusioned by its superficiality and disheartened by heartbreak, as he longs for more than he finds in the world around him. The novel resolves this angst through the protagonist's learning to transcend the feeling of longing for the practice of living, and this epiphany is characterized as a cosmological projection of self.

A comparable projection of self concludes Reed's last novel, *Vertical Intercourse*. The novel's unnamed protagonist grapples with the losses attendant upon aging and AIDS and struggles with the evolution of his illness from an acute to a chronic condition. Having cared for and lost several friends and lovers to AIDS, the protagonist finds he is overwhelmed with compassion fatigue and unable to locate personal contentment in his new friends or with his new boyfriend. Consequently, he devolves into a paralyzing existential crisis, which is literally and figuratively remedied by his rising from the seclusion of his couch and returning to the world.

In Reed's long fiction, the humanity of the person living with AIDS perseveres and ultimately triumphs despite the self-effacing potential of the epidemic.

Reed's Sex Writing

In the early 1980s, Reed began publishing sex fiction under the pseudonym Max Exander. These stories initially appeared in sex magazines such as *Mandate* and *Honcho*. By the mid-1980s, Reed was publishing story collections and fictionalized sex journals. There are five volumes of Max Exander writings.

Although some of this writing is more invested in the prurience of pornography than the psychology of erotica, Reed's sex writing frequently provides a significance deeper than prurience. When Reed's sex narratives yield to the self-limiting hypersexuality of pornography, they fail to achieve the poetic pulse of his other prose. However, the majority of his sex writing evidences an unyielding Anaïs Nin-like exploration of the social and sexual nexus.

This distinction is readily seen by comparing the first two books of sex writing Reed published in 1985: *Mansex* and *Safestud: the Safesex Chronicles of Max Exander*. *Mansex* is a collection of sixteen erotic short stories dealing with sexual experiences ranging from S/M and bondage to water sports. The stories depict unsafe sex, including the exchange of body fluids. In contrast, *Safestud*, a work of fiction written in journal form, portrays its protagonist's grappling with the emergence of safer-sex practices, as they developed over the course of the 1980s.

The concerns surrounding HIV transmission and the consequent changes in the psychology and practice of sex incited a development in Reed's sex writing, resulting in his merging the genres of memoir and pornography to explore safe-sex journaling.

Reed was a pioneer in popularizing the safe-sex genre. Accordingly, he was asked by noted erotica writer John Preston to contribute a story to *Hot Living* (1985), an anthology of safer-sex stories Preston was editing to raise funds for the Gay Men's Health Crisis and to help promote the idea and practice of safe sex. Reed contributed an excerpt from *Safesex* to the collection and continued to explore safe-sex writing.

Reed's consciousness of safe sex permeates all of his later published sex fiction, including *Lovesex: the Horny Relationship Chronicles of Max Exander* (1986) and *Leathersex: Cruel Affections* (1994).

Perhaps the literary and social impulse of Reed's sex writing is best evidenced with the short story "Fux" from his final published collection of sex writing, *Deeds of the Night* (1995). In addition to offering an orgiastic scene, this story reflects on themes such as pre-AIDS nostalgia, urban interracial relations, the

temporal nature of racism, and the communitarian function of sex through the narrative device of time travel.

Reed also collected his reflections on sex writing, which were published posthumously as *Swollen: Writings on Sex* (2002).

Reed's Nonfiction

Reed also produced several volumes of nonfiction, in addition to his journal writing. He co-authored, with Patti Breitman and Kim Knutson, *How to Persuade Your Lover to Use a Condom and Why You Should* (1987), and he produced two editions of *Serenity: Challenging the Fear of AIDS* (1987, rev. ed. 1990), which offers hope as an antidote to fear during the Age of AIDS.

Reed also wrote the humorous *Cats Are from Jupiter, Dogs Are from Pluto: A Communication Guide for Humans* (1994).

Reed's nonfiction work appeared in venues as various as *Black Sheets*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Advocate*, *Bay Area Reporter*, *University Journal*, and *The Writer*.

Reed also contributed to the theory of AIDS writing with his short yet insightful essay "Early AIDS Fiction," which was collected in Judith Pastore's *Confronting AIDS through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation* (1993).

Conclusion

Reed wrote in several genres, but almost everything he wrote is touched by the great crisis of his cultural moment: the AIDS epidemic. His critical reputation is based primarily on *Facing It*, which has been widely acknowledged as a pioneering AIDS novel. He has been credited for his depth of knowledge regarding the epidemic and for his sensitivity and insight into the spiritual and emotional toll it exacts from persons living with AIDS, as well as from their formal and informal caregivers.

Perhaps the most important contribution of *Facing It* is that it may have initiated a new thread of realism. Four years before Susan Sontag revisited her *Illness as Metaphor* to write *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988) to remind us of the risk in metaphorizing illness, Reed may well have crafted an AIDS medical realism.

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Mark John Isola holds a B. A. in Gerontology from Quinnipiac University, an M. A. in English from Simmons College, and a Ph. D. in Literature from Tufts University. His interests include American literature and GLBT/AIDS Studies. His work has appeared in *Bad Subjects*, *eSharp*, and the *Nordic Journal of English Studies*.