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# AIDS Literature and Gay Identity

The Literature of Loss

Monica B. Pearl



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This book discusses the significance of late twentieth century and early twenty first century American fiction written in response to the AIDS crisis and interrogates how sexual identity is depicted and constructed textually. Pearl develops Freudian psychoanalytic theory in a complex account of the ways in which grief is expressed and worked out in literature, showing how key texts from the AIDS crisis by authors such as Edmund White, Michael Cunningham, Eve Sedgwick—and also, later, the archives of The ACT UP Oral History Project—lie both within the tradition of gay writing and a postmodernist poetics. The book demonstrates how literary texts both expose and construct personal identity, how they expose and produce sexual identities, and how gay and queer identities were written onto the page, but also constructed and consolidated by these very texts. Pearl argues that the division between realist and postmodern, and gay and queer, respectively, is determined by whether the experience expressed and accounted is mediated through the psychoanalytic categories of mourning or melancholia, and is marked by a kind of coherence or chaos in the texts themselves. This study presents an important development in scholarly work in gay literary studies, queer theory, and AIDS representation.

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The Literature of Loss  
*Monica B. Pearl*

# **AIDS Literature and Gay Identity**

The Literature of Loss

**Monica B. Pearl**

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**This book is dedicated to the family I grew up with, and in memory of my father.**

**Arnold J. Pearl  
Sylvia Dombey Pearl  
Bettina Pearl**

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# 1 Introduction

## Gay Grief

This book examines the literary response to the AIDS crisis. It concentrates on literature produced between 1988 and 2012, written in English, predominantly American, and published, primarily, in Britain and the United States.<sup>1</sup> This book is concerned with the narrativization of AIDS, and constitutes a psychoanalytic investigation of the literature of AIDS and into how the literature, through the mechanisms of mourning and melancholia, both forms and reveals shifting identities in response to AIDS. I concentrate on how AIDS narratives depict, construct, and often reconstruct subjectivity among a community of readers as refracted through grieving and its narrative representations. While I claim that the literature of AIDS is a response to grief, that is, it is part of the work of mourning itself, I also pursue the ways that the literature charts changes in the identities and identifications of those who are writing and those who are reading this literature.

### TIME SPAN AND HISTORY

In much the same way that Gregory Woods identifies an “age of antibiotics,” as the time when, after 1941, particularly for men, “sex became safe,”<sup>2</sup> and as a time that especially influenced the gay male literature produced in the 1970s, so also do I want to draw attention to the period of AIDS writing that I have chosen to examine—largely, but not exclusively gay—as circumscribed in some significant ways by pharmaceuticals. The years 1988 to 1994—the period in which the first part of my investigation of AIDS literature is delimited—begins at a point after the initial unformed literary cries of anguish and desperation of AIDS writing, at just the moment when a more solid literature of AIDS is emerging, and ends just prior to the point when in the Western world, particularly in the United States, a new class of drugs called protease inhibitors began to change the relationship that gay men, both those afflicted by AIDS and its illnesses and those affected by AIDS in myriad other ways, had to death. Because of the advent of protease inhibitors and the discovery that they could be used in combination (in what is called combination therapy) to combat the virus in a way that none of them did singly, it was

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understood (often erroneously) that it was no longer the case that the illnesses associated with AIDS were fatal illnesses. Though they are not a cure, and though there were some individuals who were already “long-term survivors” without the intervention of antiviral medication, the emergence of the drug cocktails made up of protease inhibitors changed the responses and attitudes to AIDS. What changed was that it was no longer thought to be an automatic equation that AIDS equaled death or loss.<sup>3</sup> What the protease inhibitors were able to do was make the virus in the body undetectable. They do not eradicate HIV. However, they often do render the person with AIDS healthier and prolong the lives of those whose prognoses would have been, pre-protease inhibitors, much shorter. The availability of these drugs changed the relationship between AIDS and death, particularly in the attitudes and reactions toward AIDS among American and English readers. So strong was the general understanding that the advent of protease inhibitors has signaled the denouement of the AIDS crisis that journalist Andrew Sullivan announced in *The New York Times* (albeit not without controversy) the “end of AIDS.”<sup>4</sup> The final chapters of the book consider the literature of the period after this pharmaceutical threshold.

It was first recognized in New York and in San Francisco in early 1981 that young men, most of whom identified as gay, were beginning to manifest similar and unexplainable symptoms, and then dying quickly.<sup>5</sup> First termed GRID, for “gay-related immune deficiency,” the syndrome was defined and given the name AIDS by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in 1982 “[w]hen it was revealed that members of other groups—hemophiliacs, Haitian immigrants, recipients of blood transfusions, intravenous drug users, the sex partners (and sometimes children) of those carrying the virus, and millions of heterosexual men and women in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—were also infected.”<sup>6</sup> This was also when the first article appeared in *The New York Times*, bringing to widespread attention the rare cancers discovered in homosexual men.<sup>7</sup> The gay press, however, was already reporting on the illnesses among gay men.<sup>8</sup>

A crucial moment in the history of the AIDS epidemic was the start of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis in 1981. Initially a grassroots organization in New York City dedicated to educating the gay community, caring for those who were ill, and bringing more attention to the illness, it became the model for other AIDS service organizations in the United States and in Europe. A turning point in public recognition of the AIDS epidemic came when the actor Rock Hudson died of AIDS in 1985. It was only then that the U.S. president, five years into the crisis, delivered his first speech on AIDS. It was partly this sense of neglect by government officials responsible for allocating resources and of life-threatening delays on the part of the Federal Drug Administration who oversaw the pipeline for experimental AIDS drugs that escalated grassroots reaction and incited AIDS activism. In March 1987, a speech by Larry Kramer at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center in New York City instigated the formation of ACT UP (the

AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a grassroots AIDS activist organization. This kind of confrontational grassroots activism galvanized media attention to AIDS in America, garnering immediate and widespread public attention to the crisis.

Nonfiction literature played a part early on in the history of grassroots AIDS prevention work. Michael Callen and Richard Berkowitz produced the book *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* in 1983, the first publication to respond cogently and prudently to the crisis at hand without alarm or advising draconian anti-sex measures. It was through print and an increasing sense of reliance on literature among a growing and changing gay population that a gay community coalesced and redefined itself and spread word about ways to protect oneself and others from illness and take care of oneself if one became ill. Print has been one of the primary media for AIDS representation. For example, consider this reaction to the abundance of the available printed material on AIDS:

Anyone interested in AIDS must suffer from . . . vertigo: the number of books, essays, pamphlets, and articles, the kinds of information, issues, and events that occur are so overwhelming in sheer number as to defeat any attempt at comprehensive incorporation by one person; the ever-increasing number of written responses to the history of representation of the disease makes it impossible even to survey recent literature much less to comprehend the totality of discourse about HIV since its appearance as GRID in January 1982.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, if “AIDS has effected what amounts to an epistemic shift in gay culture,”<sup>10</sup> a large part of this change has been engendered and chronicled by the printed word.

The year 1988 is significant for AIDS literature. It is the year that noted gay novelists published their first works of AIDS literature. Paul Monette’s *Borrowed Time*<sup>11</sup> and Edmund White and Adam Mars-Jones’ collection of AIDS short stories *The Darker Proof*<sup>12</sup> were published in 1988, marking the beginning of a serious and lasting AIDS literature. It was also in 1988 that other previously known gay novelists published their first pieces of AIDS fiction, including Christopher Bram’s *In Memory of Angel Clare*, Robert Ferro’s *Second Son*, and Ethan Mordden’s *Everybody Loves You*.

The first AIDS fiction, by and large, was gay fiction. This changed, but not very quickly or very drastically. While the publication of memoirs of loved ones (or oneself) ill and then dead from AIDS continued,<sup>13</sup> the fiction written by or about other communities affected by AIDS was still sparse and infrequent. There started to appear nonfiction memoirs of a sort, or accounts of loved ones fallen to the illness, in the 1980s,<sup>14</sup> but except for Alice Hoffman’s novel *At Risk*, most AIDS fiction produced in the 1980s was written by gay men about gay men. There was almost no literature produced by other afflicted groups, like intravenous drug users and women. In

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1990 Fran Peavey's memoir of living with AIDS was published,<sup>15</sup> and in the same year one extraordinary exception to the limited production of literature by both women and drug users appeared, though it was from a small publisher and little known: an AIDS memoir of a user of intravenous drugs who contracts AIDS, by Rae Shawn Stewart, called *Letters from a Little Girl Addict*.<sup>16</sup> The first fiction that concerns women drug users is Achy Obejas' *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*<sup>17</sup> in which a story called "Man Oh Man" is told from the perspective of a female intravenous drug user, presumably with AIDS, about her boyfriend and about shooting up drugs. Many of the other stories in this collection are also about having AIDS and include lesbian characters, many Latina, a rare amalgamation of identities for AIDS literature. During these years the primary "literature" produced by women consisted in short personal accounts of their lives and how they contracted AIDS.<sup>18</sup>

One can surmise that the reasons why women and drug users were not able to produce literature in the way that gay men were have to do with a dearth for women and drug users of both cultural and financial resources and also, in the earlier years of the epidemic, the great disparity in prognosis for men and for women once diagnosed; that is, gay men lived up to three times longer than did women after diagnosis.<sup>19</sup> Richard Goldstein comments on the dearth of AIDS writing other than gay AIDS writing:

No comparable process of self-expression exists among the other groups hit hardest by AIDS—IV drug users, their children, and their mostly black or Hispanic partners—in part because of the paralyzing impact of poverty and stigma among these groups, in part because there is no "community," perceived as such, to bind drug users together.<sup>20</sup>

In Shaun O'Connell's early assessment of AIDS literature, he concludes that the "AIDS crisis has already produced a considerable body of literature, though not yet a great work of art."<sup>21</sup> The earliest AIDS fiction, books like Paul Reed's *Facing It*, the first AIDS novel,<sup>22</sup> was desperate and often more invested in instruction than aesthetics. Almost none of these novels is still in print.<sup>23</sup> Michiko Kakutani, book critic of *The New York Times*, writes of early AIDS fiction:

In the beginning so little was widely known about the disease that writers seemed to feel an urgent need to teach, to remonstrate, to somehow convey raw facts. The disease had to be named and described so it could be fought, and early works of fiction tended almost by necessity to be polemical and didactic. Since then, novels and plays alike have grown both more personal and more abstract.<sup>24</sup>

My investigation begins in 1988 because it is the year during which novels were published that were formative of the canon of AIDS literature, after

the fledgling and desperate first attempts to write about the experiences that AIDS gave rise to, when AIDS was already beginning to be understood among certain communities of gay men to be an interwoven element of everyday life and society and not the unprecedented, tragic, and expeditiously fatal malady that it was in the early to mid-eighties.<sup>25</sup> It was still tragic, but it was no longer new. One of the only significant pieces of literature to appear before that year, except for some short stories in small gay periodicals, such as *Christopher Street* and *The James White Review*, and a few in the first of the George Stambolian's *Men on Men* series,<sup>26</sup> is Susan Sontag's short story "The Way We Live Now," published in *The New Yorker* in 1986.<sup>27</sup> It was as though before 1988 there was a hesitation to respond to AIDS with fiction. As Andrew Holleran commented in his 1988 collection of essays, the "truth was quite enough; there was no need to make it up. To attempt to imagine such scenes seemed impertinence of the worst kind."<sup>28</sup>

One of the significant ways that the literature of AIDS changes after 1994 is that it becomes retrospective. For example, the first "epics" of gay literature were produced at nearly the same time. Consider that in 1995 two important gay writers produced such epics: Felice Picano's *Like People in History* and Ethan Mordden's *How Long Has this Been Going On?*<sup>29</sup> both of which chronicle gay life in major cities from some time just before Stonewall to the time of writing. They provide a grand sweep of historical events and trends culminating in the losses incurred from AIDS.<sup>30</sup> That there should now be historical novels of gay life implies some sort of closure, or at least transition in narrative and experience—a transition to what is still uncertain, though certainly to a life that incorporates, but no longer dwells on, the losses incurred by AIDS. There is a gay history now, the appearance of gay epics such as these imply, an era that closes with the advent of the AIDS epidemic.

AIDS writing also becomes retrospective in another way, and that is in the appearance of anthologies of AIDS writing. Anthologies often signal the end of an era. Take Sharon Oard Warner's anthology of AIDS short stories, and Marie Howe and Michael Klein's anthology of American AIDS writing.<sup>31</sup> Both published in 1995, when the literature was beginning to be anthologized for yet a different reading public, one who might not have sought out the individual books as they were originally published. The year 1995 also shows a change in AIDS literature from one that is primarily mournful to another stage that is, I suggest, more about anger and anomie. This is shown in the appearance of unlikable, or "difficult," characters who have AIDS. Consider, for example, the novel *Walking on Air* by R.S. Jones, which represents a shift in AIDS writing in that the tone is not melancholy but dispassionate.<sup>32</sup> In *Flesh and Blood*, a novel by the major gay writer Michael Cunningham published in 1995, the narrative is unusual for allowing the primary gay character to remain free from AIDS, while it is a primary female character who becomes infected.<sup>33</sup>

## GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND COMMUNITY

The United States was where the first literary approaches to AIDS in the English language were produced, and where the advent of protease inhibitors first made their claim and had the effect of genuinely prolonging the lives of those who were not yet in the late stages of affliction. It is also the country in which AIDS haunts a “general public” that can, but also often cannot, sustain the impression that AIDS does not affect them. It is a country where the fear of AIDS and of those perceived to be especially at risk for AIDS is acute and the responses often reactionary.

Although one can trace the beginnings of the homosexual novel to the 1880s when “a number of fictional works with major or minor male homosexual themes began to be published in the U.S.,”<sup>34</sup> there is some consensus that gay writing and publishing had its advent in the score of years before the Stonewall riots that signaled the beginning of what we now think of as “gay liberation,” and that the small industry began to flourish in the 1970s, just after the shifts in politics and identity surrounding this event.<sup>35</sup> The year 1978 is generally cited as the historical moment when gay literature as we now know it started to flourish.<sup>36</sup> The growth of gay and lesbian writing and publishing—a veritable boom in the 1980s—coincided with the AIDS crisis.<sup>37</sup>

The proliferation of AIDS literature has revealed the importance of the written word for gay men and for the formulation and sustenance of their identity as gay. However, literature has for a long time been a formative cultural influence on gay identity. Insofar as “the arts have . . . served as an arena in which homosexuals can address—and redress—the inequities of their social status,”<sup>38</sup> the gay community’s reliance on literature and other forms of cultural representation stems directly from gay men’s experience of oppression:

[L]ike all marginalized minorities or (sub)cultures, gays and lesbians often found their cultural experience and participation constrained and proscribed by a dominant culture in which they are a generally ignored or oppressed, if logically integral, part.<sup>39</sup>

Still, as Richard Dyer explains “[b]ecause, as gays, we grew up isolated not only from our heterosexual peers but also from each other, we turned to the mass media for information and ideas about ourselves.”<sup>40</sup>

Over and over in the critical reflection on literature and gay identity, the relationship between literature and a shifting gay identity in response to AIDS is cited as crucial. While the connection is not developed, it is often said, for example, that “[i]n the age of AIDS, literary representations of AIDS may be just as—if not more—valuable to the process of identity formation as was ‘gay literature’ before the onset of the epidemic.”<sup>41</sup> It has been the printed word that has had what is often cited in commentary on

gay literature to be the most profound and consistent influence upon the formation of gay male identity in the twentieth century, particularly since the Stonewall riots, regarded as the inception of gay liberation. One critic writes that “[h]ungry for reflections of themselves and their lives that they couldn’t find at the movies or on TV, gays and lesbians continued to take their images from fiction”<sup>42</sup> and another that “literary representation . . . has been of greater importance for gay communities than for any other ethnic, national, or religious group.”<sup>43</sup>

Gay literature reflected back gay culture to a gay reading public, often made up of individuals for whom gay fiction was the only aspect of community they experienced, especially while growing up. Coming out stories, narratives that chronicle the emergence of the individual into a gay identity, were crucial in this respect. Such narratives, then, were able to constitute for isolated individuals an imagined gay community. An “imagined community,” as Benedict Anderson has formulated it, is fashioned precisely by what it reads, even if it is only a small segment of the community that reads and disseminates the values and assumptions contained in the literature. Anderson considers the formation of national consciousnesses through the effects of “print-capitalism” and the stabilization of “print-languages, which “created unified fields of exchanges and communication.”<sup>44</sup> Here the imagined community is established at the level of representation through a culture of the printed word that is structured through reading and the imagined social space it produces. Stuart Hall has similarly highlighted the importance of a shared culture in constituting national identities: “national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to *representation*.”<sup>45</sup> But marginal as well as dominant subjectivities are formed and transformed in relationship to representation. For Alan Sinfield, gay culture works in this way:

Subcultures constitute *partially alternative subjectivities*. In that bit of the world where the subculture runs, you may feel, as we used to say, that Black is beautiful, gay is good. It is through such sharing—through interaction with others who are engaged with compatible preoccupations—that one may cultivate a workable alternative subject position.<sup>46</sup>

Although the gay community has often been seen in terms of an ethnicity, gay men do not have equivalent structures of kinship, family, or memory that enable the transmission of a gay history and identity.<sup>47</sup> (“Consider,” Alan Sinfield poignantly exhorts, that “parents will repudiate their offspring because of gayness.”)<sup>48</sup> Culture, for this reason, has been central in the constitution of gay identity:

As gay persons create a gay culture cluttered with stories of gay life, gay history and gay politics, so that very culture helps to define a reality

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that makes gay personhood tighter and ever more plausible. And this in turn strengthens the culture and the politics.<sup>49</sup>

In that time of AIDS, when generations of gay men and their legacies had been lost, the transmission of a gay history and identity was even more crucially dependent on cultural production and consumption.<sup>50</sup>

### THE LEGACY OF GAY GRIEF AND LITERATURE

If it is literature that is in significant part formative of the imagined gay community, it is also precisely the sadness in the literature that was formative of the imagined gay community. It is easier to understand how grief can form a community when the mourning is more specific, that is, for example, when it is connected to the identifiable losses from AIDS. In the funeral process the “rite confirms in its every repetition the possibility of a ground for a shared intelligibility,” and it “secures for those who perform the ritual the guarantee of a common pathos, a common sense.”<sup>51</sup> The repetition of burials for the gay community during the time of AIDS had the effect of cementing the community as a common community. However, although AIDS brought about massive loss in the gay community, the period since the advent of AIDS is not the first time that the gay community has formulated itself as such around loss. It was the grief, mourning, and letting go, as found in the literature, primarily after Stonewall and before AIDS, that constituted the gay community as such.

The appearance of AIDS among gay men, then, was not the first time that homosexuality in men has been associated with loss, mourning, or death. One writer comments, for example, that “[p]arents’ fears that their children might become gay have symbolized various death fears,” and not only “that of biological death from AIDS,” but also “death of innocence, death of heterosexual identity, death of parental/adult authority, death of the natural order—even a feeling that a child turned gay might just as well be dead.”<sup>52</sup> There is a legacy of these associations that pre-exist AIDS and also seem to anticipate AIDS, a condition and a historical moment in which these associations are made corporeal by actual illness and death, by calls for mourning that now have (ill and dead) bodies connected with the underlying grief.

Gregory Woods begins the chapter on AIDS literature in his *History of Gay Literature* with a “sequence, in random order, of quotations and brief narratives relating to queers and death.”<sup>53</sup> Woods demonstrates with his sequence that gay culture “has been acquainted with death for a long time.”<sup>54</sup> AIDS literature has a legacy of loss in the gay literature that preceded it. Since pre-AIDS gay literature “characterize[d] . . . doom as the specific fate of gay men,”<sup>55</sup> AIDS literature when it emerged already had a context in which to portray loss and grief. Responding to Douglas Crimp’s article on AIDS and

mourning and Crimp's observation that "the dominant media still pictures us only as wasting deathbed victims,"<sup>56</sup> Jeff Nunokawa asserts that "the dominant media has *always* pictured gay people as 'deathbed victims.'"<sup>57</sup> Because the short history of gay literature carried in almost every novel the "requisite unhappy ending,"<sup>58</sup> gay literature when AIDS came along was accustomed already to longing, disappointment, loss, and grief.

There is a legacy of gay literature, both before AIDS and since, in which a gay character dies unnaturally or prematurely: a veritable epidemic of gay deaths that are not due to AIDS.<sup>59</sup> Woods suggests that the mournfulness found in gay men's literature is an anticipation of the prospective losses, reminding his readers that it "is easy to forget that a lot of writing from the Golden Age between Stonewall and AIDS was filled with foreboding."<sup>60</sup> Even during the time of liberation "death persisted as a theme because gay men and women were now free to address the reality of the violence directed against them."<sup>61</sup>

It was not, however, only images and themes of death that preceded AIDS in perceptions of gay men and in gay literature, but loss more generally. The coming out story, the most popular and common gay literature before the time of AIDS, was about loss at the same time that it was about liberation. Coming out novels made up the majority of the fiction that emerged after Stonewall, the phrase indicating a breach of the "closet" in which one's gay identity was kept hidden from straight society. "Coming out," Edmund White explains, "is the rite that marks the passage from homosexual desire to gay identity."<sup>62</sup> The novelist Dorothy Allison has remarked that the coming out story is "the essential homosexual theme, as persistent as the romantic love story and the coming-of-age novel"<sup>63</sup>; it is "the gay equivalent of the *Bildungsroman*,"<sup>64</sup> the narrative of the coming of age of a gay youth and "invariably, an account of the move away from the family."<sup>65</sup>

There are two ways in which the coming out story is the precursor to AIDS literature. One way—that I detail more closely in Chapter 2—is the legacy of realist literature in first person confessional narration. However, the second way, which I want to focus on here, is in its legacy of loss and mourning. While coming out stories are in some significant ways about the triumph of a gay identity over the disapproval of family, society, and friends, they are still very much about the yearning for and sacrifice of those entities.

Coming out novels proliferated during the time just before the emergence of AIDS; one of the most enduring and best known is Edmund White's novel *A Boy's Own Story*.<sup>66</sup> White's novel, typical of the *bildungsroman* as a form, is representative of, indeed can be said to be the quintessential, post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS gay male novel. The novel is typical of pre-AIDS gay literature in these ways: it is a *bildungsroman*, or a coming out story (how a young man, in this case, grows up to be and comes to accept being gay), and it is sad, that is, already entrenched in the kind of loss and mourning that later will come to be exclusively associated with AIDS. Indeed I am

suggesting that it is AIDS that allows this pre-existing, and mostly vague and inarticulate, sadness around unacceptance and loss of family bonds to be at last articulated.

The novel is a story of a unnamed boy growing up in the Midwest of America, probably in the 1950s, in which the narrator declaims his “disgust and longing” (p. 40) and his loneliness: “I most certainly had been lonely,” the narrator declares in an extraordinary image of the very tangibility of isolation, “I had ached and writhed with loneliness, twisting around and smearing it on me as though it were a tissue of shame pouring out of my body” (p. 110). White’s novel epitomizes a literature of utter desolation and sadness. It is a novel of a “childhood sunk into a cross-eyed, nose-picking turpitude of shame and self-loathing” (p. 126).

*A Boy’s Own Story* is among the first novels of its kind to describe the growing up of a boy who, although he is full of diffidence about his desires for men and other boys, is also largely without apology for these desires. The protagonist often expresses shame for his desires, but more often he expresses distress that they cannot be fulfilled. The pre-existing grief that I speak of is conveyed nicely when White’s narrator, as a young boy, pines for a man to love him: “I hypothesized a lover who would take me away,” he laments; “[h]is delay in coming went on so long that soon I’d passed from anticipation to nostalgia” (p. 39). The grief of the coming out novels is tied to a longing that even before it can be defined is best articulated as a kind of nostalgia. The protagonist does not want to overcome his homosexuality, though there is some of that inclination in the novel, but far more there is a continual capitulation to “the ache of waiting and the fear I wasn’t worthy” (p. 40). “Everything I did or touched,” the narrator declares, “spoke to me of sadness” (p. 165).

In *A Boy’s Own Story*, Edmund White creates a narrative of “the self-hatred that was forced on a young gay man by a society that could conceive of homosexuality only as a sickness, sin or crime.”<sup>67</sup> White’s statement here suggests that it is the reactions to these attitudes of society that make for the loneliness and grief in his novel, and by extension, I would add, the loneliness and grief of other novels of this period and of this kind. *A Boy’s Own Story* is typical of other post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS coming out stories (though atypical, perhaps, in the superior quality of the writing) in that it charts the lonely existence of a gay adolescent who knows of no other gay men, no community of men like himself. It is precisely this sort of isolated existence, albeit ending with the recognition of community, that constitutes the longing and grief in the coming out novels of pre-AIDS literature that I am pointing to and offering as itself constitutive of a pre-existing mourning, as it were, among gay men before the advent of AIDS.

Another novel of growing up, David Leavitt’s *The Lost Language of Cranes*,<sup>68</sup> while not published before AIDS, is set before an awareness and recognition of AIDS. It is the story also of a young gay man who must in his post-adolescent youth (Philip is twenty-five) come to terms with his

sexuality in a world where he knows of no others like himself (though the interesting twist in this story is that his father also comes out as gay). “Philip longed for passion,” we read very early in the novel, and that “[r]ejection seemed his lot in life” (p. 33). In a line that echoes similar sentiments of secretiveness in James Baldwin’s early novel *Giovanni’s Room*, which I will discuss shortly, Philip recalls that “[h]is sexual life had been bred in secret; he had never spoken of it with anyone, not even himself” (p. 77); he hoped that he “would be free of it, then, that other life, the secret life; it would fall away unknown to anyone but him, a husk, and he would look back on it as a distant dream” (pp. 77–78). Leavitt’s novel, like White’s, foregrounds a sadness—a loneliness and loss—that is particular to representations of the coming of age of young gay men.

While it is frequently claimed that gay men have a pre-existing relationship to death—that AIDS was by no means the first instance that homosexuality and death were consigned to the same association—I want also to claim, as an extension of this conception, that there is a pre-existing link, not only between gay men and death, but between gay men and loss, disappointment, and grief. Certainly the presence of AIDS among such large numbers of those men who love men produced waves of loss and grief, but it was not the first time that gay men felt mired in loss and consumed by grief. In fact, grief seems to have been, up to and including the time of “gay liberation” marked by the Stonewall Riots in 1969, the common disposition of men represented in the available literature from at least mid-century onwards, who came to a consciousness of themselves as loving, pursuing, and wishing to be pursued by other men. Consider, for example, Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar*, James Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room*, and Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*, all pre-Stonewall novels predicated on themes of loss.

Gore Vidal’s third novel (the “first serious American homosexual novel,” declares Bernard Levin’s assessment from *The Times* across the novel’s cover), published in 1948, broke the mold, the author declares in a 1994 preface to the novel, of “American novels of ‘inversion’ [that] dealt with shrieking queens or lonely bookish boys who married unhappily and pined for Marines.”<sup>69</sup> It does not follow, however, that this is a cheerful novel. The protagonist Jim Willard is searching for his one perfect love throughout the story, his “twin, with whom he shared a night of physical fusion (“[n]ow they were complete, each became the other, as their bodies collided with a primal violence, like to like, metal to magnet, half to half, and the whole restored” p. 32) before his lover, Bob Ford, departs their hometown to “travel and to hell around” (p. 29). The book opens on Jim in a seedy bar in the middle of the night, he is seemingly ancient at twenty-five years old, unsure what city he is in, drunk and without a place to sleep (“Drunk, he wanted to be drunker, without memory, or fear” p. 14). A secondary character in the novel, Sullivan, considers at one point that there was “an excellent chance that he would lose Jim, and the thought gave him