

John Carranza

Contemporary understanding and empathizing with minority groups, such as the gay and lesbian community, requires historically grounded knowledge. For example, the AIDS epidemic became a defining moment in gay and lesbian history. The disease due to its complex and lethal nature, bewildered and stumped scientists, causing death to loom large over the gay community. Silence among American politicians left the gay community in the difficult position of being ostracized and having to become activists to lobby for life-saving medications. Using primary source material, the reader can intimately engage this historical moment and consider the community in their own words. Literature allows the reader to experience the author's creative expression of thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a unique way.

Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series is a primary source that gives the reader a glimpse into life in San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s. *Tales of the City* began in serial form in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in the 1970s, and were later collected into cohesive novels. Importantly, *Tales of the City* became known for its placement of gay and lesbian characters alongside heterosexual characters, and showed that they had complicated lives and meaningful relationships. The fanciful storylines intertwine with one another, and center around the main characters living at 28 Barbary Lane. Anna Madrigal, as the matriarch, provided stability for the characters who acted as one another's chosen family. In the second novel, *More Tales of the City*, it is revealed that Anna Madrigal had once lived as a man, making her one of the first transgendered characters in American literature. This revelation was taken in stride and normalized by all of the residents of 28 Barbary Lane, who saw her as a maternal guide through their troubles and someone who also desired love and family in her own right.

As a serial, a steady stream of deadlines urged Maupin to produce a daring, entertaining, funny, and coherent narrative in installments. Because he wrote the story in real time, Maupin incorporated his lived reality. For example, Michael "Mouse" Tolliver's mother expresses her approval of Anita Bryant and her crusade against homosexuals while being unaware of her son's sexuality. In the fourth installment, *Babycakes*, Queen Elizabeth's 1983 visit to San Francisco sets the theme for the events in the novel.

The emergence of the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco remains one of the most resonant and compelling storylines. A short amount of time elapsed between the events of *Further Tales of the City* and *Babycakes*, but in that time Michael Tolliver lost his lover, Jon Fielding and many friends to the deadly, seemingly unidentifiable, disease. As the reader progresses through *Babycakes*,

*Significant Others*, and *Sure of You*, the reader experiences the very real sense of loss and confusion; the streets of San Francisco no longer feel like a bustling center of sexual energy, but instead appear quiet and morose. The reader gets this sense from the narrator's perspective in *Significant Others*:

*It wasn't just an epidemic anymore; it was a famine, a starvation of the spirit, which sooner or later afflicted everyone. Some people capitulated to the terror, turning inward in their panic, avoiding the gaze of strangers on the street. Others adopted a sort of earnest gay fraternalism, enacting the rituals of safe-sex orgies with all the clinical precision of Young Pioneers dismantling their automatic weapons. (Maupin, 1987, p. 22)*

In San Francisco, the gay community can do nothing else but wonder about who has "it," who is positive, and who "couldn't possibly be negative." (Maupin, 1987, p. 23)

Michael Tolliver, who lives with HIV, feels overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the disease and meticulously monitored his health. Any sign of "a mild case of the flu or the slightest furriness of the tongue" would fill him with "abject terror." (Maupin, 1987, 23) In fact, as he saw many of his friends die, he became preoccupied with the notion of when his own death would arrive. This uncertainty causes tension in his relationship with his new boyfriend, and his friendships with Mary Ann Singleton and Brian Hawkins.

The magic in the *Tales of the City* series owes as much to how the reader empathizes with the characters, as it does with the fantastic storylines and situations in which the characters often find themselves. In an interview with NPR in 2014, Armistead Maupin admits that "...almost everybody at 28 Barbary Lane is in one way or another drawn from my own soul." As a result, the reader connects with Maupin on a personal level and evolves with him and the characters.

Readers could learn about the beginning of the AIDS epidemic through primary sources such as newspapers, memoirs, and documentaries, but the *Tales of the City* series adds something special. Maupin invites his readers into the lives of the characters of 28 Barbary Lane *before* the AIDS epidemic begins. Therefore, they come to know the characters intimately, and it is their voices and actions that remain privileged. By the time AIDS appears as a mysterious and nameless disease, the reader becomes scared for Michael Tolliver personally, because they invested in his story. The reader mourns the loss of those around Michael, struggles along with him as he tries to come to terms with his potential death sentence (nearly two decades after the conclusion of *Sure of You* we find that Michael has survived into the new millennium in *Michael Tolliver Lives*), and can celebrate the activism that manifests in his new boyfriend. *Tales of the City* as a primary source offers a perspective on the AIDS epidemic that allows the reader to experience the prevalent feelings of confusion, fear, and loss through the eyes of Armistead Maupin. This period in American history was fraught with tension socially, culturally, and politically. As a result, it is important to value a multitude of perspectives and representations of this historical event when attempting to understand the impact of AIDS.

