

A TIME BEFORE AIDS

IN HIS NEW NOVEL, AUTHOR JEFFREY SHARLACH REVISITS
THE HEADY DAWN OF GAY LIBERATION

BY JIM BROSEAU

It was turning Toronto's village into a modern-day ghost town. The same was true of gay enclaves in Montreal, Vancouver and other cities throughout Canada and the U.S. It was the 1980s, and the mysterious zephyr falling so many men in their prime was AIDS.

Even though the disease doesn't surface until the latter half of Jeffrey Sharlach's debut novel, *Running in Bed* (Two Harbors Press), it stalks the carefree lives of a post-Stonewall group of friends as surely as winter does fall.

Head of his own Miami-based communications firm, Sharlach brings to life the era of disco balls, outsized moustaches and hook-ups that didn't carry the threat of death—or so everyone thought. He's also lent fresh energy to gay literature's once bountiful coming-of-age genre. Some might argue the scarcity of such tales, while suggestive of greater openness and freedom in the LGBT community, could leave gaps in the compilation of gay history. If so, Sharlach has thoughtfully done his part to help fill the void.

OUTLOOKS: What motivated you to write this book?

JEFFREY SHARLACH: In teaching at New York University, meeting young people and being in the social scene, I began to see that this was a lost part of our history. People had no idea of what that era was like. I felt as if it was going to disappear

from view. It was a story I'd always thought about, and I realized the time had come to get busy writing it.

OUTLOOKS: Your book's lead character seeks the help of a therapist in "going straight." Did you ever avail yourself of so-called conversion therapy?

JS: When I first moved to New York City, in 1974, it was in the midst of the gay-rights movement, just a few years after Stonewall. One of the things that used to be very scary to me was seeing these guys in dresses, and I'd tell myself, That has nothing to do with what I'm feeling. I was going to law school and closeted. I wanted to be straight. Fortunately, the therapist I did see didn't try to change me. He redirected me and asked, Why don't you want to explore this part of you occurring naturally?

OUTLOOKS: When did you actually come out?

JS: About three years after moving to New York, in 1977. The only time you heard about homosexuals back then was when we were arrested for having sex in public bathrooms. We didn't have the role models we have now. The media was a nonstop barrage of how miserable and unhappy gay people were. Being homosexual meant you could end up being arrested or killed.

OUTLOOKS: You lost your partner, Ken Williams, to AIDS in 1994. The love interest in *Running*, Tommy—is he based on Ken?

JS: No. You might say Ken plays himself at the end of the book. He was a social worker [as is one of the novel's most compassionate characters]. Ken also had an infectious laugh, and everyone felt comfortable around him.

OUTLOOKS: What was it like to revisit those earliest days of the AIDS epidemic, when the disease didn't even have a name?

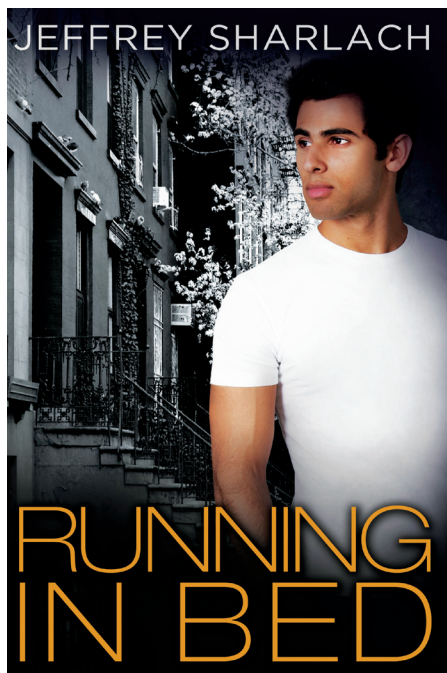
JS: It's still difficult. Even now, just thinking about it, while I'm speaking to you, I can get goose bumps. We would be reading these stories in the newspaper one day, and we'd say to one another, Well, everyone's not going to die. But, yes, a lot of those people did die. It was like watching this Holocaust going on, but an invisible Holocaust because I was going to work every day, people were going about their lives. And, of course, a lot of gay people were still invisible then.

OUTLOOKS: You capture something almost in the way Huxley did about meeting kindred spirits in the workplace. What was that like?

JS: There was a community. When you found someone gay, there was this very strong bond because it was so underground. It's great we have the openness now, but there was this secret society. I think that connection was a very, very powerful one.

OUTLOOKS: Now that things are much more open, that there's less of a need for that secret society you describe, do you think the class distinctions of the culture at large are now as much a part of the gay community, as well?

JS: Absolutely. But I think we can romanticize the past a bit. There was, for example, a lot of ageism. In my 20s on Fire Island, we would think, Oh, I hope those old guys don't come over to spoil the party. And, of course, the old guys at that point would have been in their 40s [Laughs]. And there was certainly some racism, as well. In 2012, there's still a lot of separate socializing going on.



Author Jeffrey Sharlach's new book (left); Sharlach today (top, right) and with his late partner, Ken Williams, right, at their 10th-anniversary party in 1991.

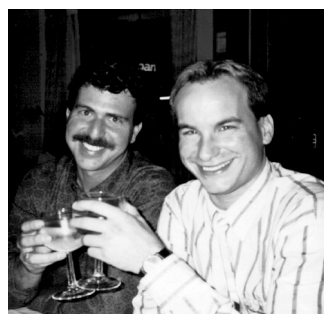
OUTLOOKS: Do you think of your book as a novel or a gay novel?

JS: I initially thought of it as a novel. I wanted to make it the crossover tale everyone would read. Publishing these days is very much a niche process. The days of wandering into a bookstore just to see what caught your eye are gone.

OUTLOOKS: Putting on your marketer's hat, how would you assess the "gay brand" today?

JS: The gay brand is being very diluted these days. Being gay was something that set you apart: You had your own clubs, restaurants. We've seen the decline of gay bars. The reality, in terms of socializing, is that gay men and lesbians, in most urban areas, at least, can go to any bar or restaurant and feel pretty welcome. We've lost this sort of exclusivity that the brand used to have. It's become more

mass market, but that's for good reasons. Young people are coming out very early. Being gay is much more integrated into their whole experience. When I came out, I found all new friends. That's not how it works for young people now when they come out.



OUTLOOKS: A lot of people believe they have a novel in them but aren't sure how to get started. Any advice?

JS: Books about writing will say you should set aside an hour a day to write, but the best thing I did was to go away and write. I had an opportunity to take time off. I just said, I'm going to go away and write this book. So I rented an apartment in Sitges, Spain, for two

months. I got up and wrote all day—I'd go out at night, so it wasn't exactly Walden Pond. I came back with a 400-page manuscript. I realize a lot of people don't have the opportunity I did, and I give a lot of credit to people who can't get away, to women with kids, for example, who get up at 4 in the morning to write their novel.

OUTLOOKS: What's something you learned about yourself in writing the book?

JS: One of the things is that there are a lot of feelings I had buried over the years. I had buried the Holocaust of that time. There were moments I had tears in my eyes remembering that period. I also think it felt really good to get the story out there. A lot of those people were just starting out with real promise. That promise was just extinguished.