

After being diagnosed with AIDS, **Hervé Guibert** wrote this devastating, darkly humorous and personal novel, chronicling three months in the penultimate year of the narrator's life. In the wake of his friend Muzil's death, he goes from one quack doctor to another, from holidays to test centres, and charts the highs and lows of trying to cheat death.

On publication in 1990, the novel scandalised French media, which quickly identified Muzil as Guibert's close friend Michel Foucault. The book became a bestseller, and Guibert a celebrity. The book has since attained a cult following for its tender, fragmented and beautifully written accounts of illness, friendship, sex, art and everyday life. It catapulted Guibert into notoriety and sealed his reputation as a writer of shocking precision and power.

Praise for Hervé Guibert:

'Hervé Guibert's novel, created in the white heat of his own impending death from AIDS, is written with urgency, clarity, controlled rage. It is an important document charting the shock of diagnosis and illness, but, more than that, it is an astonishing piece of writing, whose tone is gripping and fierce; it is electrifying in its searing honesty and its control of rhythm and cadence'

—Colm Tóibín

'One of the most beautiful, haunting and fascinating works in the French autofictional canon. Guibert grapples with his own AIDS diagnosis, and the death of his friend Muzil, in a dazzling piece of writing. It's a book that gives me goosebumps every time I open it – I'm thrilled that it's being reissued in the UK, where Guibert's extraordinary writing deserves to be much better known'

—Katherine Angel, author of *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*

‘Guibert’s life work looms before me not merely as what Keats called (describing the Elgin Marbles) the “shadow of a magnitude”, but as the magnitude itself, sans shadow’

—Wayne Koestenbaum, *Bookforum*

‘Reveals a writer of courage, beguiling flai, and sometimes maddening nastiness ... The rare book that truly deserves the epithet “unflinching”. Its author may be afraid to die, but on the page his voice doesn’t crack, his hand doesn’t tremble ... In Linda Coverdale’s masterly translation [the book] powerfully evokes the AIDS epidemic’s uncertain early days’

—*New Yorker*

‘Dark and unsettling, yet Guibert manages to find beauty and tenderness in the world around him’

—Moyra Davey, author of *Index Cards*

‘It is an unforgettable, heartbreaking evocation of the early days of the epidemic, when gay men were forced to become their own scientists, lobbyists, archivists’

—*The New York Times*

‘Relentlessly honest, extraordinarily truthful’

—*Kirkus Reviews*

‘This moving French bestseller ... reads like a personal memoir. Delivered with wit, verve and valour’

—*Publishers Weekly*

‘Outstandingly colloquial and exact ... urgent and monitory ... restrained and controlled ... but full of well-noticed contrasting details that combine to create an effect that Guibert ... characterised as “barbarous and delicate”

—Marco Roth, *Bookforum*

‘[Guibert’s] work has been strangely neglected in the anglophone world, never mind its innovation and historical importance, its breathtaking indiscretion, tenderness and gore. How can an artist so original, so thrillingly indifferent to convention and the tyranny of good taste – let alone one so prescient – remain untranslated and unread?’

—Parul Sehgal, *The New York Times*

To the
Friend Who
Did Not
Save My Life

To the
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Did Not
Save My Life

HERVÉ GUIBERT

Foreword by
Maggie Nelson

Introduction by
Andrew Durbin

Afterword by
Edmund White

Translated by
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Foreword: My Hervé Guibert

On an afternoon in 2003, when I am on a road trip with the writer Brian Blanchfield, in pursuit of an empty condo owned by a distant relative in Palm City, Florida, Brian takes out his weathered copy of Hervé Guibert's *My Parents* (then published by Serpent's Tail) and begins to read aloud to me as I drive. I remember having to pee very badly and also feeling abashed that I hadn't yet heard of this writer of such obvious importance to Brian, whose literary taste I consider impeccable, as I heard the first words (in translation, of course) of a writer who would soon become deeply important to me. "On Thursday 21 July 1983, when I am on the island of Elba and her sister Suzanne is at her country place in Gisors, my 76-year-old great-aunt Louise has a bad turn on the number 49 bus going toward Gare du Nord..."

About a decade later, I read a stunning essay on Guibert in *Bookforum* by another friend, the writer Wayne Koestenbaum, in which Koestenbaum says he cannot "objectively evaluate the work of a writer [he takes] personally," groups Guibert with writers and artists such as Guy Hocquenghem, Michel Foucault, Tony Duvert, Dennis Cooper, Pierre Guyotat, Robert Mapplethorpe, David Wojnarowicz, Jack Smith, Jimmy De Sana, Mark Morrisroe, Félix González-Torres, and Paul Thek, and hopes that renewed interest

in Guibert's work will bring back into prominence the "philosophically inclined subset of body-smear literature" that Guibert both contributed to and transformed.

I'm thinking of these two moments, and these two friends, as I sit down to write about *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, a book that has come to occupy an immoderately important place in my canon. I'm wondering how I, too, came to take Guibert personally—how he became "my Hervé Guibert" (à la Susan Howe's "my Emily Dickinson")—and what it means.

My Parents may have come first, but it was the opening page of *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* that staked its claim. To this day, I cannot think of a more perfect example of the performative, dauntless writing of the body-in-time as it faces down the twin miracles of mundanity and mortality, the ability of literature I likely care about most. It wasn't just the first page, of course—it was also the second and the third, which quickly reveal the complexity of Guibert's temporal and tonal fretwork. The past tense of the book's opening line—"I had AIDS for three months"—mobilizes the comfort of retrospective storytelling, of survival ("I told no one save these same friends that I was going to make it, that I would become, by an extraordinary stroke of luck, one of the first people on earth to survive this deadly malady"). Turn the page, however, and the opening gambit crashes. Alone in Rome, Guibert now wavers "between doubt and lucidity, having reached the limits of both hope and despair." He spurs himself on to write the book we are holding in our hands by telling himself that its *raison d'être* lies "along this borderline of uncertainty, so familiar to sick people everywhere."

Harrowing uncertainty is the soil in which *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* grows. Alas, one aspect of the case has since

been decided: Guibert did not survive the malady. In fact, he died within a year of the book's publication. Knowing this before we begin, the book's opening page is radiant with irony and tragedy. From there, the book unfurls like an extended, salacious riff on John Keats's fragment (written when Keats was dying from tuberculosis): "This living hand, now warm and capable...see here it is— / I hold it towards you." Guibert knew, as did Keats, that the hand here proffered would soon be that of a dead man. Rather than pity him for it, we might recognize that we share his fate, the difference being that he felt it acutely, and was uncommonly capable of scribing the disaster.

It has been thirty years since Guibert died, and just over thirty since *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* was first published in French. Not so much time, really, but enough that certain aspects of its original scene of reception have significantly altered. The scandal of the book's outing of Foucault (who appears here under the name Muzil) as someone who died of AIDS and had a closet full of BDSM equipment has thankfully passed. By the time I came to Foucault in the early 1990s, such facts were—partly due to Guibert—a given, and only deepened my interest in Foucault's work. Some critics and readers continue to feel perturbed by Guibert's revelations (often called betrayals); for others of us, there is no sting. Perhaps this is unsurprising, as his work inevitably comes off differently to those of us who also swim in the choppy waters of high-stakes life writing, and are familiar with the ethical and aesthetic challenges that come with it (not to mention with how intensely outsiders judge the venture).

Many life writers eventually come to understand that a reader's sense of scandal or sensationalism tells us as much or more about her than about the writer; certain sensibilities, sentiments, and

activities that are shocking to some make others feel at home. Likewise, the charge that Guibert's obscenity lacks in higher purpose—that unlike, say, Genet or Bataille, he was just “a young man out to trigger the middle-class world, espousing extreme self-exposure for its own sake”^{*} lands a punch only if “extreme self-exposure for its own sake” strikes you as obviously thin or bad. Damning accusation for some; cherished, fecund credo for others. It all depends on who you are, how you roll.

Not for the first time, I am wondering what it means to have been so profoundly shaped by the artists and writers on Koestenbaum's list (especially Wojnarowicz, whose own 1991 memoir of disintegration from AIDS, *Close to the Knives*, reordered my world when I was eighteen). There were women, of course, and there would be more. But even of those, the ones I revered most tended to be those who formed some kind of bridge between genders, between worlds: Eileen Myles, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Cookie Mueller, Nan Goldin, Gayle Rubin, Jane Gallop, and so on. As is typical for young women confronting male-dominated coterie in literature and in life, I revered and loved these men without knowing if that reverence or love ever would or could be reciprocated—whether the tradition of philosophically inclined, body-smearing literature that Guibert represents ever would or could be understood as part of the same flow that contained so many of the not-men writers I also admired. (Certainly men can be not-men, too—forgive me here, I'm speaking in broad strokes.)

I say all this to explain the somewhat juvenile claim of my title, which I don't mean in a proprietorial way, but rather as an attempt

^{*}Julian Lucas, “The Virus that Became a Muse for Hervé Guibert,” *New Yorker*, 14 September, 2020.

to place Guibert in this flow, which encompasses everyone from Myles to Paul Preciado to Claudia Rankine to Gloria Anzaldúa to Anne Carson to Hilton Als to Bruce Benderson to Karl Ove Knausgård to Catherine Millet to Frank Wilderson to Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore to Emmanuel Carrère to Patricia Williams to Christina Crosby to Marguerite Duras to Harry Dodge to James Baldwin to Roland Barthes to Audre Lorde to Violette Leduc (not to mention Blanchfield and Koestenbaum, and many more). Without giving it a name (like “queer”), I want to celebrate this riotous, motley heritage as one characterized by ravenous intellectual appetite; a wry and unflinching devotion to chronicling corporality; dedication to formal experiment, up to and including the detonation of genre; and a certain curiosity and fearlessness where others might expect (or project) shame.

To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life is not a perfect book. Each time I read it, I find myself riveted by its first half, then growing somewhat irritated and distracted by the second, which perseverates on the eponymous, unctuous friend “Bill” who fails to deliver the drug that might keep the narrator alive. Because we know how the story ends, and because we know how it ended for so many others, it’s painful and maddening to watch Guibert chase the idiot doctor, the fraudulent cure. Now that there’s an internet, I find myself drifting away from the text and into deep Google holes about the various figures here fictionalized, from Isabelle Adjani (“Marine”) to Daniel Defert (“Stéphane”) to Thierry Jouno (“Jules”), all the while trying to remind myself—mostly in vain—that it’s *a novel*, one that Defert, Foucault’s surviving companion, termed “a vicious fantasy.”

But the book remains a masterpiece, not despite its imperfections, but because of them. Imperfection was key to Guibert’s

style—as Koestenbaum puts it: “Futility and botched execution are the immortal matter of Guibert’s method.” As is often the case in reading Guibert, after you turn the last page of *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, you can’t believe it’s over. That was it? It’s really going to end right there? With Guibert in deep shit, his arms and legs “as slender as they were when [he] was a child”?

Yes, that’s it. That’s all you get. In the end, it’s an astonishing bounty: at age thirty-six, Guibert left behind over twenty-five books, along with a remarkable body of work in photography and film, with *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life* one of his constellation’s brightest stars. If you haven’t read it yet, there’s no need to feel ashamed. You can instead feel grateful that you—any of you, all of us—can now enter.

Maggie Nelson
Los Angeles, 2021

Introduction: A Guide for Living

In 1988 the French novelist and photographer Hervé Guibert was diagnosed with HIV. Two years later, Éditions Gallimard published *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, a stark autobiographical book about his desperate effort to gain access to an experimental “AIDS vaccine.” *To the Friend* made Guibert both wealthy and famous, especially after an appearance on the French TV show *Apostrophes*. Posters of his handsome face went up around Paris, transforming him into a symbol of the intense suffering of seropositive men and women at the time. Though he promises in the opening section of his book to become “one of the first people on earth to survive this deadly malady,” he would die the following year, on December 27, 1991, only a few days after his thirty-sixth birthday, author of an additional five extraordinary books, all of which would be published posthumously.

To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life comprises a series of portraits of friends and lovers whom illness and its specters torment throughout its one hundred chapters. Marine—based on the actor Isabelle Adjani—is dogged by rumors that she is HIV-positive after a mid-career debacle on the Paris stage. The novel’s titular friend, a cocky, Miami-based pharmaceuticals executive named Bill, brags about his connection to Melvil Mockney (a stand-in for the inven-

tor of the polio vaccine, Jonas Salk), who hopes to introduce immunotherapy to combat HIV/AIDS; both the connection and Mockney's therapy come to nothing (as Mathieu Lindon recalls in his 2011 memoir *Learning What Love Means, To the Friend's* manuscript was titled *Pendes-toi Bill!* or, *Go Fuck Yourself, Bill!*). Jules and his wife, Berthe—a couple based on Guibert's longtime lover, Thierry Journo, and his wife, Christine Seemuller—fear not only for themselves but for their children when Jules discovers that he, too, is seropositive. Other sickened men flit by in the novel's short chapters: sons, boyfriends, brothers, strangers. The central and most arresting portrait is of Guibert's mentor, the philosopher Muzil, based on Michel Foucault, whose death the writer repeatedly returns to in the first half of the novel.

Guibert's gripping revelation, in the character of Muzil, of Foucault's final days, which had been kept secret by the privacy-obsessed French press, caused a stir in the country, abetting the author's rise to fame late in his young life. Muzil is cavalier about the virus when the first reports of a "gay cancer" arrive in Europe, and later he even admires its "revolutionary effects." After Muzil's annual trip to San Francisco, where he prowls the city's famous bathhouses, he remarks that AIDS had created "new complicities, new tenderness, new solidarities" in the city's cruising grounds. When he tests positive, he conceals his diagnosis from almost everyone, even his partner. Death, Muzil argues, should retain an element of profound mystery, for the living and the dying. In a passing conversation with Guibert, the philosopher provocatively imagines a "death resort" built around such obscurity, where unwell or aging people who are ready to die slip behind a painting, into a secret room, after which they are never heard from again—an inversion of Dorian Gray's famous portrait, with the illusion of beauty swapped for good health.

Muzil's resort provides a concise image for Guibert's late fiction, which is full of disappearances, revisions, and redundancies as characters die and are resurrected, sometimes turning to shambles only to be found, a few pages later, back on their feet. In *To the Friend*, Guibert offers one brutal glimpse behind Muzil's resort painting after another. At the height of his intellectual powers, the philosopher struggles, in his final year, to complete a series of books on human sexuality but, like Foucault, fails to do so. (His name is likely a nod to the Austrian writer Robert Musil, who left unfinished the epic novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, that he wrote between 1930 and 1943. The substitution of the last letter of the alphabet for an "s" provides a note of finality that both men were otherwise denied.) Eventually, Muzil loses his memory, his ability to write, his physical capacities, and collapses in a pool of blood in his Parisian apartment.

"I can imagine several endings," Guibert writes toward the beginning of *To the Friend*, "all of which fall for the moment under the heading of premonition or heartfelt desire, but the whole truth is still hidden from me, and I tell myself that this book's *raison d'être* lies along this borderline of uncertainty, so familiar to sick people everywhere." Multiple endings meant that Guibert would devote much of his later work to the unfinished stories—and lives—shaped by this recursive sickness that, like the novel itself, is embedded with the history of venereal diseases and their treatment, as well as the "new complicities, new tenderness, new solidarities" that attend to terminal illness.

After Guibert—the narrator of *To the Friend*—tests positive in the second half of the novel, his various multiplying infections are remedied at the Institut Alfred-Fournier, which had served as an important syphilis hospital in the nineteenth century. Here,

Guibert points to another quiet substitution, one within the broader medical pattern that has long pathologized gay life: that of HIV/AIDS for syphilis within epidemiological healthcare institutions in 1980s France, from the way they treated gay men to the very hospitals used to care for them. With the rise of HIV/AIDS, the old Institut was quite instantly revitalized, “enriched by the blood of seropositive patients,” Guibert observes. He describes the nurses as if they might be wearing that season’s Yves Saint Laurent: “With semisheer stockings and flats, straight skirts, and tasteful necklaces worn over their white smocks, the nurses look very chic... They slip on their latex gloves as though they were velvet gloves for a gala evening at the opera.” But the hospital’s revival doesn’t change the way doctors approach the treatment of HIV/AIDS: they are anxious about being near their patients, just as the patients are anxious about themselves. Physical, emotional, and intellectual contact between them (not only at the hospital, but in the pharmaceutical labs of the major manufacturers) is kept at a minimum, a major issue that would be confronted in the United States by ACT-UP. Governments in Europe, meanwhile, Guibert reports, were debating whether to brand seropositive people or forcibly test “at-risk groups” on intra-continental borders.

This follows a long history of blaming gay men for the prevalence of venereal disease, and for dismissing them as hopeless cases for modern medicine, people who could never be “saved.” In his book *Homosexual Desire* (1978), Guibert’s near-contemporary, the philosopher and activist Guy Hocquenghem—who died from AIDS-related complications in 1988—describes the treatment of syphilis, only a few years before the appearance of the first cases of HIV/AIDS, in terms that would have been instantly recognizable to Guibert as he sat in the Institut Alfred-Fournier:

The shame that accompanies the disease, the repressive system by which the social worker has virtual police rights in cases of syphilis (including access to the files and his ability to force the patient to declare all sexual contacts who could have been infected) are sufficient to explain the spread of the disease. It is difficult for someone to admit that he has syphilis. Syphilis is not just a virus but an ideology too; it forms a fantasy whole, like the plague and its symptoms as Antonin Artaud analyzed them. The basis of syphilis is the fantasy fear of contamination, of a secret parallel advance by both the virus and by the libido's unconscious forces; the homosexual transmits syphilis as he transmits homosexuality.

So, even as the medical establishment conquered syphilis with the miracle of penicillin, it failed to conquer the faggots, leaving partly dormant a repressive system that sprang to life again with AIDS, as Guibert's novel testifies.

Once more, fantasies of contamination spread across Europe and the US in the 1980s and early 1990s. Seropositive men and women were denied necessary medication and basic courtesy while being subjected to dubious experimental treatments, double-blind tests by which they might be deluded into thinking they would receive medication but were given only a placebo, public disgust, and outright indifference. Even when Guibert is told that he has tested positive for HIV, the nurse presupposes his foreknowledge, as if it were a given—or an inescapable fate: “How long have you known that you're seropositive?” It is an appalling irony that, while the Swiss pharmaceutical company Roche patented the first antiretroviral drug, Saquinavir, in 1988, the year Guibert received his diagnosis and Hocquenghem died, it wouldn't be made available to patients until 1995.

To the Friend is riven with desperation and fear, especially as it moves toward its final chapters. As the French and women's studies scholar David Caron notes in an introduction to Guibert's diary of his final few weeks, *Cytomegalovirus*, "Some French activists criticized him for what they saw as apolitical and romantic self-involvement." Countering this idea, Caron wonders whether "the very affirmation of personhood in the face of the dehumanizing discourses so prevalent at the time represents in fact a legitimate combative stance?" I tend to agree. But Guibert expresses his own doubts about his autobiographical project, which would be carried out after *To the Friend* in several more works, including *The Compassion Protocol*, *My Servant and Me*, *The Man in the Red Hat*, *Paradise*, *Cytomegalovirus*, and his collected diaries, *The Mausoleum of Lovers*. After relaying Muzil's final days to the reader of *To the Friend*, he wonders:

What right did I have to record all that? What right did I have to use friendship in such a mean fashion? And with someone I adored with all my heart? And then I sensed—it's extraordinary—a kind of vision, or vertigo, that gave me complete authority, putting me in charge of these ignoble transcripts and legitimizing them by revealing to me (so it's what's called a premonition, a powerful presentiment) that I was completely entitled to do this since it wasn't so much my friend's last agony I was describing as it was my own, which was waiting for me and would be just like his, for it was now clear that besides being bound by friendship, we would share the same fate in death.

Agony upon agony. What is especially powerful about Guibert's writing is that he reclaims from Hocquenghem's "social

worker with police rights” (that is, the state working to “contain” him) the right to tell the manifold story of a virus—and the community it has so deeply affected. It is a story of leaky emotional and physical borders; a story not of just one person and one body in 1988, but also of friends, a city, and a time. Guibert’s “vision, or vertigo” after Muzil’s death leads him to some of his most moving—if heartbreaking—writing on the toll of disease, as in one scene, late in the novel, when Guibert and Jules travel to Lisbon to share a birthday celebration. With both men sick, they are dragged “to the very bottom of the abyss,” where Guibert unspools, in breathlessly staggered prose, on the burden of suffering:

[Jules had] been strong enough—or weak enough—to keep moral suffering at a distance, he’d never known what it was, except when those close to him were in its grip, because you would’ve thought he picked for his friends only people given to the excesses of misery, and just last summer I spent a night trying to console Jules’s lover who was sobbing in the next room, and here I was pushing Jules to discover for himself the devastating effect of this suffering, a weapon I seemed to wield like an executioner, when the sight of him in pain made me just as wretched as he was, and added to my burden by leaving me prostrate for days on end like an invalid, I’d practically lain down on my deathbed... Neither Jules nor I was capable of the slightest physical warmth anymore. I asked him, “Are you suffering from lack of love?” He answered, “No, I’m suffering, period.”

This writing, personal as it is, with its portraits of friends and lovers in pain, expresses a political orientation cognizant of its limitations, too—its lack of a coherent program, its lack of ideas for