

writers



WRITER AMY HOFFMAN AT HOME IN PROVINCETOWN. PHOTO BY TRISH CRAPO

Amy Hoffman

Creating the Story of Her Life

BY TRISH CRAPO

I **KNOCKED** on Amy Hoffman's door on a side street in Provincetown on a cold day at the end of December. A storm the day before had given the town what I was outsider enough to see as a frosted-over beauty. Ice glazed the closed shops and restaurants. Snow had been driven into the bark of trees. Hoffman had hot, homemade chicken soup for me and, after lunch with her partner, photographer Roberta Stone, we got to talking about her work at the *Women's Review of Books (WRB)*, the frustrations and joys of writing, and the blurry lines between fiction and memoir.

Hoffman has published two memoirs: *Hospital Time* (Duke University Press, 1997), the story of caring for a friend who died of AIDS in 1992; and *An Army of Ex-Lovers* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), a memoir that traces her years as managing editor of *Gay Community News* through the tumultuous seventies, when an act of arson destroyed the paper's Boston offices. Since *Army's* publication, she's been working on a third book about her family's emigration from Russia. How she has time to write is a mystery: she's also managing editor of *Women's Review of Books*; editor of *The Public Eye*, the quarterly magazine of Political Research Associates, a progressive think tank in Somerville that researches the Right; and a professor in the low-residency MFA program at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

from HOSPITAL TIME

I SAT ON THE EDGE of Mike's bed or on a stool or chair next to it and cupped my palm around his shoulder. Sometimes I held his hand, but often it was swollen from the IV taped into the back of it, and a blood oxygen monitor was clamped to one finger. We would speak, when he was able. He would ask for things, and I would get them. Or we would sit in silence, and I'd wonder if I should say something. Something profound, something appropriate to this most profound of situations.

"How are you doing?"

No answer.

My neck would begin to ache, then my buttocks. My arm would fall asleep. I'd think of obligations elsewhere. I'd get bored. I'd wish I'd brought a magazine to look at. A magazine! Mike was struggling, he was dying, and he needed my total attention. My total palm on his shoulder.

Some people believe in the laying on of hands, and they're not all religious fanatics either. Look at Mike's friends. Look at Loie, coming to visit Mike in the ICU at Beth Israel. She took his hand, and then she demonstrated t'ai chi for him—no sitting around on the bed for her. She stepped back into the room away from the monitors and began to move slowly over the linoleum.

"The monkey . . . the swan . . . pushing back the clouds," she explained, eyes closed. Her hands traced patterns in the air. Mike's eyes were closed too. He lay on his back facing the ceiling, his bony nose jutting like a monument out of his emaciated face. Air rushed and gurgled through his oxygen mask. In the hallway, the nurses ignored us, but the doors to rooms in the ICU are never shut, the curtains never entirely closed. I was aware that we might look ridiculous.

I would shift my position slightly, and Michael would say, or not say, but I knew he was thinking, "Leave, if you want."

"No," I'd say. "I'm fine."

I'd set goals: to stay until I'd helped Mike eat his lunch, until the nurse came to change the bed, until the doctor and his entourage kicked me out. Nothing happening. Everything happening. The minutes would tick by, stretch by, leap by, poke by, and I'd fluff up the pillows, demand another blanket to tuck around Mike's feet—he hated for anyone to see his feet, thought they were terribly ugly—fetch the bedpan or a cup of juice and a straw.

The patient lies in the ICU, and you charge in gabbing about the weather, which you have brought into the room: you shake the rain from your hair, or the cold air reddens your cheeks and clings to your temples. You draw the patient's attention to the view from the window, the time of day: the sun, the moon, the clouds. Your vigor, your life outside, is an affront. It's utterly frivolous, the world and its stupid times. Here in the hospital is the real thing. Eternity.

I should probably confess right off that I write a fiction review column for *Women's Review of Books*, which makes Hoffman my boss. She's also a friend. We attended the MFA Writing Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst together in the mideighties and before the day of this conversation, hadn't seen each other for seven years, though frequent e-mail contact for *WRB* made it seem a lot fewer.

She looked the same—a little younger than I do, though she is a little older—and *sounded* the same. Her speaking voice, which is smart, funny, friendly, and definitely New Jersey, is so distinctive, I can hear it when I read her prose. Both in person and in her writing, Hoffman is at heart unpretentious. Her aim is never to show off but to illuminate the situation at hand, even when it means illuminating her own flaws or weaknesses. In *Hospital Time*, she writes with humor and love about putting up with her ailing friend, Mike, as he "dawdled over every purchase" at the grocery store, then struggled to get the bags up the steep stairs of his apartment. She writes:

Once we got the stuff up to his kitchen, I would leave. It was a small, grimy room, and I hated poking around, trying to figure out Michael's system. He never agreed with my placement of things. I would kiss him good-night and run down the stairs.

Running felt good.

The first time I read this last sentence, it rang so true, it felt electric. I told Hoffman that I admired the courage it took not to pretend she had had some other, nobler reaction.

"That was really one of my aims in the book," she explained, "or one of my aims when I'm writing, generally. And it's very hard." She described "having to go through layers and layers of stuff in order to get to that fundamental part." Key for her, when she's revising, is watching for imprecision or cliché.

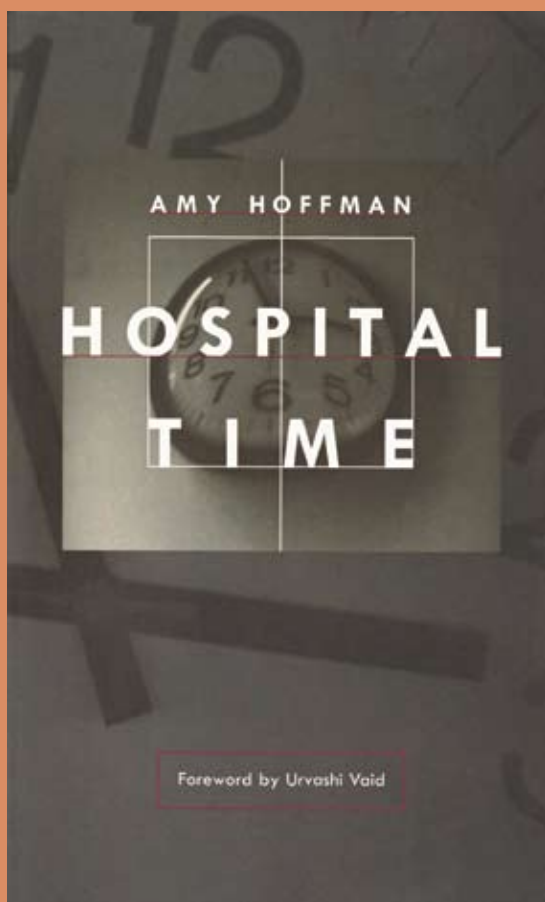
"As soon as the language isn't right," she said, "as soon as you find yourself going into a cliché, that's when you know you're not being honest. I'm always asking my students, 'What are you not saying? Why are you just picking this cliché out of the air? What is it hiding? What are you hiding from yourself, or from someone else?' With me it's always from myself. There were periods when I was writing both books when I would end up feeling very depressed."

In typical deadpan understatement, she added, "That kind of self-confrontation and self-evaluation can be very disappointing."

"Well, right," I agreed, "because if you find out anything real it's always that you're not perfect."

"Right! Right!" Hoffman laughed. "God-damnit!"

AT UMASS, Hoffman and I both studied fiction. One of our professors commented that her short stories had "too many characters in them and too many things generally," as she wrote in an essay about that time. This flaw of excess—if



it is one—Hoffman thought arose from being the eldest of six children in a busy household in Rutherford, New Jersey. I asked whether it had been a factor in her switch from fiction to memoir.

“Well, I still kind of think of myself as a fiction writer even though I’ve published two nonfiction books,” she answered. The fiction she wrote at UMass was very autobiographical, based on her own experiences and people she had known at *Gay Community News*, and was the material she returned to when writing *An Army of Ex-Lovers*.

“You’re basically *creating* the story of your life,” Hoffman said. “You’re making decisions all the time about what to leave in, what to leave out.” She had just been reading an essay by Jill Johnston, she said, in which Johnston “writes about autobiography as a process of self-discovery and self-creation and the fact that your understanding of your life changes as you grow old. The facts don’t change—they’re the same facts—but the story changes. You are still creating a narrative, so in that sense, fiction and memoir are the same.”

Both of her books use the techniques of fiction. “There are scenes, dialogues, there’s a beginning, middle, and end. I mean, life itself is just a chaos of things going on all the time, and as a narrator of a memoir or a piece of fiction you’re making sense of a lot of random stuff.” When she started writing *Hospital Time*, “I started writing these little pieces and putting them in a folder that was called ‘Mike Becomes Fiction.’ I didn’t know exactly how to classify what I was doing.” It was her agent who said, “This is a memoir.”

“The writer I always think of is Maxine Hong Kingston,” Hoffman said. “She’s so interesting to me because she doesn’t care about those genre lines at all. Especially when I was in school, I felt that writing autobiographical fiction or, God forbid, memoir, was just less creative than writing fiction and wasn’t as good. She doesn’t put any of those value judgments on it. She writes these books that are supposedly nonfiction memoirs that include all sorts of fantasy and myth and her own extrapolation of her ideas about the events.”

Hoffman described a scene in the memoir *China Men*, in which Hong Kingston’s grandfather, a railroad construction worker, is lowered over a cliff in a basket in order to insert dynamite into a fissure. “Then they’d quick, light it,” Hoffman said, “and they’d, quick, pull them back up. So of course it was horrifying and lots of people died doing this.” Yet Hong Kingston gives her grandfather “this sort of ecstatic experience, looking out at the scenery, sort of flying above it all and masturbating in this basket.”

When she taught the book, both undergraduate and recent MFA students objected, asking, “How could she possibly know this about her grandfather? He didn’t tell her that!” Regardless of the scene’s veracity, Hoffman feels it expresses an emotional truth that is important to the story and demonstrates how fiction can inform, or even deepen memoir.

I point out that one huge difference between autobiography and fiction, it seems to me, and

a potential danger, is that people you actually know are apt to go buy your book and read what you wrote about them. I wondered whether anyone Hoffman had written about had ever reacted badly.

“Oh, yes!” she exclaimed. “Never, ever what I expected though.” Two people whom she worried she had not portrayed “fairly or positively” in *Hospital Time* loved the manuscript when she showed it to them. “Then there’s someone who’s mentioned maybe once or twice who apparently was livid. And I actually can’t remember what I even say about him.”

What about her parents?

Hoffman hesitated. “I feel that even though I’m critical of my parents in both books, actually, they’re very loving portraits. And I think both my parents realize that. They were very unhappy when I came out to them and it was a real struggle for a long time. And my mother, when she read *An Army of Ex-Lovers*, said to me—and she’s now in her eighties—‘I don’t even know why I cared about that stuff so much. I can’t even remember.’ She said, ‘I know I was upset about it; I can’t even remember why.’ And that is so moving to me, still, whenever I think about it.”

“She came to understand you,” I said. “Do you think the books helped her to do that?”

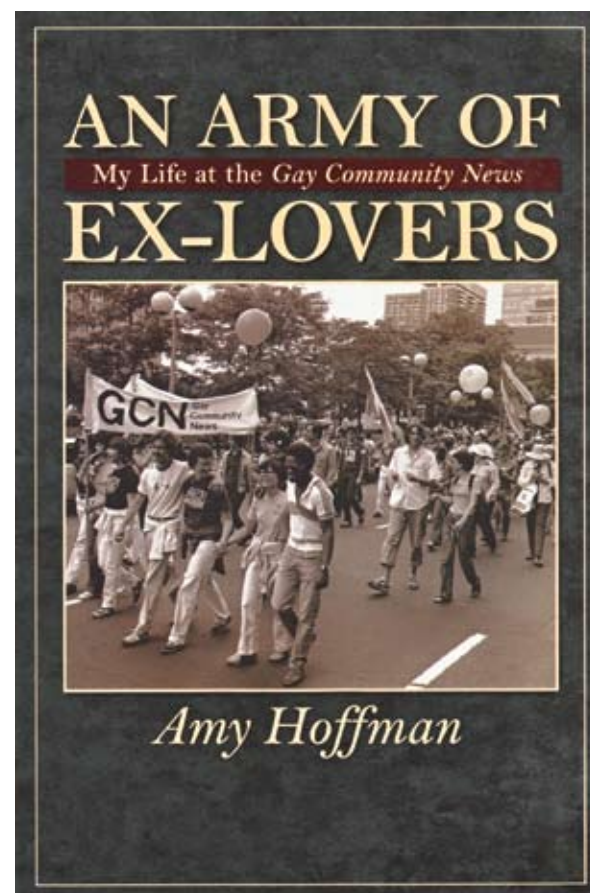
“Yes, I think reading my books changed both my parents’ feelings about my sexuality. They learned more about my life and my relationships. My mother genuinely enjoyed the books—she thinks *Army of Ex-Lovers* should be a TV show, ‘like *Friends*,’ she says. But also, I think as the years went by we were able to see one another for who we are, and let go of preconceptions and expectations. In the end love is what’s important, right?”

I ASKED HOFFMAN to tell me about how she pretty much single-handedly brought *Women’s Review of Books* back to life in 2006, after it had shut down for about a year. With characteristic modesty she shrugged and began the tale: she took over editorship in 2003, replacing founding editor Linda Gardiner, who had started the journal in 1983. By the time Hoffman came on board, the journal had been struggling financially for a long time. “We owed the Wellesley Centers for Women a huge amount of money,” she explained. “Finally, after I’d been there a year and a half, I told the director of the Centers, ‘You know, we can keep going but it’s not going to get better. We’re going to be even more in debt at the end of the year.’ We decided, basically, we had to shut it down.”

But Hoffman was not ready to give up. Working as a consultant to the Centers, she spoke with people at other colleges, libraries, and with

independent publishers, trying to figure out how to bring the journal back. “And then, we got this call from this guy, out of the blue, from Old City Publishing and I thought he was nuts—I almost hung up on him!—because he was saying, ‘Oh, I want to go in with you on this, and I think I could make some money. . . .’”

Ian Mellanby, Director of Old City Publishing in Philadelphia, was encouraged to contact Hoffman by his girlfriend, who worked at Rutgers



HOFFMAN IS IN THE SECOND ROW, ON THE FAR RIGHT, MARCHING IN THE 1980 GAY PRIDE MARCH IN BOSTON. PHOTO BY SUSAN FLEISCHMANN

University Press, one of *WRB*’s advertisers. “She’s the secret hero!” Hoffman exclaimed. “And I’ve never met her.”

The partnership with OCP has worked out well. *WRB* was back in print in January of 2006, with a design makeover that improved upon its former, newsprint tabloid format. Mellanby handles subscriptions, advertising, and production, leaving Hoffman free to edit. She also collaborates with the designer, which she enjoys.

Why did she work so hard to save this one little journal?

“It’s unique,” Hoffman said with fervor, “because there’s very little coverage even now of critical and scholarly and creative work by women in mainstream book review publications. It’s really astonishing! There’s significant work—scholarly work being written by women’s studies people—that doesn’t get covered; there’s really interesting fiction, poetry, and memoir that doesn’t get covered. In a way it astounds me that there’s still a niche for this stuff! But there definitely is.”

As a counterpoint, Hoffman relates the media

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blitz Jonathan Franzen's new book, *Freedom*, received in the summer. The book received "hysterically glowing reviews" and Franzen made it onto *Oprah* and onto the cover of *TIME* magazine, where large, bold type next to his photo proclaimed, "Great American Novelist."

"Several women authors began posting stuff on the Internet," Hoffman said, "asking, 'Why do women writers never get this kind of attention?'" Even Franzen, she said, eventually agreed that the coverage of the book was "over the top."

Though of course some women writers are well-respected, win prizes, and have best sellers, Hoffman insisted, "There's something about the quality of attention that Franzen's book got that even the most popular or distinguished women writers that I can think of have not received, even somebody like Margaret Atwood or Toni Morrison. It just doesn't happen that way. So that's one thing I think is important about *Women's Review of Books*. Another is that the reviews are in-depth."

With print book reviews "falling left and right" and more reviewing occurring online, Hoffman sees the trend shifting toward "short, capsule reviews saying, 'Yeah, go read this; don't read it.' And that's not what we're about. Our articles are more analytical; they're more review essays. Even the shorter ones, like the ones you write, usually have a theme, or you use the reviews to discuss issues about fiction writing or about the content of the books—and that's not something that happens that often in other publications, it just doesn't."

IN CLOSING, I asked Hoffman what I really wanted to know: "Why do you come to Provincetown to write?"

She smiled fondly. "Oh, well, I think I was very romantic about Provincetown before I even came here. There's this insane book by Kate Millett called *Flying*, which I read and loved very much, when I was, oh, probably in college. It's autobiographical; it's about her life, about her sexuality and her life with her husband, who was an artist, and her love affairs with all these women. In one part of it she comes to Provincetown and has this fabulous affair and eats wonderful food and swims in the ocean, enjoys the natural beauty.

"I think partly because of that Provincetown has always been this incredibly romantic, artistic place to me. And of course it has that history of being an artists' colony as well as a place where all kinds of people—gay people and all kinds of non-conforming people—found a home. So I always liked that idea: the idea of Provincetown."

Hoffman and Stone bought their first apartment in P-town in 1992, sold it in 2002, and bought their present place in '04. But Hoffman began visiting decades earlier.

"I think the first time I came to Provincetown was with girlfriends from my group household in around 1975. We stayed several to a room (or we never could have afforded it) at the old Land's End Inn when it was run by David Schoolman. He died of AIDS in the mid-1990s. Art nouveau antiques and tchotchkes on every surface—I'd never seen anything like it (still haven't)—and cinnamon-spiced coffee for breakfast, which to me seemed very sophisticated and delicious. We brought a box of food from the co-op to minimize restaurant visits, and I remember sitting on the lawn, looking out at the harbor, peeling oranges. Later we did yoga on the beach.

"Provincetown's a very magical place in many ways. It just has such incredible beauty. Even in the middle of the summer when you can't even walk down Commercial Street, you can walk two blocks and be nowhere. It's really quite amazing. I can get on my bicycle and be, in a minute, places where there's nobody. And in the winter it's completely deserted. I come here to write because there are no distractions and it's quiet and beautiful. If you come down here in February, nothing's happening."

The enthusiasm with which she says this shows that, for writer Amy Hoffman, that's a good thing. ❧

TRISH CRAPO is a writer and photographer who lives in Leyden, Massachusetts. She writes a fiction review column for Women's Review of Books and a column on local poets for The Recorder in Greenfield. Her chapbook of poems, Walk Through Paradise Backwards, was published by Slate Roof Press in 2004.

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