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Fluidity and Found Family in Carter Sickels' *The Prettiest Star*

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Abstract

Carter Sickels' *The Prettiest Star* explores the interplay of fluidity and found family amid the backdrop of the AIDS crisis in rural Appalachia during the 1980s. This novel confronts the pervasive ignorance surrounding the AIDS crisis, exacerbated by a conservative Christian culture and the media's dissemination of fear-based narratives. As the focal character of this novel, Brian, returns to his hometown of Chester, Ohio, he grapples with familial and societal rejection while confronting the reality of his HIV-positive diagnosis. Sickels illustrates a profound evolution from prejudice to empathy, reflecting the broader societal shifts prompted by the crisis – specifically in Appalachia. The narrative highlights the vital role of mutual aid within marginalized communities, embodied by characters like Annie and Andrew, who challenge traditional norms of caregiving and redefine family. Ultimately, *The Prettiest Star* serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity for intersectional understanding and collective support in addressing health crises, emphasizing that the struggle against discrimination and the embrace of fluidity can lead to personal and communal revolutions.

In 1987, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* made its way to rural West Virginia. Here, she would interview a 28-year-old man, Mike Sisco, who had become a local controversy: Mike was HIV positive. When he went swimming in the local pool, his community members fled "like in those science fiction movies where Godzilla walks into the street" (Sickels). The mayor ordered the pool to be drained and disinfected – an unnecessary caution, as it was already known that AIDS could not be transmitted by swimming in the same waters as someone who was positive. What followed was an onslaught of hate towards Mike and his family, making national news and drawing Oprah to the scene. Carter Sickels recalls watching this episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* as a child:

> On *Oprah*, a man in the audience stands up to the mic. "I am repulsed by the man's lifestyle. I am repulsed by his disease," he says. "Nature will take care of something that's wrong, it will eradicate it." When he proclaims that gay men will become extinct "from the face of the earth in no time," the audience breaks out in applause.

This moment of hate towards both Mike and the queer community stuck with Sickels for years; for him, it meant that "to be gay was to be ostracized." Mike Sisco's story would eventually become Brian Jackson, an HIV positive gay man from Appalachian Ohio and the protagonist of Sickels' 2020 novel, *The Prettiest Star*. After living in New York City for multiple years, the novel documents Brian's return to his rural Ohio hometown and his family's journey through homophobia, judgement, hate, and love. Upon returning home, Brian finds restricted comfort from his mother, Sharon; confused acceptance from his little sister, Jess; judgement and iciness from his father, Travis; and unrelenting love and hope from his grandmother. *The Prettiest Star* adopts the plot points of Mike Sisco's story – Brian, too, wishes to swim in his hometown pool and finds himself on a fictionalized *Oprah*, wearing "an earring glinting in his left ear" (Sickels). It poses an untold story of the AIDS crisis: a dying man returning to his Christian, conservative, Appalachian hometown to find closure and comfort in his last moments. While the novel begins as one would likely assume – snide remarks, homophobia, ignorance – it develops into a story about change, growth, and acceptance through grief. Throughout the AIDS crisis, government intentional ignorance, the mass media's manifestation of fear, and rural state's lack of media literacy formed a culture of paranoia and panic surrounding HIV-positive people. This fear was – and still is – not easily repelled. Americans tend to think in a culture of black and white: "Protect the good from the bad, the normal from the abnormal, the innocent from the infected" (Sickels 86). Characters of *The Prettiest Star* break down these binaries, creating a less rigid, more nuanced way of thinking. In Carter Sickels' *The Prettiest Star*, the fluidity of humanity, love, and caretaking force a nature of acceptance amongst the Jackson family, representing a sort of revolution of thinking and action during the AIDS epidemic that spread throughout urban structures and bled into rural towns such as Chester, Ohio.

In 1983, two years after the CDC first addressed the AIDS crisis, the *New York Times* published a cover article filled with misinformation and fear tactics, claiming that AIDS "could be transmitted to children through 'routine close contact' with adults" (Bennington-Castro), and citing police officers that feared transmission through first-aid work. These fear tactics were extraordinarily common throughout America, as exemplified in *The Prettiest Star* when Travis insists on Brian's use of separate drinkware, flatware, and silverware due to his sickness (Sickels 55). Travis and his family's ignorance of AIDS is exacerbated by their rural landscape, where "lack of visible HIV prevention campaigns often [led] rural residents to conclude that HIV is not a threat to their community," thus lending themselves to an 'ignorance is bliss' mindset. Even once Brian has returned home after years of living in New York, Travis acts as if his life has remained unchanged – or, rather, ignores Brian and his sexuality and sickness completely.

The AIDS crisis was easy to ignore for the majority. AIDS primarily affected what politicians and the CDC unfortunately called "the four H's": homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians (Gonsalves & Staley). In fact, one of the main ways in which AIDS was rarely uttered in government was used to prevent immigration from Haiti and other third-world countries. This lack of acknowledgment contributed to the fact that the CDC did little to no research at the start of the AIDS crisis – especially knowing that AIDS was primarily affecting minorities. Brian laments, "Queers, drug addicts, Haitians – we're the expendable, the scourge. They want us gone. When we die, Christians and Republicans must go wild with applause – that's what it feels like" (Sickels 65). Indeed, in two separate polls in 1978, roughly half of Americans agreed that it was people's own fault if they got AIDS, and that "AIDS might be God's punishment for immoral sexual behavior" (Gallup Vault). The impact of Christianity on the AIDS crisis was huge, as Brian states in *The Prettiest Star*. Sharon, too, uses Christianity to back her judgment towards Brian: "He turned his back on his family to live a life of sin and he's sick because of it" (Sickels 18). Christianity is used as many characters' scapegoats in *The Prettiest Star* – especially the preacher's son, Josh Clay, who repeatedly attempts to 'save' Brian before ultimately exposing him and his family to the rest of the town. He states, "It's not right, you not telling people [...] People have the right to know" (Sickels 126). Josh Clay, like many others residing in Chester, put their religious comfort above Brian's own autonomy – thus punishing him for his uncontrollable illness and revoking any sort of safety he had beforehand.

The largest, most obvious example of growth in *The Prettiest Star* is Brian's mother, Sharon. She's heard comments such as William Buckley's – "everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed" (Gonsalves, Gregg, & Peter Staley) – and has had no reason to question it. Raised in the church and residing in a small town, Sharon's image is the most important thing to her. She has achieved a picture-perfect nuclear family; she has

achieved the American Dream. Yet, Brian – her gay, HIV-positive, city-dweller son – disrupts this image she has worked so hard to obtain. When Brian first contacts her, asking to come home, one of her first thoughts is "our son, five hundred miles away, is dying from what is in his blood, dying because of what he did, dying because of what he calls himself, and what if he comes back here and what if people find out the truth, then what will happen to us? *What will people think?*" (Sickels 19). Not only does Sharon place direct blame on Brian for his illness, but also she is more focused on outward influences than the well-being of her son. Yet, the more that she is exposed to the reality of Brian's illness, the more harm towards her son that she witnesses, she reaches a point of acceptance: "I want to blame Brian for everything, but it's not that easy. What did he do that was wrong?" (Sickels 215). While Sharon still craves the strict dichotomies she has built her life around, Brian's mere existence forces her to acknowledge the fact that thinking, believing, and loving is more fluid than she once thought. After Brian's death, Sharon becomes a different person – one who is not reliant on her husband, the church, or politicians, but rather on a chosen family and her own autonomy.

President Ronald Reagan did not mention AIDS until 1985 – four years after it was first addressed by the CDC and one year before the setting of *The Prettiest Star*. In the same year, the CDC proposed an AIDS prevention plan, which was then rejected by Washington leaders. Most scholars claim that a large reason behind this ignorance was not only that AIDS was affecting gay men, but that AIDS was affecting gay men *of color*, immigrants, and drug users. When a disease is taking out populations that the government already does not care for, why would they go to great lengths – or lengths at all – to stop it? Sharon, along with the US government, places blame on people of color while describing Brian's lover, Shawn: "this man. Older than him. Tall, muscular. *Black*. [...] It was him. He infected my son" (Sickels 25). Sharon instinctively leans into her dichotomies – Black, white; guilty, innocent. However, by the end of *The Prettiest Star*, Sharon seems to show some empathy for Shawn, and for Brian's community in general, once more exemplifying how exposure can lead to a revolution of thinking. Sharon's newfound understanding of intersectionality reflects Kimberle Crenshaw's exploration of "the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects" of harm – an idea tackled by those like the character of Annie.

While Sharon later fills the motherly, caretaking role of the classic Appalachian mother, Brian has other, nontraditional caretakers as well. During the AIDS crisis, community caretaking became a daunting reality for queer folks, people of color, and lower-class members. Mutual aid programs such as the Shanti Project spread from urban to rural environments, reflecting the "much deeper tradition of the capacity of humans to care for one another, independent of the state (especially when its response has been negligent)" (McHugh). Annie, one of Brian's primary caretakers from beginning to end, is a

manifestation of mutual aid herself, constantly protecting and caring for Brian without any expectations. She speaks often of mutual aid in New York – "They feed and wash and cook for each other, they take each other to the hospitals and they make funeral arrangements, and they fight doctors and politicians and drug companies. They take care of their living and their dead" – reflecting the same acts of Annie, Sharon, Lettie, and Andrew, who are performing mutual aid without putting a label on their caretaking (Sickels 234). Annie's influence on the Jackson family is monumental and important; she forces Sharon to confront the reality of Brian's illness and to be fully present for his last moments in Chester. Annie and Sharon represent two sides of the same coin: Brian's headstrong protectors.

In rural Ohio, 'mutual aid' is not a commonly tossed-around term, especially in the late 1900's. AIDS itself was not spoken of in rural areas due to a lack of HIV prevention campaigns and media literacy, leading rural residents to believe that HIVposed no threat to their community. This misinformation, in turn, led to a "lack of confidentiality, few sources of social support, and increased discrimination and prejudice directed towards people living with HIV" (Heckman, T.G., et al.). Brian speaks to this lack of visibility in *The Prettiest Star* while reflecting on his life in New York, full of influential queer folks, versus his life in Ohio, "where we do not speak of the dead." He asks, "Where are all my beautiful men?" (Sickels 105). Brian's question is answered by Andrew, a flamboyant, Appalachian-residing gay man he meets at the mall.

While Brian sees his only opportunity for queer liberation in New York, Andrew found his own in rural Ohio. Brian sees something of himself and of his life in New York in Andrew: "I gave him a smile of recognition. You can spot your own" (Sickels 109). Before meeting Andrew, Brian had separated his life in New York from his life in Ohio; yet, in the same way that Brian breaks down Sharon's dichotomies, Andrew breaks down Brian's and makes him realize that queerness does not just exist in urban structures. The fluidity that Andrew creates for the Jackson's is unique: for Sharon, Andrew breaks down gender roles and becomes a primary caretaker; for Lettie, a reflection and friend; and for Brian, a like-minded companion who brings some of his queer New York life into his last moments in Ohio. Too, Andrew's character illustrates the sense of queer community and mutual aid that the AIDS crisis created, and proves that queer sanctuary can be found in the most unlikely of places. However, this sanctuary was often fought against by conservative, Christian peers.

Brian, while reflecting on his lost home and community in New York, states that his "home is burning down as nobody wants to put out the fire" (Sickels 92). This claim rings true today, when intersectionality is still a large issue in HIV research. Recent national surveillance data from 2019 shows that HIV has decreased for white sexual minority men, but not for their Black and Latino counterparts. Lisa Bowleg claims that Black and Latino

sexual minority men were also significantly less likely to be aware of or have access to PrEP, an HIV preventative. Michele Tracey Berger, who focused her studies on HIV-positive women of color, claimed that HIV research and preventions aligned with the "structural realities of race, class, and gender," thus prioritizing white, gay men and upper-class citizens before people of color and genderqueer folks. Bowleg states, "Had the HIV field initially listened to (and cited) Berger's work with its attention to structural intersectionality and commitment to intersectionality as critical praxis, we might be closer to achieving HIV equity than we now find ourselves." Though intersectionality is not a driving topic of *The Prettiest Star*, it leaks through to the mostly-white, straight town of Chester through Brian, Shawn, and Annie – who then influence characters such as Sharon, Jess, Lettie, and even Brian's cousin Gus, to carry a greater knowledge of intersectional mutual aid and community.

The Prettiest Star tells a story of America, as Shawn says: "It's a story that must be told" (Sickels 177). While much of AIDS research and storytelling is focused on New York, San Francisco, and other big cities, the AIDS crisis spread throughout America, into rural Appalachian towns such as Chester, and affected more than the cisgender, gay, white men that the media uses to portray the epidemic. Throughout *The Prettiest Star*, characters continually disrupt this 'norm' that readers and characters are used to; disrupt the dichotomies that many have used to define their lives. And, they come out better for it, able to accept fluidity and change as a part of life rather than something to categorize or work against. This fluidity affected America on a larger scale, too, during the AIDS crisis. Queer mutual aid and media coverage became more important and recognized, along with paving the groundwork for future epidemics such as Ebola or Covid-19. Now, there is still work to be done to achieve intersectional equity in the discussion of HIV treatments and a potential cure, which will surely be achieved by mutual aid movements as small as Brian's found family, to as large as ACT UP. A focus on community, intersectional equity, and fluidity – as shown in *The Prettiest Star* – are the roots of revolution.

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