

OUT IN AMERICA

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Sensual Sensibility

Fantasy writer Clive Barker finds the real world scary enough.

THREE THINGS YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW about British novelist Clive Barker: He's a huge Stephen Sondheim fan ("One of the joys of my life," he says), he's an "increasingly strict" vegetarian (though he admits he "loves the smell of frying bacon as much as anyone"), and he's ready to head for the hills (another five years and he'll leave his home in Los Angeles so he can be closer to nature).

Many of the best-selling author and filmmaker's fans also probably don't know he's gay. Even though he has some 4 million books in print (such as *Weaveworld* and *Everville*) and two successful film franchises (he originated both *Candyman* and *Hellraiser*, a series he now says should "die an

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honorable death"), and has given countless media interviews, Barker's sexual orientation has so far surfaced only in a round of gay-press interviews published a year ago to herald his film *Lord of Illusions*. "I think it is strange it was never more of an issue," says the 44-year-old Liverpool native. "People came to the house, people met my lover, met my best friend, saw this was an all-male household. But they never mentioned it. Never even asked the question."

That should change with *Sacrament* (HarperCollins), Barker's most personal novel yet, which focuses on gay wildlife photographer Will Rabjohns, takes AIDS-devastated San Francisco as a central setting, and is dedicated to Barker's lover, Malcolm. While the novel has moments of gore and hints of magic, its driving force is an overarching psychological tension, that deep sense of unease that's been Barker's trademark since his first short story collection, 1984's *Books of Blood: Volume One* (which also included a tale with a gay protagonist).

Despite the forces of evil his imagination continues to muster, Barker's new novel clearly signals movement away from the early despair of the *Books of Blood* series to a real sense of optimism. "*Sacrament* is a redemptive story," he says. "And even though it plunges very deeply into the things that give me anxiety as a human being living in an increasingly spoiled world, I do think there's plenty of light at the end of this tunnel."

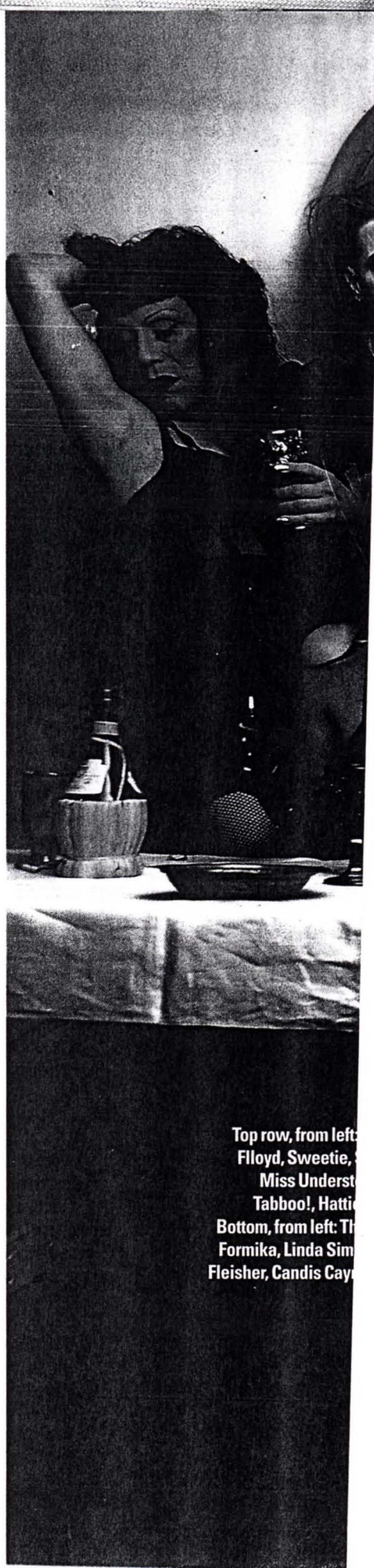
Working in genres not known for their social conscience—gory books, horror films, fantasy epics—Barker uses his pop platform to take on the big issues: man's destruction of life on Earth in *Sacrament*, racism and homelessness in the film *Candyman*, the poverty of the American imagination in his novel *The Great and Secret Show*. "One of the things that horror does is deliberately address issues in a very extreme form," he says. "So it's kind of aversion therapy. You get to look at these things in an extreme form and, yes, in a safe situation. I think movies in that sense can be quite therapeutic; they can strengthen your antibodies where this stuff is concerned."

At least one of the frightening themes of *Sacrament*—the ravages of disease—continues to play out in the author's own life. "All of us live with the notion that we are frail and that we are transforming," he says. "My father contracted leukemia six months ago. You know, there's my dad—the cornerstone of my life—and here is this thing which is in his body and part of him, doing its vicious thing." (His father is currently in remission.)

Not your average paperback writer, Barker is also an artist who has exhibited his paintings at major galleries and illustrated a number of his own stories. He's now editing a second collection of his plays (titled *Forms of Heaven*) and keeping an eye on Paramount Pictures' animated production of his children's book *The Thief of Always*. "I think it's important to hold on to the 19-year-old inside who says, 'I can do that,' because you don't know until you try," he says.

With that in mind, he's juggling story ideas that may take him into science fiction and erotica. As is evident in *Sacrament*, where gay sex is part of the natural terrain, a respect for the sensual has always been a part of his work. "Sex and arousal is one of the places where our minds look at the world with a kind of clarity," says Barker. "It's one of the places in our regular lives, our normal lives, where we get a sense of holiness." —MICHAEL GILTZ

Michael Giltz has contributed to Entertainment Weekly and New York.



Top row, from left:
Floyd, Sweetie,
Miss Underst
Tabboo!, Hattie
Bottom, from left: Th
Formika, Linda Sim
Fleisher, Candis Cay