



Guibert, Hervé (1955-1991)

by Michael D. Sibalís

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Hervé Guibert was a French journalist and novelist who published a great deal during his short life, but achieved fame only because of his last three books, which recounted in semi-fictionalized form his struggle with the HIV virus that finally killed him.

Born on December 14, 1955, Guibert was the second and last child in a conservative Catholic middle-class family. His childhood, spent in Paris and La Rochelle, was a happy one, at least according to his older sister, who has recalled him as "sensitive and uncommunicative, affectionate and nice. A really charming little brother."

In his later years, however, Guibert wrote a book, *Mes Parents* (1986), in which he savaged both his father, a veterinarian and slaughter-house inspector, and his mother, a former schoolteacher. He claimed, for example, that he had been an unwanted baby whose birth kept his mother from returning to work: "When at last I was pulled from her belly, she begged 'if only he were dead! Let him be stillborn!'"

Guibert grew into an extraordinarily beautiful young man with pale skin, blue eyes, and curly blond hair. His father pushed him to study science and mathematics, but the teenager resisted. He had literary tastes and was more interested in theater and cinema.

After some hesitation about a career--he was denied entry to both the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (Institute for Higher Studies in Cinematography) and the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre (National School for the Arts and Techniques of the Theater)--he lied about his age and at only seventeen talked his way into a position with the fashion magazine *20 Ans*. There he did various jobs, including writing an advice column under the name "Vincent." In 1977 and not yet twenty-two, Guibert was hired by *Le Monde*, France's most prestigious daily newspaper, for which he was soon reporting on cinema and, especially, photography.

Guibert, who had his first same-sex relationship with a fellow student at secondary school in La Rochelle, was always open about his orientation but refused to define himself as "homosexual." According to one biographer, "Hervé was a homosexual without any relations with the gay community" that emerged in Paris in the 1970s. Nor did he have anything to do with the militant gay movement of his day.

In 1976 he began his most significant love affair, which continued until his death, with Thierry, an equally handsome bisexual who lived with a woman and their two children. A friend remembers: "I could never disassociate Hervé from Thierry. . . . They were like two angels permanently joined together."

Guibert showed the first symptoms of AIDS in 1983. In June 1989 he married Christine, Thierry's partner, so that the income from his published work would eventually pass to her and her two children instead of his own biological family. Christine and Thierry were both seropositive and Thierry died of AIDS only six months after Guibert.

Guibert's first novel, *La Mort Propagande (Death Propaganda)* appeared in 1977. By the end of his life he had published almost two dozen books, most combining fact (his personal experiences with friends and family) and fiction to such an extent that it is virtually impossible to untangle the one from the other.

Guibert's fascination with marginality, suffering, sickness, and death was evident from the start. Although critics generally reviewed his books favorably, Guibert achieved national fame (indeed, notoriety) only with the publication of *À l'Ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990; *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, 1991). The novel is elegantly written, but its sensational contents far overshadowed its literary qualities. The French public snapped up more than one hundred thousand copies within a few weeks.

Most of the novel is devoted to telling how Guibert struggled with his mortal illness, but it also reveals (in semi-fictionalized form) much about the sexual life (including sado-masochistic practices) and the death from AIDS of his close friend Michel Foucault (1926-1984), one of France's leading intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s, called "Muzil" in the text.

These revelations sparked intense controversy. Had Guibert scandalously betrayed his friend or had he obeyed a higher moral imperative by telling the truth about the death of a great man? Guibert also used the book to settle scores with another of his friends, the actress Isabelle Adjani, who had apparently broken her promise to make a film of one of his scenarios and had thereby let him down at a difficult time in his life.

Guibert continued the story in two sequels: *Le Protocol Compassionnel* (1991; *The Compassion Protocol*, 1993) and the posthumous *Cytomégalovirus* (1992; *Cytomegalovirus*, 1996).

On the day before his thirty-sixth birthday, Guibert attempted suicide by ingesting a mixture of medicine and digitalin. He survived, but his damaged heart gave out only two weeks later in a hospital in Clamart, a Paris suburb, on December 27, 1991.

Guibert was not only a journalist and novelist. He also made a name as a photographer, exhibiting his work in galleries and bringing out several albums of his photographs.

He also co-wrote the scenario for *L'Homme Blessé* (1983), a movie directed by Patrice Chéreau. It is a sordid but haunting story of the mutual attraction between Henri, a young homosexual, and Jean, a pimp and hustler, whom he eventually murders. It won Guibert a César (the French equivalent of an Academy Award) for best scenario.

Guibert also made a television documentary (*La Pudeur et l'Impudeur* (English title, *Modesty and Shame*) broadcast a few weeks after his death, for which he himself filmed his day-to-day life with AIDS, showing in excruciating detail how the disease had ravaged his once beautiful body.

Bibliography

Buot, François. *Hervé Guibert: Le jeune homme et la mort*. Paris: Grasset, 1999.

Soleil, Christian. *Hervé Guibert*. Paris: Arts graphiques, 2002.

About the Author

Michael D. Sibalis is Associate Professor of History at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. He specializes in the history of modern France and has published articles and essays on the Napoleonic police state (1799-1815), the nineteenth-century French labor movement, and French homosexuality. He has co-edited, with Jeffrey Merrick, *Homosexuality in French History and Culture* (2002) and is currently writing a history of the gay male community of Paris since 1700.