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• **Interview • Armistead Maupin talks about Michael Tolliver Lives, France and Jacques Chirac's wife** •

Armistead Maupin figures on just about every list of gay fiction you will ever see - and not without reason - his Tales Of The City series of novels broke every record selling over six million copies; they has now been translated into more than ten languages. In this in-depth interview, Nick Alexander spoke to "uncle" Armistead at length about his latest novel - Michael Tolliver Lives - writing, HIV, France and Jacques Chirac's wife...



Nick: So how are you today?

Armistead: I'm very good, great in fact. My husband and I went up to the High Sierra - we just bought a piece of property and have been kind of fantasizing about the kind of cabin we want to put on it...

Nick: How funny. My last novel is about a gay American couple moving to a cabin in the hills, and doing the whole Off the Grid thing.

Armistead: Well, that's exactly it. We're thinking about going green and operating off solar power.

Nick: Huh! I just wrote about it, which is kind of weird. Because you're actually living it.

Armistead: Sounds like it. I'd love to read it.

Nick: Well, I'll send you a copy. But you still live in San Francisco, right? The place up in the hills isn't a permanent move?

Armistead: No it's just a retreat, as it were.

Nick: And do you still love San Francisco, or is it just habit?

Armistead: Well I guess I must love it (laughs). No, I can't imagine living anywhere else. I love to travel and see new horizons, but San Francisco suits me very well, it's part of my lore now... I feel as if it's my destiny.

Nick: So what have you been working on lately?

Armistead: Well, the promotion for Michael Tolliver Lives. Sometimes you write and sometimes you promote what you write, and I'm in the middle of a promotion right now.

Nick: Do they drive you hard to promote the book?

Armistead: Not at all - they organize it very well, and I rather enjoy the process.

Nick: I find writing is a lonely kind of process, so it must make a change.

Armistead: Absolutely. I love the gregarious nature of getting out into the world and actually getting to meet the readers. That's the real reward as far as I'm concerned.

Nick: So will Michael Tolliver Lives be coming out in French?

Armistead: Oh, absolutely. They're busy translating it as we speak.

Nick: So will there be a book tour in France too?

Armistead: Yes, I think it will be next spring. You know I sell more books per capita in France than anywhere else. It took me years to break into the Paris literary scene. They're very careful about the Americans that they let in. But once they embraced me they did so with open arms, and that felt very, very good, because I think of Paris as one of the great civilized centers of the world. I met the mayor not long ago in San Francisco.

Nick: Bertrand Delanoë.

Armistead: Oui (laughs). He did a little bow when he heard my name. That made me feel very good.

Nick: Do you speak French?

Armistead: Un petit peu. (giggles) Not enough to talk to the mayor however.

Nick: Because Maupin sound very French, I guess they might expect you to speak it.

Armistead: Well it is. It's a Huguenot name. They were the people who fled France and settled in Virginia. I have a little schoolboy

French, but as soon as people like the mayor hear me using it they think I really can speak it and launch into normal conversation, and then I have no idea what they are saying. But Parisians are extremely gracious if you make any effort at all with their language. Madame Chirac actually turned up at one of my book signings in Paris.

Nick: God how dreadful.

Armistead: Yeah, it was shocking.

Nick: But cute.

Armistead: I think she saw that I had the longest line, and it seemed like the right one to go to. I'm not sure she was personally a fan.

Nick: Tales of the city changed the way a lot of gay men perceive themselves. For my generation Michael Mouse was often the first positive gay role model we came across.

Armistead: How old are you Nick?

Nick: I'm 43... but I was a late bloomer.

Armistead: So was I (laughs).

Nick: It was incredibly useful for me to open this book - a girlfriend recommended it -and just stumble upon this incredibly sensitive and positive gay character. Do a lot of people say the same thing?

Armistead: Yes they do. But I never tire of hearing it. It means more to me than almost anything.

Nick: It's been 18 years since the last Tales of the City novel. Why such a long break?

Armistead: Well there were other things going on in between. Like three TV mini series, and two novels, both of which, by the way, contained characters that related to the Tales of the City story. There are minor characters in both Maybe the Moon and The Night Listener. I always point that out because people tend to miss it.

Nick: I'm afraid I missed it too. Any clues?

Armistead: Well, Anna, Gabriel's book-keeper, the character played by Sandra Oh in the film, is actually one of Dee Dee Halcyon-Day's twin daughters. She had Anna and Edgar. So Sandra Oh is playing is Anna.

Nick: Sorry, I did miss it. Shame on me.

Armistead: No no, I didn't underscore it.

Nick: You changed to first person narrative for this book. Why so?

Armistead: Actually the last two novels, Maybe The Moon and The Night Listener were first person. It's just the earlier books that weren't. I enjoyed the process of writing that way - I feel it allows for a more intimate glimpse, and I thought that people might enjoy seeing Michael - seeing the world through Michael's eyes. The Tales do that, but they do it in third person, and first person is far more revealing. I wanted to concentrate on that character and the way he interrelates with the other characters.

Nick: Don't you ever find it frustrating - the fact that you can't reveal why other characters are doing what they're doing?

Armistead: Well, it's a more limited viewpoint, but maybe a richer more revealing one in the end.

Nick: Well it certainly works for you. Michael Tolliver Lives is a much more intimate read than the other books in the series. Do you still feel nervous when you release a book to the public or have you got used to it by now?

Armistead: No I still feel nervous. It's like a debut every time. But I have four or five close friends, including my husband, who give me their feedback before I let it out into the world, and their reviews have been good, so I'm happy about that.

Nick: Michael seems to be having more sex than he ever had before.

Armistead: Well, I think it's described more. I'm not sure it's a greater frequency. As you get older quality becomes far more important than quantity.

Nick: Was it a conscious decision to make the sex more up front in this novel?

Armistead: I think it just grew out of who I am and how the world is today. Sex is discussed everywhere, and I didn't see any reason why I should exclude it, especially because I think that there are things about it that are revelatory, and funny, and inspiring.

Nick: Edmund White said that younger guys don't imagine just how much sex older guys are getting these days.

Armistead: (laughs) Well I know one younger guy who can imagine. My husband. Nowadays, thanks to the magic pill, it just doesn't stop! If you want sex then you can have it for a very long time.

Nick: So, both you and Michael Tolliver are dating younger guys.

Armistead: Well, he's actually married to a much younger guy. So am I.

Nick: Sure. Sorry. The French writer Didier Lestrade is another one dating a youngster. He suggested that the only people that open, well-balanced people in their fifties and sixties can date are the generation that haven't been made bitter and twisted by the gay scene, what do you think?

Armistead: Laughs. Well, my husband once told me that it was very difficult finding people of my generation who aren't fucked up - which I took as an enormous compliment. But it's not a new phenomenon. Christopher Isherwood was forty-eight years old when he met the eighteen-year-old Don Bachardy back in the early sixties, and they were a great inspiration to me, both as friends and artists. Don is seventy-two now, and he was the younger member of that relationship. And if you really want to get picky about it, you can go back to the Greeks. In the end, whatever the generation, what matters is if the two of you are compatible. Whether you can stand to

spend time with each other and still have things to say to each other.

Nick: I was just wondering - there seems to be a bit of a theme here, with older writers dating younger guys.

Armistead: Well, the Internet makes that possible. My husband actually runs a website, called daddyhunt.com - a personal site for gay men over forty.

Nick: Did you meet him on that site?

Armistead: I saw him on that site. But I met him in the street.

Nick: So the same as Michael does in the book then.

Armistead: Yeah, pretty much. (laughs).

Nick: Sounds like a pretty cheeky strategy. Running a dating website, I mean. That way you get first pick. Did he contact you as soon as you joined?

Armistead: (laughs) No, I never actually joined. I saw him on the site, and then when I saw him in the street, I knew that he liked older guys, so I just kind of accosted him on the street. It was a very non-techno kind of link-up.

Nick: As well as being sexy and funny, there seems to be a fair bit of death in this novel.

Armistead: (laughs). Well that's another thing that you get more of when you get older. I'm sixty-two. It's no mystery - some of my friends are going to be dying. For many years they were dying prematurely... Now they're dying of so-called natural causes.

Nick: Yes, well it gives the book a kind of melancholy magnificence that maybe the other books didn't have.

Armistead: Ooh. Melancholy magnificence. I like that. I hope you're reviewing the book.

Nick: I am. And Melancholy magnificence is already in it.

Armistead: Well good. Thank you.

Nick: So Michael Tolliver has been HIV positive for twenty years in the book.

Armistead: So many people have.

Nick: How do you feel about the fact that HIV infection rates are rising again? That brutal and unsafe sex are becoming more and more common?

Armistead: I think it's stupid and unconscionable. I'm horrified that there is a generation that has become blasé about taking care of themselves and the people they love. It speaks to me of a residual self-loathing.

Nick: Many people of my age have, you know, come through the whole thing by being careful and taking care, for, what, twenty years now. And we're suddenly confronted with these twenty year olds announcing that they have become HIV positive. I find it quite difficult to be OK with that.

Armistead: Well, I'm not OK with it. I'm not OK with it at all. I'm not OK in fact with a number of self-destructive things that gay men do. Lung cancer strikes gay men more than the general population because of smoking. I think there are a number of signs that we don't maybe love ourselves as much as we should.

Nick: So it's like a suicidal desire almost.

Armistead: Well, there's certainly an element of that. There are bug-chasers out there who want to get infected so they can join the club. I can't imagine what club they think that is... The diarrhoea club... the lypodistrophy club maybe. Because anyone who is sick will tell you that it's not fun at all.

Nick: Writers like Larry Kramer in the States and Lestrade here in France have been very critical of the gay community. Have you ever felt like attacking them over...

Armistead: Oh, there have been many times. I don't attack any community - because we're not one thing. I attack certain behaviours - my characters make observations about foolish behaviour. But there are many individuals who rise above the adolescent thinking that a lot of gay men still participate in. But I'm never gonna be as grumpy as Larry Kramer.

Nick: Well luckily. I mean, that's why Mouse is such a great role model for us. He wasn't living a permanently tragic empty existence. You need positive role models too.

Armistead: Well, it simply wasn't the life that I was living. When I came along and started to write, the image presented in gay literature was pretty damn grim. And as soon as I realised that it didn't have to be that way. If you chose your friends carefully, and behaved in a way that was worthy of love, then you could escape from that terrible fate - of being a depressed old queen. And you know, I have my ups and downs like anyone else, but I'm happier at sixty three than I've ever been, because I know more about myself. And because, (laughs) the wonders of science have allowed me to continue my sex life.

Nick: Well it's good to think that I might have another thirty years of sex in front of me.

Armistead: Well yes. There are plenty of eighty-year-olds having sex, and you might as well think about it, because you're gonna get there one of these days, and you'll be glad that that's true.

Nick: And what's your feeling about where the gay community is at today?

Armistead: I think we fall into traps when we talk about the gay community. That's what homophobes do. They think that we're all one thing and make generalisations about us. But I don't do that. There are plenty of gay people I can't stand. And I find their behaviour abhorrent. So I don't know which bit you mean when you say the gay community. I don't buy into the whole notion that we're one big thing, whether that be a market, or a political entity, or anything else. Because we just aren't. There are plenty of gay people out there

who are reprehensible closet cases, and they're no part of my community.

Nick: There just seem to be more and more people around me who are saying that they don't feel they fit in. They don't like the bars and the sex clubs...

Armistead: So what you mean by the gay community is bars and sex clubs? (laughs)

Nick: No, but they are saying that they find it hard to find places to go meet people, because they don't like the places on offer...

Armistead: Well, the Internet relieves that to a certain degree. You don't have to go sit in a bar or a bathhouse - you can actually hook up with people online. Or, heaven forbid, you could say hello to someone on the street, like I did. This is about keeping your heart open, and not becoming hardened to the world around you. That's what keeps you happy as a gay person; that and a certain amount of residual pride, or arrogance if you prefer. Something that says, I'm not trying to be as good as anybody else. I am as good as anybody else, and maybe even better because of the life I've had to lead...

Nick: The fact that Michael Tolliver met his partner in the street after seeing him online, it makes us suspect that Michael Tolliver is actually Armistead Maupin.

Armistead: Only in some ways.

Nick: Just the cute ways?

Armistead: (laughs) Yes, just the adorable ways. I've always plundered my own life for fiction. I did it when I was writing *Maybe the Moon*, about a heterosexual female, Jewish dwarf. She was as much myself as Michael Tolliver. You know that as a writer, I'm sure. You draw on your own storehouse of emotions.

Nick: Yes, only in fiction people have to be more defined, more black and white. So you tend to isolate just one part of yourself for each character.

Armistead: That's right. That's what I found too. With a whole apartment-house full of characters in *Barbary Lane* I had to do it that way. I would lean on certain aspects of myself in order to create the character.

Nick: So does Art imitate life, or does life imitate art? Do you try out scenarios for your own life in your books, or...

Armistead: Oh absolutely. My books are often driven by the way I imagine my life to be - how I want to fix it, or change it. I use my fiction as a way of directing my own life. It allows us to make some kind of sense out of the chaos of life. Real life is disjointed and messy, and disorientating. But fiction, no matter how loose, has a certain pattern to it, which is comforting to the reader and the writer.

Nick: And other people. Do you steal parts of their lives for you books?

Armistead: Sure, sometimes. I usually tell them though. There's a story in *Michael Tolliver Lives* about a guy who wants to eat pussy by the time he's forty years old. And a girlfriend helps him out, but she freshens up with cinnamon douche. And the result is that the guy feels this aversion to breakfast rolls ever after. (laughs) That happened to someone I know. I wrote it down as he told me - I told him it was going straight in the book. My ears are constantly open for such things.

Nick: - Have you ever upset anyone, by writing about them?

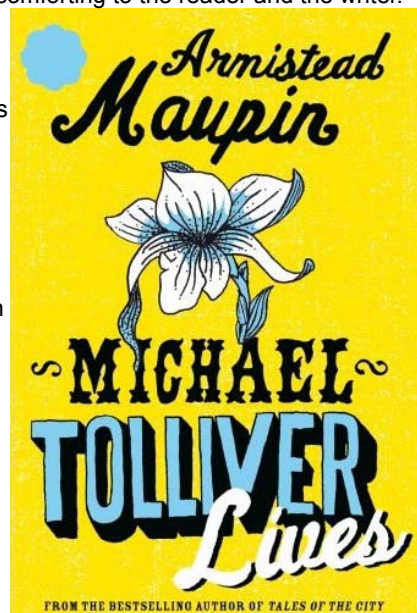
Armistead: Oh, there's a local socialite, who recognized herself in the Prue Giroux character in *Tales of The City*. She spent twenty years upset about it. But nowadays she brags about it.

Nick: Well that's pretty much all my questions. Thanks for that. You've been great. What else are you doing today?

Armistead: Oh, some phone interviews, and the launch party for a book about fag hags to raise money for a gay teen suicide helpline, and probably taking my dog to get washed.

Nick: You have a dirty dog?

Armistead: Yeah, she just got back from the country, so its time for her to go to the beauty parlour.



Armistead Maupin's new novel; **Michael Tolliver Lives** was published by Doubleday on the 18th of June 2007. Buy it <[here](#)>.

Nick Alexander's new book: **13:55 Eastern Standard Time** was published by BIGfib on the 7th of June 2007. Buy it <[here](#)>.

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