

[Q&A]

PW TALKS WITH JOSEPH OLSHAN

Italian Intrigue

Throughout Joseph Olshan's literary career, he's written about everything from restless gay men to Jamaican chambermaids and has enjoyed the success of a Hollywood adaptation of his 1985 debut, *Clara's Heart*. His new novel, *The Conversion* (Reviews, Feb. 11) is an evocative, atmospheric story about a gay man in Tuscany struggling with his identity and his past loves.

What inspired you to set your new novel in Europe?

I'm like a lot of American writers who write about being abroad. I know French, and I know Italian even better. So I wrote about European culture because this is something I know. I've spent a lot of time at the villa where the novel takes place, and I tried to limit myself to writing about events that I'd actually witnessed. As much as I used my imagination, I based the novel on real experiences and on the culture of the language.

Do you ever see aspects of yourself in the characters you create?

When I create my novels, I'm really writing about my own experience. My best stuff is written out of my own gut. I don't sit down and do a lot of research—I just write about what concerns me. Having the main character based on me, it makes a great touchstone from which to jump off to other things. It's a very comfortable thing.

One of the "conversions" in the novel involves HIV. What are your thoughts about addressing this topic in literature?

The general population doesn't understand the risks we take while

under the spell of love. It's a powerful mixture to combine sex and death in a sympathetic and compassionate light. The novel dramatizes the dilemma of loving someone and coming to the place where you want to share everything with that person.

That is the moment I came to in several scenes in the story, and it became a core issue.

Did you have any reservations about tackling such a controversial issue?

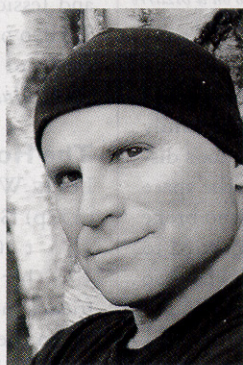
I was trying to understand it for myself as well as the reader. I enjoy taking contemporary issues and dealing with them in a way

that makes them timeless for every kind of reader. The disease of love, the thought that intimacy can cause death, is a very revolutionary and confusing thing.

What else are you working on?

I'm writing a novel that takes place in Vermont during a time when seven women were found murdered over a five-year period; the killer was never caught. It really shook up the community. The other project is a collaboration with a friend called *Four-Hand Sonata*, about two fraternal Italian-American twins who've inherited a castle.

—Jim Piechota



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The Conversion

JOSEPH OLSHAN. St. Martin's, \$24.95 (288p) ISBN 978-0-312-37391-7

Olshan's crisp, satisfying new novel follows American translator and author Russell Todaro, a Jewish gay man who becomes embroiled in the death and ensuing scandal of a former lover. While in France with Ed, a well-known Parisian poet, they are attacked in their hotel room by two armed men. The men mysteriously flee when Ed confronts them; then Ed dies of a heart attack the following morning. Marina, an aging literary acquaintance of Ed's, provides a haven for Russell at Villa Guidi, her picturesque and history-laden Tuscan villa. Marina frets that the men who assaulted Russell in Paris may have been looking for her reclusive husband, Stefano, a controversial, outspoken media writer. Meanwhile, Annie, the executrix of Ed's literary estate, demands to know the whereabouts of the autobiographical manuscript he'd spent the last 10 years penning. Russell denies he has it, though escalating momentum and melodrama converge in the novel's denouement when Ed's writings re-emerge and the lines of truth become blurred. Set against a plush and evocatively described European backdrop, Olshan has produced a compelling story of forbidden desire, deception, religion and love's intoxicating allure. (Apr.)



Read the review at www.publishersweekly.com/conversion