Someone You Know: A Friend’s Farewell
By Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli


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This review of Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli’s book Someone You Know is undertaken from an analytical perspective, from my personal response as the sister-in-law of a young man who died from AIDS, and as a former PhD candidate of the author. This book is a biography that chronicles the journey, from the mid to late 1980s, of Maria alongside her friend Jon, as Jon finds out he is HIV-positive and subsequently becomes unwell, eventually dying from AIDS-related complications.

The book contains six parts. Part one introduces us to Jon and Maria’s lives and friendship. We learn about Maria, her Italo-Australian background and how societal preconceptions of what it means to be an Italian female in Australia are challenged by Maria herself in how she lives and what she believes. Equally complex is Jon, whom we learn comes from a religious family who do not accept that he is gay. As Maria recalls in the early chapters, Jon relates their respective identities to that of chameleons, “changing colours” in order to negotiate the multiple identities they take on in their multiple worlds. We also meet some of the significant people and places in their individual and collective realms. Maria’s husband Rob, Jon’s then-partner and later, steadfast friend and carer Kevin are introduced to us. We also become acquainted with other friends and colleagues whose own journeys help to shape the book.

It took me a few pages to orientate myself in Jon and Maria’s world to start with, with chapters one and two throwing me into two different cities and points in time. From this point, however, the style of the book
becomes familiar and we are clearly led in and out of Adelaide and Sydney, and the narratives that accompany each location. It is in part one that we are both comforted and confronted with everyday life events such as work and collegial relationships, family gatherings, holidays and house-hunting. Jon and Maria’s shared workplace, a secondary school, provides the location in which much of the book is set. Maria’s clever juxtapositions mean that, on one level, these events appear mundane but, on another, they reveal the stigma, discrimination, isolation and prejudice that exist for gay men living in heteronormative worlds. I think of my brother-in-law, coincidentally named Jonathon, and what his life would have been like in the time before he knew he was HIV-positive. I never met Jonathon, so I read with interest this section of the book as it chronicles the mid-1980s. For readers alive in that era, the mention of cassette players and public phone booths is a nostalgic prompt. For younger readers, it is an insight into the world pre-smart phone and social media.

In part two, Jon and Maria’s lives and friendship are altered by two life-changing events. First, we accompany Jon and Maria to the doctor as they receive Jon’s diagnosis that he has tested positive for HIV. We also learn of Maria’s pregnancy around the same time and the simultaneous joy and grief that Maria feels in knowing that she is going to have a baby and, at the same time, watch her best friend die. The events in this short section deftly frame part three of the book. This third part is intimate and candid as we follow Jon’s grapple with his diagnosis and declining health and, at the same time, Maria’s fears that accompany many women throughout pregnancy, around miscarriage or other issues that can result in the loss of a foetus. There is again a powerful juxtaposition posed regarding the differences in support Jon and Maria receive for their respective health situations: “I am amazed at the amount of attention and support I receive because of my pregnancy. Meanwhile, Jon suffers alone with little support or encouragement…” (p.89). This raises for us the opportunity to reflect on contemporary society, and whether anything has changed for people with HIV.

We also watch as Maria struggles to know how to respond to Jon as he struggles the reality of his situation. Jon’s comparison of his bodily changes with that of Maria’s reminds us about societal stereotypes that serve to isolate: “aren’t you lucky? God’s taking me away, an ageing queen, and giving you in return a brand new lovable baby” (p.79). Maria writes about herself and about Jon in ways that bare their insecurities and foibles, which helps us to understand this is a biography about genuine people, viewed through a realist, rather than a nostalgic lens. The relationship between Jon and Maria is tested at this time by Jon insisting that his diagnosis of HIV is kept secret, compelling Maria to lie to work colleagues and some friends by saying he has cancer. This reminds me of my brother-in-law Jonathon, who kept his illness a secret until he was so ill he could no longer escape seeking medical attention and receiving his own diagnosis of HIV. As I read I imagine how Jon and Jonathon must have felt, shamed by their illness to the point they needed to hide it from friends and family members. I have asked my sister-in-law about this time in Jonathon’s life and watched her emotionally recount how Jonathon did not want anyone to know, not even his closest friends. Tears well in my eyes as I read, empathizing for Maria in having to lie in order to protect Jon, and the mixed feelings she experiences as she progresses in her pregnancy whilst Jon’s health simultaneously declines. I agonize for Jon in not being able to safely disclose his illness because of the stigma of being a gay man with HIV. Jon and Jonathon’s journeys must be reminiscent of many, many people who are diagnosed with HIV, both then and now. I feel ashamed that, more than 25 years after the events in this book, people living with HIV are still unable to disclose their illness in safety.

We are stunned at the end of part three by Jon’s relocation to Sydney in order to get treatment and his saying goodbye to Maria via a letter to her. Jon explains the letter to Maria over the phone, saying “I couldn’t stand to be with you, knowing what we’ve been through. I’m scared I’ll never see you or the school again” (p.100). Whilst at first I am surprised that Jon uses a letter to say goodbye, at the same time, however, I feel we know Jon well enough to accept that he chose this way to depart. The pain I feel as I read this section of the book is surely a tiny fraction of how Jon must have felt to choose this way to leave his Adelaide life behind.

In part four of the book we are honoured to share in the intimate details of the birth of Maria’s baby, and...
this new chapter in her and Rob’s life. However, this joyous event is tempered by Jon’s significant decline in health. Maria describes the physical changes in Jon, hitting us with the cruel reality of AIDS: “For a moment, I am taken aback. He looks paler, thinner, hesitant and vulnerable…I move forward to embrace him…Beneath my palms, I feel the rib-cage, his spine, his bony shoulder blades” (p.114). We silently witness how these stark physical changes herald changes in Jon and Maria’s relationship and we sense the helplessness Maria must feel as she watches Jon’s body decline. Jon speaks of death. He attempts to make sense of his mortality and the brutal way in which his life is being taken from him: “…I know that somewhere out there, in those infinite cycles of life and time, there is meaning in it all. It’s bloody awful getting there, but once I’ve shed this troublesome flesh, I’ll be free, at peace with myself, and powerful” (p.121).

Part five is the most compelling, and yet most difficult part of the book to read. We know that Jon is going to die. I don’t want to accept it, just as Maria writes of her own feelings of anxiety as she travels to Sydney to see Jon, who is in the final stages of his illness. I am in tears as I recall this section whilst writing this review, as I was in tears as I read it. Maria writes that she cries, and I cry with her. Intertwined in this pain that we experience through Maria, however, is a deep and profound sense of love and humanity as we are privileged to share Maria’s last days with Jon. We are there as she and his friends care for him in his final hours. We are also there as we see Maria and Jon’s friends grapple with the collision of their love for Jon with that of anger toward his now-present parents, whose views about homosexuality and AIDS have been a long-standing source of pain for Jon. For anyone who has been present when a loved one has died, this part of the book is utterly familiar. Maria deftly captures the conflicting feelings of all the different people surrounding the dying person: anger, fear, love, grief, humour all colliding as each person contends with the impending death of their loved one. This section of the book is very tangible; I feel like I am being absorbed into the pages, alongside Maria, feeling the temperature of the Sydney air, hearing the sounds in the hospice where Jon lays dying. I am again reminded of my brother-in-law Jonathon, and what I know about his last weeks in a hospital dying of AIDS, and I feel sorrow for him and for Jon, for having to die in young men’s bodies no longer recognizable because of the ravages of the virus.

Reading part six is like taking a deep breath after sobbing uncontrollably for a few minutes. Maria steadies our grief with her narrative around the hours, days and months after Jon’s death. She helps to move us from immediate anguish to a point of reflection about the entirety of her and Jon’s journey. Maria reminds us that life goes on and that, like life, her love for Jon continues.

Overall, this book is generous in the multiple insights it provides to us about stigma, vulnerability and friendship. Maria reveals her own insecurities and vulnerabilities in a way that helps us to distinctly feel what she is feeling. As a result, the book provokes in us an opportunity for deep introspection into our own beliefs and prejudices, both subconscious and obvious. The interspersion of anecdotes of everyday mundane life alongside the magnitude of dying is a powerful mechanism that Maria uses to remind us that living is not always as we anticipate. Someone You Know can be read as a historical account, or used as a means for discussing complex issues including homophobia, heteronormativity, stigma and discrimination. Within these issues, this book delivers a profound message about the fragility of the body and the enduring strength of friendship and love; a message that never grows passé. Humanity would do well to consider the issues raised in Someone You Know more often in everyday life.