

AIDS as you've never read it before

Randy Shilts' new book about people, institutions and AIDS is highly compelling and controversial; he speaks out about being outspoken.

B Y W C M C R A E

And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic; by Randy Shilts (St. Martins, \$24.95)

Rock Hudson may have given the AIDS epidemic a face. But San Francisco journalist Randy Shilts has given the health crisis its first best-seller.

"And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic" is a monumental exercise of investigative reporting and the first

Books

book to fully chart our institutional response to the AIDS crisis. At the same time, it tells the stories of people who fall victim both to the virus itself and to our society's reaction.

Shilts begins his book in Africa, in 1976, where a Danish lesbian doctor becomes the first non-African victim of HIV infection; it ends with the announcement in 1985 that Rock Hudson has AIDS. In the nearly 600 pages between these two precipitous events, Shilts charts a story of government inaction, gay political indifference and cynicism, and medical ineffectuality.

The book's real power comes from the exhaustive documentation — from internal memos and candid conversations — that demonstrate the indifference of our institutions to AIDS. "The federal government viewed AIDS as a budget problem, local public health officials saw it as a political problem, gay leaders considered AIDS a public relations problem, and the news media regarded it as a homosexual problem that wouldn't interest anybody else."

In Shilts' hands, the reporting of such wholesale dithering becomes a factually-driven narrative of compelling interest. Shilts documents the spoiling for funds and for recognition that hampered federal research into AIDS, and exposes the passionless leadership of federal public health officials. He also details Dr. Robert Gallo's sleazy appropriation of the French Pasteur Institute's discovery of LAV (later renamed HIV), a story I personally think cannot too often be retold.

The gay orthodoxy is cited for its commercially and politically motivated allegiance to goals of ever-increased promiscuity, even after evidence had clearly demonstrated sexual activity led to AIDS infection.

But however compelling is the history of our institutions failing us in crisis, not many readers would make it through this volume if it were only internal memos from the Centers for Disease Control. Throughout the book, Shilts has intertwined a semi-fictional narrative detailing

the personalities and lives of the individuals affected by both the disease and our society's priggish reaction to it.

But therein lies the rub. By introducing elements of fiction, Shilts becomes tied to conventions of narrative which often detract from straightforward reporting. Early on, the virus is described as "something new and horrible rising slowly from the earth's biological landscape"; and "slowly, almost imperceptibly, the killer was awakening." This kind of writing is closer to Stephen King than journalism. The characterizations of bumbling government officials and self-serving politicians are made the more insidious by borrowing from other horror traditions — the book sometimes seems like *Jaws* with a virus.

In the process of narration, activists like Larry Kramer and Bill Krauss become assailed, John Wayne-like loners, who then partake in the kind of reverence our fictive traditions accord such heroes. Gaetan Dugas, the gay Don Juan-cum-Typhoid Mary who becomes AIDS "Patient Zero," is a creation of purest stereotype. The power of the personal stories is undeniable; however, the book would withstand stronger analysis had Shilts decided whether he was writing journalism or a *roman a clef*.

"And the Band Played On" is a very powerful and impressive book. It ought to be required reading for anyone with any interest in AIDS, or for that matter, anyone interested in a prognosis of our shallow, uncaring society.

I spoke with Randy Shilts from the St. Martin's offices in New York.

What are your Oregon connections?

I moved out there in 1970 because Oregon's a nice place to live. I attended PCC, and then went down to Eugene for university. I was chairman of the Gay People's Alliance until 1973. When I went into journalism, I stopped being an activist. I don't think you can do both at the same time.

Are you surprised at the success of "And the Band Played On"?

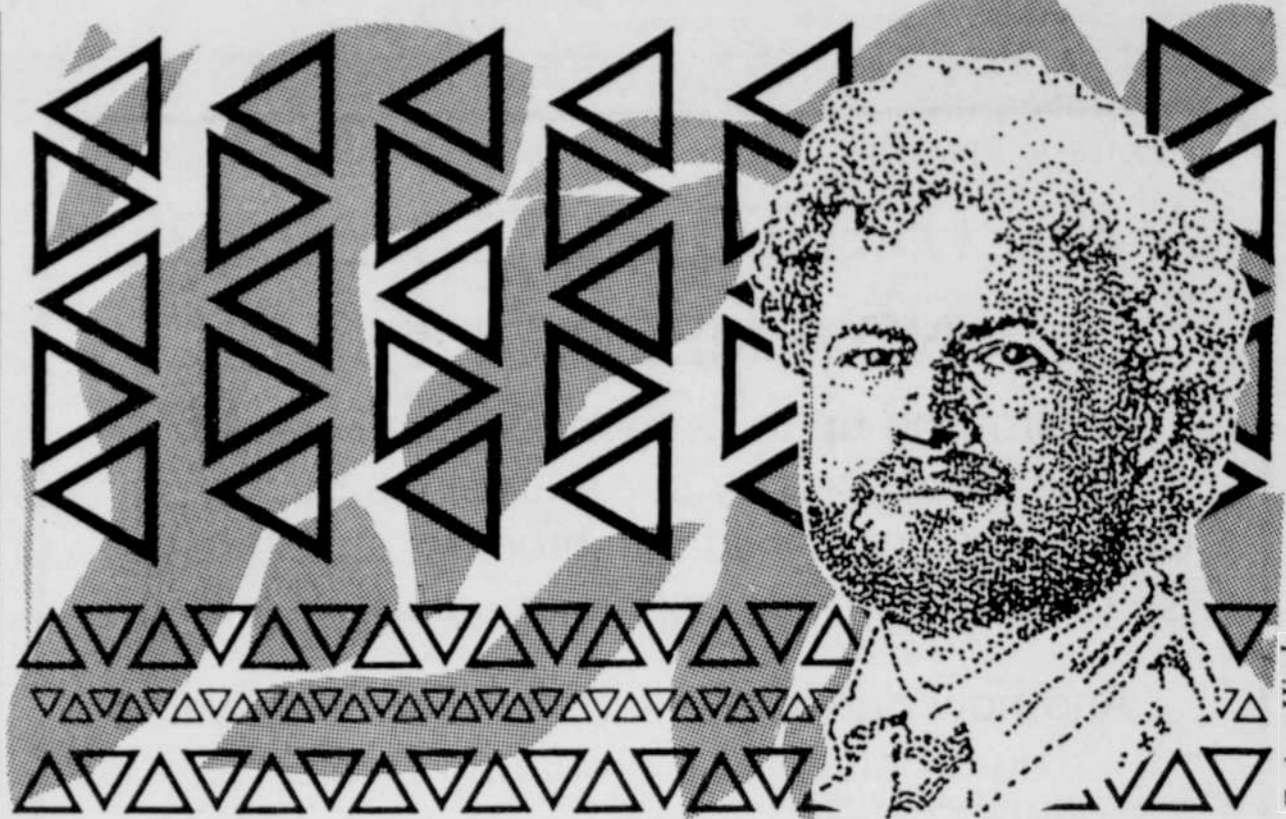
I knew it would be successful, but I had no idea it would be this successful.

How do you account for its success?

I think people are hungry for information about AIDS.

Of a couple of friends who have read excerpts of the book, one characterized you as a "gay Bob Woodward." How do you respond to that?

I'm an investigative reporter. The book is just old-fashioned journalism. I mean, I filed for Freedom of Information material, I went and talked to everyone. It was just shoe-leather style journalism. To me, this is the kind of information that should have been in the newspapers all along.



E. Ann Hinds

The other friend characterized you as a gay Geraldo Rivera.

Is that someone who's read the book?

He read the excerpts in California magazine, the *Patient Zero* stuff.

Nobody who has read the entire book could say that.

Were you surprised by the coverage and acclaim you received in the press? It seems to me that there's an element of "making up for lost time" in AIDS coverage by reproducing large portions of your book in the press.

I think most of the media is aware that they blew it. What I'm hoping is that the book will lead them on to do a good job. It's great that people are covering the book, but that doesn't replace coverage of the disease.

Why did no one else write this book?

I am the only gay person in a prominent position in a major paper. And I don't think that straight people care about the story.

You still think it's still that divided?

Look, the only people who write about AIDS patients in national papers are women. They don't put investigative reporters on AIDS cases.

Who did you think of as the audience for the book?

Myself. You've got to remember that when we were trying to sell the book, we had a difficult time finding a publisher. Publishers thought a straight audience wouldn't want to hear what I was saying, and that what I was saying was too radical for a gay audience. But I felt it was time to tell the truth. I didn't feel I could be tough on Reagan without being tough — accountable — on gay politicians.

Well, it seems like you've cut yourself a fairly small piece of turf. Basically anyone who has been involved in the reaction to AIDS is given his comeuppance.

The book does document institutions that have failed, but there are also a pretty good number that did a good job. There were a lot of doctors, activists, who didn't even know how this thing was spread who were trying to make a difference. And there were a lot of people who had AIDS who were really out there, trying to make people wake up to the threat.

How do you respond to charges of hindsight?

In the book, I'm not talking about what people in 1987 say about how we conducted AIDS in 1982. I demonstrate that in 1982, 1983 people were begging and pleading to the government for leadership, pointing to the dark future ahead. This is not hindsight: it is thoroughly documented that four or five years ago the government decided not to take an active role against the AIDS crisis.

I was thinking more of your criticism of gay reaction. Much of the gay reaction to AIDS you characterize as purely commercial or politically based. Wasn't part of this reaction based on ignorance due to government inaction?

In 1981, 1982, perhaps. By 1983, particularly on the coasts, there was more than adequate information about what was going on. It's curious who turned out to be the "radicals" for this

cause. The gay grassroots was changing ahead of its leaders. I think that by 1984 the average gay man was changing much faster than the gay politicians realized.

You don't much mention the role of lesbians in the reaction to AIDS. Had you written the book about Portland and its reaction, many of the leaders would have been women.

I've got Lu Chaitin, who's a major figure. There's a lot of people who deserve to be mentioned. I wasn't putting together a scrap book. Some people here [in New York City] say, "Oh, you should have mentioned so and so." My God, this is the only place where I've run into people who think that book isn't long enough! I mean, I think the book is plenty long.

Well, maybe not expensive enough. Why don't you make it \$28.95?

Your book ends with Rock Hudson. There's the unwritten assumption that things change after him.

To some extent, it did. The history of AIDS after Rock Hudson is different from the history before. After Rock Hudson, the press started to pay attention.

But the government response was just as wacky as before.

It was wacky in a different way. It's not like they're ignoring AIDS anymore.

A recent San Francisco Chronicle profile of you said you hate to be criticized. How has the gay press received your book?

The Bay Area Reporter gave me a good review. I just about fell off my chair. The New York Native has run a headline, "You can live without Shilts."

Some of the characters that you view sympathetically in the book receive hostility from gay institutions. By characterizing that hostility, were you anticipating the controversy that you would generate?

In one sense, I've been amazed at the positive reaction there has been. But no, I wasn't doing that. All the stuff I reported happened.

You give what must be one of the most kindly characterizations of Larry Kramer ever in print. Between your characterizations of him and Bill Krauss I read a defense of your sometimes unpopular role as a journalist.

A lot of people don't like Larry Kramer's style but a lot of people I talk to here in New York have to admit he's right. And inasmuch as I share their attitudes, I suppose — but I don't feel I have to defend myself because I'm not a gay leader. My job is to write stories.

Do you think your book will change things?

I hope so. I think it will put a big spotlight on things, particularly for the government. I can't imagine the government can ignore it any longer. I've put it all down in black-and-white.

Randy Shilts will appear Nov. 18, 7:30 at the First Congregational Church, 1126 SW Park, Portland. Tickets are \$7.50, and are available at all Powell's Bookstores.



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