

## "Apocalypse from now on"

*AIDS and Its Metaphors challenges the entire construct of AIDS in language and thought*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Everyone who has anything to do with AIDS — policy makers and home-care nurses, people with ARC, and designers of condom ads — should read Susan Sontag's book, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. And then,

### Books

when they're finished, they should lend their copies to everybody else.

Doctors who give patients an HIV-positive diagnosis might even hand over a paperback copy with advice to "read this and call me in the morning." Not because of its palliative effects, not because it is uplifting; it isn't. Sontag's purpose isn't to make us feel better — about AIDS or anything else. Her goal is to make us think clearer.

AIDS, as a medical, social, and political issue, has moved so fast and changed so often, we've had to invent language to keep up with it. Often, our inventions use metaphor — a name that belongs to something else — to put unfamiliar ideas in household terms, to make new information comprehensible. So we describe AIDS as an "invasion," as a "plague," the cells of its sufferers as being "under assault."

In a dense 95 pages, Sontag unpacks these metaphors and others, taking down the language of AIDS piece by piece and holding it up for scrutiny. She presses beyond routine questioning of the words we use to write and talk about AIDS, words like "victim" and "innocence." This book challenges the entire construct of AIDS in language and thought.

Sontag rakes her fine intellect through the use of military metaphors to describe AIDS and other diseases, the connection of disease with foreignness and the links between AIDS language, a capitalistic society, and the apocalyptic vision.

That sounds like a heady menu, and it is — *AIDS and Its Metaphors* is the kind of book you pick up, read ten pages of, then put down and think about for an hour. The eight untitled chapters follow each other in tight, logical sequence, and Sontag's straightforward writing propels the book steadily ahead.

First, she explains why she wrote it. After being diagnosed with cancer more than ten years ago, and experiencing the shame and disgust with which many cancer patients viewed the disease, Sontag wrote *Illness as Metaphor*. This book was intended, she said, to dissolve the fears that prevented people from seeking early, medical treatment.

"I hoped to persuade terrified people who were ill to consult doctors, or to change their incompetent doctors for competent ones . . . to regard cancer as if it were just a disease — a very serious one, but just a disease. Not a curse, not a punishment, not an embarrassment. Without 'meaning' " she writes.

A decade later, she says, cancer no longer carries the terrifying stigma it once had. There's a new disease on the block "whose charge of stigmatization, whose capacity to create spoiled identity, is far greater." AIDS, she says, "has provided a large-scale occasion for the metaphorizing of illness."

In rigorous, clear argument, Sontag traces the sense of doom and blame surrounding AIDS to its roots in Western attitudes about disease and health. The military metaphor,

applied in turn to syphilis and tuberculosis, likens disease to a foreign invader, an "other." Not only does this metaphor isolate and stigmatize those with the disease, but it can serve as official license for drastic and zealous measures ("war-time emergency acts") in response.

"We are not being invaded," Sontag responds. "The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy. We — medicine, society — are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever . . ." it is the military metaphor, with its extremist and divisive results, that Sontag finds most objectionable. But she examines others as well — including the interpretation of AIDS as a form of moral and natural "judgment" and as one version of apocalypse.

Epidemic diseases once described as "divine retribution" acquired a different interpretation after the discovery of bacterial and viral causes. The sense of retribution shifted from society to the individual — disease as punishment for a dissolute lifestyle, low in exercise or calcium, high in cholesterol or promiscuous sex. AIDS revives parts of the earlier interpretation, inviting blame of individual behavior, certain "risk groups" and society's general moral laxity.

Visions of AIDS as the natural result of moral decline, Sontag points out, come not only from predictable fundamentalist quarters. As a result, "not only does AIDS have the unhappy effect of reinforcing American moralism about sex; it further strengthens the culture of self-interest . . . [which] receives an added boost as simple medical prudence."

Sontag's book provides a solid history lesson in the language of disease; read it, and you will learn why doorknobs were replaced with swinging doors on U.S. Navy ships in the early part of century. But its most provocative and valuable achievement lies in the last two chapters, in which Sontag suggests that AIDS fits neatly into an end-of-the-millennium context. In this vision, apocalypse in the form of nuclear threat, environmental pollution and, now, epidemic disease, has become a constant presence. Not "Apocalypse Now," she suggests, but "Apocalypse from Now On . . . that future which is already here and always before us, which no one knows how to refuse."

Clearly this book is about Western metaphors for illness, and no reader should open it expecting a multi-cultural education. By confining her arguments to the tradition she knows best, Sontag is able to achieve both depth and clarity in a relatively short space.

Only one piece of her argument rings sour. In renouncing the application of metaphor to disease, she also renounces all models but the purely medical, all treatment but the most conventionally allopathic (as opposed to naturopathic or homeopathic). About cancer, she says, "The metaphors, I was convinced, kill. (For instance, they make people irrationally fearful of effective measures such as chemotherapy, and foster credence to thoroughly useless remedies such as diets and psychotherapy.)"

These statements may come from the zeal of the cured (two-and-one-half years of chemotherapy eliminated Sontag's cancer), but they sit at odds with the documented success of some alternative treatments and the proven links between mind and body.

*AIDS and Its Metaphors* challenges the way we think about AIDS. And while Sontag may not believe in the connection, may not intend the result, changing our language and thought about this disease may ultimately alter the way we feel about it, too. ▼

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