Words to Live By

POZ staffers dug through their at-home libraries and dusted off the tomes most likely to stand the test of time.

June 1, 2001 By Staff

The Normal Heart

by Larry Kramer
1995 (Penguin)

I was looking to direct a play at Brooklyn College when Kramer's tour-de-force closed at New York City's Public Theater. My late partner, Nick Pippin, founder of the PWA Theater Workshop, had recently been diagnosed, but still our eyes had to be opened. Kramer even brought an entourage to the play's non-professional debut. Now, much of it is dated, even irrelevant. But because it so powerfully illustrates the genesis of AIDS activism, it's crucial information. A new production might show us all how far we have -- and haven't -- come.

-- Dennis Daniel

Surviving AIDS

by Michael Callen
1990 (HarperCollins)

I paid $9 for this now out-of-print gem at a musty used-book store in Chicago in 1993. Recently diagnosed, I could barely fathom what the title boldly stated. I studied the text as if my life depended on it. Callen scoured scientific journals and recorded hours of personal and physician testimonials to present a vision of hope. You can imagine my shock when I heard that he had died that year. When the despair passed, I still had the ability to live.

-- LeRoy Whitfield

The Invisible Epidemic

by Gena Corea
1992 (HarperCollins)

Alone in my cell, I cried a flood of relief after finally reading about all I'd witnessed: rapid deaths of women inside as the media called AIDS a men's disease, prison medics refusing Pap smears for HIVers. I cherish the detailed anger: "AIDS thrives on the notion of 'otherness,'" Corea wrote, "[of] sexism, racism and homophobia -- words too puny to convey the savagery they represent." Today, its pages remind me of the activism needed to take on this damned epidemic.

-- Laura Whitehorn

Last Watch of the Night

by Paul Monette
1994 (Harcourt Brace)

A WASPy poet with classical pretensions whose nonfiction is decidedly fierce, Monette taught me a lasting lesson in mistaken first impressions. I first read his bearing-witness memoirs in a gay-history class, his work finally canonized alongside his own favorite (and out-after-death) writers. No act of institutional neglect of AIDS goes unscathed in this autumnal collection of essays and still the grand passion for his life's three loves (twice an AIDS widower before his own 1995 death) seeps into every spare, perfect metaphor.

-- Shana Naomi Krochmal

In the Shadow of the Epidemic

by Walt Odets
1995 (Duke)

"Do you want to get infected?" my therapist asked in 1993 during another session about unsafe sex. So I finally started to untangle how HIV had grown in me into a mission, identity, fetish and fate. My guru in this lesson was Odets, a gay psychologist I'd never met. His deep, deeply felt book analyzes "the psychological epidemic" causing infections and worse among us neggies. It immediately electrified or enraged a community so overwhelmed that it had only contempt for our ambivalence about surviving mass death. Odets' most radical insight -- that the highest value is not remaining uninfected but living fully now -- still makes preventionistas reach for their guns.

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