Facts and Fiction Collide in This Clever Novel of AIDS Activism

Rasheed Newson discusses his debut novel, “My Government Means to Kill Me,” about a Black gay HIV activist coming of age in 1980s NYC.

August 22, 2022 By Trent Straube

The way Rasheed Newson tells it in his debut novel, My Government Means to Kill Me, set in 1980s New York City, the AIDS activist group ACT UP didn’t spring into existence after a rousing call to action by writer Larry Kramer during a speech at the LGBT Center. Nope. That narrative, commonly recounted today, amounts to a myth, a “lie [that] has a romantic sweep to it, if one finds beauty in the magic of accidents and perfect timing.” Instead, Kramer enlisted the help of civil rights leader Dorothy Cotton, who worked with Martin Luther King Jr., and the two secretly trained an AIDS army, going so far as to hire goons to rough up wannabe activists to see who could take the impending abuse.

Did that really happen? Hardly. But the novel is a work of historical fiction. Many of the people and events are real, but most are fabricated. It’s the clever tale of 18-year-old Trey, a Black gay man who moves to New York City from the Midwest and comes of age in the heady world of HIV activism. It’s a fast-paced yarn, reminiscent of a Mark Twain picaresque or a savvy and frisky Forrest Gump, complete with detailed footnotes to help guide the reader through history. (Newson posts tweets related to the footnotes; many of which are embedded here.)

> Who doesn’t love a mini-play list? Here are five songs featured in the footnotes of “My Government Means to Kill Me,” which goes on sale in 9 days. #1980s #music #LGBTQIA #book pic.twitter.com/QJdvc31m65
>
> — Rasheed Newson (@RasheedNewson) August 14, 2022

To learn what's fact and fiction in his book, we spoke with Newson, 43. We caught the married father of two as he was prepping for the new season of Bel-Air. He's the showrunner and executive producer for the TV series (a dramatic reimagining of the '90s sitcom The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air). He has also worked on the series Narcos, Shooter and The Chi. Our conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

When did you first learn about HIV?

In high school, in 1994, a teacher brought in a man who was HIV positive to speak to us. I was 15. It was a revelation. He has to have been the first person I ever knew who openly had HIV. I remember him being led into the room because at that point his vision was such that he could see us as a shape or silhouette. Incredibly powerful.

Did you come out as gay at a young age?

I was not terribly brave [about coming out early], but I was also not fooling anyone. I never had a serious girlfriend and was on the down low, dating other boys my age. When I did come out after college, I don't remember anybody gasping.

You grew up in Indianapolis (like Trey). You went to college at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, and you now live in Pasadena, California. What drew you to writing a story in New York?

An uncle, who is gay and only 14 years older than me, lived in New York City. Ever since I was 16, I would fly out there once or twice a year to see Broadway shows and hang out. We'd tell my parents that [my uncle] was taking the day off, but he was a lawyer, so wasn't missing work. [I explored the city alone] and loved it. Just to show you where I was in my life, of all the things you could do, I once figured out how to take the subway out to Brooklyn where they filmed Another World so I could stand outside and see, like, Linda Dano walk in.

You were a big soap opera fan?

Absolutely. I could go on and on about how daytime TV doesn't get enough respect and the number of things I learned from daytime TV that I plug into my work.

But [back to the subject of New York], when I went to college, back in pre-9/11 days, you could just show up at Washington National Airport, and they had two commuter flights that left every half hour, and for $25, if you showed your student ID and they didn't have all the seats filled, then you could just hop in one and go.

One of my favorite footnotes in "My Government Means to Kill Me" focuses on Mineshaft, which you can learn a

little bit about in this TikTok!

pic.twitter.com/mVhE9ISXZX

— Rasheed Newson (@RasheedNewson) August 21, 2022

Were you like Trey, hitting the bathhouses and museums?

I had boundless energy then, and no children, and I would go to the museums and clubs. The feeling I had then was: Don't waste your time sleeping.

Have you been involved in AIDS activism?

I volunteered at Grandma's House [a home for foster children living with HIV]. I'd help them with homework and be their playmate, read stories. Teachers and students were afraid of them, so our job was: I'm gonna love you like mad, and somebody's going to think you're the best thing ever.

In my nonprofit life, I worked for the Coalition for Juvenile Justice. In college, we'd protest against the death penalty—the United States, at the time, would execute a juvenile offender. [That activism was] very much like the AIDS activism I wanted to convey in the book: Yes, the subject is heavy, but protesting wasn't somber. We'd joke around and laugh, and somebody cute would be there, and you'd get their number. You'd get to be friends with these people. That's the vibe I want to remind everyone of.

The book melds AIDS activism with civil rights history. What's the connection?

What's interesting about that time and why that [AIDS] movement was able to mobilize so quickly is that by the time you get to the '80s, you've got people who've been in the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the anti–Vietnam War movement. You have older people who are like, "I know who to call to get the Times interested in this story or how to get this in front a city councilman." But you also have younger people willing to throw their bodies into the movement and bring passion. You've got older people saying, "This is how systems work and how change is brought about," and then you have young people who are impatient. I think there has to be that push-pull. I'm all right with the clash and the messiness.

The aesthetic genius of this TikTok video of an audio excerpt from "My Government Means to Kill Me,"

narrated by @JelaniAlladin, is all due to @jmruane. I've watched it a dozen times. @MacmillanAudio pic.twitter.com/BqDHHFtksv

— Rasheed Newson (@RasheedNewson) August 12, 2022

Many novelists play with facts to get at underlying truths or to streamline a story. You do include footnotes that explain historical people and events—including pop culture tidbits and music—but do you worry that readers might not know what's fabricated? I must admit that I'm so used to serious nonfiction about HIV and to people trying earnestly to record their memories of the movement that it almost felt transgressive to read a blatantly fictional tale.

Oh, this is historical fiction. Thomas Mallon does this great with Fellow Travelers. I'm in that school. As long as I gave you some indication of where you could go to follow up on the facts, I thought it was fair game. And in a few footnotes, I'm telling you I'm making this up. I'm trying to be openhanded about when something is real and when it's not. But all the other [nonfiction] material is still out there for the taking. And at the end of the book, I give a reading list, like Sarah Schulman's Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987–1993.

And I'm hoping that [my fictionalized tale] brings in younger people, that people who lived through [1980s AIDS activism] can get a sense of nostalgia and that this rings authentic, even if it's not actually factually true.

Let's go over what's fact and fiction in some details from the story. First off, Trey befriends civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, who holds court at Mt. Morris Baths, a real-life bathhouse that catered to Black gay men. What do we have there?

The facts cater to Rustin's demographic. I know Rustin was [arrested and convicted] in Pasadena, in 1953, for [consensual] sexual activity with two men in a parked car. What I took from that was, Oh, right, you know a lot of things about Rustin, but he is a man, a gay man, with sexual desires at a time when those desires were criminalized. So I thought, Let's continue the idea that he was still sexually active. [Editor's note: Nearly 70 years after his conviction, Rustin was posthumously pardoned by California Governor Gavin Newsom.]

Read or Listen To An Excerpt From 'My Government

Means to Kill Me’ by Rasheed Newson | The Nerd Daily https://t.co/kQRqZgnLKD

— Rasheed Newson (@RasheedNewson) August 21, 2022

The book states that much of the story of Rosa Parks—who played a pivotal role in the bus boycott in 1955 Alabama when she refused to give up her seat to a white man because she was so tired—is basically mythology, as is the story of ACT UP’s formation, which allegedly happened because writer and director Nora Ephron got sick and couldn’t give a scheduled speech at the LGBT Community Center, so Larry Kramer filled in and his speech led to ACT UP. Are both genesis stories myths?

The first one, absolutely—Rosa Parks, I love it. They’re like, “She’s a seamstress, and her feet hurt.” But she was so into the apparatus of the civil rights movement, and she knew they needed someone to do something and that there had been a test case that fell apart—the teenager who did it first ended up being pregnant by a married man, which is not good optics. This fascinates me about history. It’s not enough that you’re on the right side of history, you also have to be the right kind of spokesperson.

And the Nora Ephron thing, the part that’s true is she was supposed to speak and called out last minute because she had a cold, and Larry Kramer showed up [and gave a rousing speech] and created ACT UP. Those are the verifiable facts. Part of me is like, What was he going to do if she hadn’t got a cold? [ACT UP] is going to happen somehow. And I like Nora Ephron, so I was like let’s pretend she just said, “I’ll bow out [on purpose], and Larry can step in and do this.”

Researching queer history for my next #LGBTQIA novel, and my newest TikTok video shows why I love finding treasures! #booktwt #book #writing #writingcommunity pic.twitter.com/TewqtMH6MS

— Rasheed Newson (@RasheedNewson) August 8, 2022

Did Dorothy Cotton and Larry Kramer ever work together to train AIDS activists?

Not that I know of. But what I like about her is she was for gay rights and marriage equality, and as a civil rights activist, she distinguishes herself for being vocal about it. And she had done trainings—that really was her talent. The idea of those lunch counter trainings back in the day [to prepare for the 1960 nonviolent sit-ins to protest segregated lunch counters], they knew they'd have hot coffee poured on them, and people would get in their faces and scream, so without trying to do real harm, [the trainings] want to simulate the chaos and instill how to stay calm and self-possessed.

In your book, Kramer and Cotton subject potential ACT UP members to these physical trainings at his apartment. In your research, did anything like that happen?

I know there were people at Larry Kramer's apartment at the beginning of ACT UP organizing, but what happened there? That's my invention. I did a lot of research and listened to a lot of oral histories, and almost everything was possible with ACT UP because each branch did its own thing, and there was no hierarchy. What I encourage other people to do—whether it's Kramer or Rustin or Dorothy Cotton—[is to go online and check out the] hours and hours of video and audio of them talking about their lives. Those were my primary sources.

Larry Kramer was alive when I started writing this book [he died May 2020], and a friend asked if I wanted to talk with him. I said, "I absolutely do not want to talk with Larry Kramer. I'm frightened of Larry Kramer." But if I did, then it would get in my head in the wrong way, and I'd be stuck with whatever he tells me.

Another pivotal character in the novel is Angie, who runs an AIDS hospice. Is she based on a real character?

She's a composite of all the lesbian sisters who stepped up during the crisis and who disappear from our stories of, like, five white gays guys holding hands on the beach and facing AIDS. I'm not saying that didn't happen too, but there are other stories. Ultimately, [my novel] is the story of an enduring friendship between a femme gay Black man and this unapologetic butch lesbian, and I was happy with that.

Finally, do you consider yourself an activist?

I was much closer to it when I was in my 20s and could spend my weekends going to protests. Now I consider myself an activist in how I'm raising my children. I certainly use my dollars and donations for liberal causes. And I consider writing this book an act of activism.

I can't wait to chat with the amazing @RasheedNewson about his new book, "My Government Means to Kill Me" this week via @Loyaltybooks. Come through, y'all!

https://t.co/IJ4wFOCkiu pic.twitter.com/KmLP5xJxRr

— Derrick (@geekandahalf) August 20, 2022

My Government Means to Kill Me (Flatiron Books) is out Tuesday, August 23. Visit RasheedNewson.com for info on upcoming author events, including Wednesday, August 24, at The Strand Bookstore in New York City and Thursday, August 25, at Jackie Lee's in Washington, DC.

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