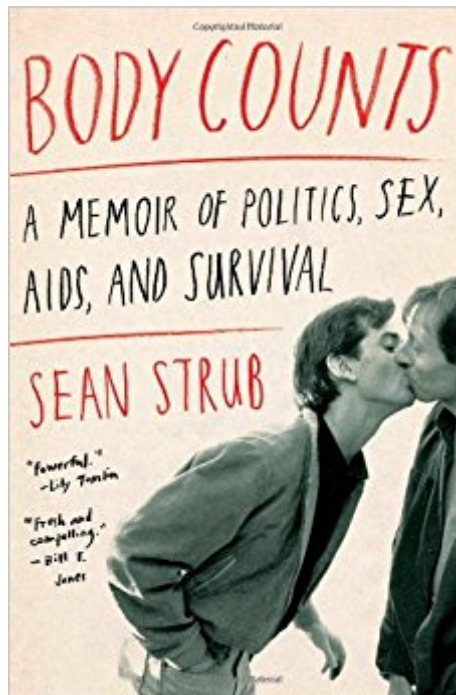




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Body Counts: A Memoir Of Politics, Sex, AIDS, And Survival



Synopsis

Sean Strub, founder of the groundbreaking POZ magazine, producer of the hit play *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, and the first openly HIV-positive candidate for US Congress, charts his remarkable life—a story of politics and AIDS and a powerful testament to loss, hope, and survival. , and the first openly HIV-positive candidate for U.S. Congress, charts his remarkable life—a story of politics and AIDS and a powerful testament to loss, hope, and survival. As a politics-obsessed Georgetown freshman, Sean Strub arrived in Washington, D.C., from Iowa in 1976, with a plum part-time job running a Senate elevator in the U.S. Capitol. He also harbored a terrifying secret: his attraction to men. As Strub explored the capital's political and social circles, he discovered a parallel world where powerful men lived double lives shrouded in shame. When the AIDS epidemic hit in the early 1980s, Strub was living in New York and soon found himself attending “more funerals than birthday parties.” Scared and angry, he turned to radical activism to combat discrimination and demand research. Strub takes readers through his own diagnosis and inside ACT UP, the activist organization that transformed a stigmatized cause into one of the defining political movements of our time. From the New York of Studio 54 and Andy Warhol's Factory to the intersection of politics and burgeoning LGBT and AIDS movements, Strub's story crackles with history. He recounts his role in shocking AIDS demonstrations at St. Patrick's Cathedral and the home of U.S. Senator Jesse Helms. >is a vivid portrait of a tumultuous era, with an astonishing cast of characters, including Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Keith Haring, Bill Clinton, and Yoko Ono. By the time a new class of drugs transformed the epidemic in 1996, Strub was emaciated and covered with Kaposi's sarcoma lesions, the scarlet letter of AIDS. He was among the fortunate who returned, Lazaruslike, from the brink of death. Strub has written a vital, inspiring memoir, unprecedented in scope, about this deeply important period of American history.

Book Information

Hardcover: 432 pages

Publisher: Scribner; First Edition edition (January 14, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1451661959

ISBN-13: 978-1451661958

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 67 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #563,217 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #71 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > AIDS #123 in Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Pathology > Diseases > AIDS & HIV #479 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Social Activists

Customer Reviews

Guest Review of Body Counts By John Berendt author of Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

A Lambda Literary Award Finalist—“Inspiring... A vital history of ordinary people rising up and demonstrating the potential inherent in this extraordinary country... Although at times it is agonizing to remember and relive our past, Sean’s articulate, and humane memoir transforms this pain into a hope for a better future. This is the most personally powerful and authentic portrayal of our collective history that I have read since Paul Monette’s *On Borrowed Time*.” (Judith Light)—“What a life! From the Senate elevator to Studio 54 to Andy Warhol and Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal and John Lennon to the famous demonstration inside St. Patrick’s Cathedral—who is this guy, Forest Gump? This is the compelling life and near-death story of Sean Strub, of thousands lost to HIV-AIDS, and thousands more living with it whom his activism helped save. Wow.” (Andrew Tobias, author of *The Best Little Boy in the World*) “Read *Body Counts* by Sean Strub and share one American’s story of growing up with an instinct for justice, then finding oneself in an epidemic whose tragedy is multiplied by bias. As a man who survived sexual abuse, rape and an HIV diagnosis, Strub embodies the shared interest of women and men who fight for human rights, and against any government or person intruding on our bodies. By taking us with him on his journey from a conservative family in Iowa to the heart of a global movement for human rights, Sean Strub gives us ideas, strength and heart in our own journey.” (Gloria Steinem) “*Body Counts* is an absorbing read. It not only vividly recounts the personal odyssey of one man’s struggle with AIDS, but places it—with remarkable objectivity—within the larger story of those years. Strub is a dispassionate, reliable guide whose directness and honesty create considerable impact. Anyone would profit from reading this book.” (Martin Duberman, author of *Stonewall* and Professor of History Emeritus at the Graduate School of the City University of New York)—“Searingly honest about himself and others, Strub shows how the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s brought out the best and the worst in people. His heroes are the ordinary men and women who fought to save lives. His villains are and deservedly so are the cowardly public

officials, from Reagan through Clinton, whose opportunism proved deadly to others. This take-no-prisoners memoir has the quality of a suspenseful page-turner, and will keep you reading until the final sentence.

— (John D’Emilio, author of *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*)

“From early struggles against AIDS to later collective acting up, Sean Strub’s lively, gossipy memoir is also deeply moving history.

— (Jonathan Ned Katz, author *Gay American History*)

“Sean Strub has written more than just a memoir. *Body Counts* pulls back the curtain on a hidden half-century of American history, from closeted Washington politicians of the 1970s and 1980s to his interactions with a parade of American icons; Tennessee Williams, Yoko Ono, Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Gore Vidal all make cameos. AIDS looms large, but the story never feels like a tragedy. It is the tale of a life lived in high-resolution, high-intensity, saturated technicolor.

— (Ari Shapiro, NPR White House Correspondent)

“Sean Strub has been a columnist, editor, publisher, theatrical producer, congressional candidate, conservationist, hotelier, and for most of that time an outspoken advocate in the fight against AIDS as well. His *Body Counts* is a stunning memoir--candid (at times startlingly so), courageous and humane. Much like the author himself.

— (John Berendt, New York Times bestselling author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and *The City of Falling Angels*)

“On June 5, 1981, the day the AIDS epidemic was first recognized by the Centers for Disease Control, Sean Strub was with my close friend, gay activist Vito Russo, in Denver, Colorado. *Body Counts* is a powerful account of the epidemic’s early years and the subsequent three decades. It encompasses the tragedy of lives lost young, as we lost Vito, as well as the triumph of empowerment, activism and survival. *Body Counts* is a page-turner with moving insight and fresh analysis told in a compelling and highly personal style.

— (Lily Tomlin)

“Strub paints a striking picture. A valuable document that gives an insider’s view into AIDS activism and declares that compassion can mean just as much as cure.

— (Kirkus)

“Elegantly written, moving and powerful, this book from one of the most important advocates for people with HIV/AIDS is eye-opening. In these times when the continuing need for services for populations that suffer the most seems almost lost from public sight this is an important reminder.

— (Mary Frances Berry, Geraldine Segal professor of American Social Thought, University of Pennsylvania and Past Chair United States Commission on Civil Rights.)

“Sean Strub’s *Body Counts* is an important document for several reasons. His direct and honest prose relates a familiar story of growing self-awareness, coming of age and coming out in a fresh and compelling manner. The big surprise comes when one recognizes how dramatic the machinations of drug trials, power politics and the building of a grass roots movement can be.

— (Bill T. Jones)

“A brilliantly told story of a life at the center of the historical period

defined by the AIDS epidemic. Moments of struggle are illuminated by a tale of despair and death, gay self-transformation, love, hope, and modest bravery. More than a survivor's tale, a gripping story of a movement that changed the soul of our world." (Kathy Boudin, Assistant Professor, Columbia University School of Social Work)

"Body Counts--so smart and affecting, idealistic and clear-eyed--chronicles Strub's own personal experience with HIV, and, at the same time, explores how culture shapes us and how we can shape it in turn. Strub's memoir, like Strub himself, is an inspiration." (Richard McCann, author of *Mother of Sorrows*) A compelling page-turner...

[Sean] provides fresh insights into the foundations of today's LGBT movement, an inside personal history of the AIDS epidemic and an eye-opening and horrifying depiction of the growing trend of HIV criminalization. To understand today's HIV epidemic, read *Body Counts*. (Rory Kennedy, filmmaker)

"This is a very particular and personal history, but it's also our history. A wonderful storyteller, Strub does such a great job of showing how life also went on amidst so much death. I very much admire his writing and how clean and powerful it is." (Will Schwalbe, author of *The End of Your Life Book Club*)

"Sean Strub--one of the real heroes of the long fight against AIDS--gives us a shatteringly honest and moving account. [He] challenges conventional wisdoms and speaks truth to power." (Doug Ireland, veteran political journalist)

"Sean Strub ... [is] one of the AIDS movement's most respected leaders... A critical historical voice.... Absorbing... Accessible not only to those intimate with the devastation wrought by HIV/AIDS but to those who viewed it from a distance or in retrospect." (Earl Pike *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*)

"Body Counts is a well-written and welcome addition to the histories of the queer and AIDS movements. It also details the considerable contributions Strub has made to those movements over the past 30 years." (Gay City News)

"Strub offers an eyewitness account from the inside of the epidemic.... This book is a valuable addition to the American AIDS archive." (Next Magazine)

"In his new book, *Body Counts*, Strub proves to be a rare breed of narrator, one who weaves a rich tale that both predates the early crisis--he arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1976, still swooning over Carter's liberal optimism even as gay politicians clutched tightly at their closeted power--and managed to survive its darkest days." (Out)

"Body Counts is a well-written and welcome addition to the histories of the queer and AIDS movements. It also details the considerable contributions Strub has made to those movements over the past 30 years." (Gay City News)

"[A] deeply moving, stunningly honest memoir, Strub recounts a story both distinctly his own and shared by many men in his generation." (Boston Globe)

"[Body Counts] depicts incredible acts of courage by Strub and his constellation of collaborators. Against thick walls of institutional homophobia and

shrieking AIDS hysteria, they forged battles that shaped seminal moments in AIDS history. Strub's close up portrayals of events and people are an insider's telescope. Gripping. Strub remains on the cutting edge of activism. (Windy City Times) "This captivating new book from the POZ magazine founder grabs your attention with stories of Strub's college years in D.C., of standing on the front lines of the AIDS epidemic and all the sex, heartache and growth along the way. And it's a powerful read beautifully told. A vivid look at how far our community has come and the work that is still to be done. (Instinct Magazine) "Body Counts, Sean Strub's moving, multi-decade memoir of one gay man's life, is not only a time capsule of the LGBT movement but also an examination of how far the United States has come in a very brief time to a new understanding of difference and acceptance it forcefully reminds us of the impact an individual can make in changing the world around him. (The San Francisco Chronicle) "Body Counts relates not just the dramatic life story of one of America's leading AIDS activists and founder of the magazine Poz, but also, for a younger generation who may not know, how he and others fought to increase public awareness and counter bigotry in the much darker 1980s and 90s. (Tim Teeman The Daily Beast) "[Body Counts] chronicles a rage-inducing chapter in recent political history." (June Thomas Slate.com on NY1 News) "A beautiful book brings back the 80s and 90s and the danger of AIDS, the uncertainties of AIDS." (Bill Goldstein WNBC-TV's Weekend Today in New York) "Fascinating an insider's view on the struggles of gay men during the early years of the AIDS epidemic." (Lambda Literary Review) "A fascinating new memoir. (Bay Area Reporter) "An important new memoir." (MetroWeekly) "A page-turner. Body Counts has the suspense and horror of Paul Monette's memoir Borrowed Time and the drama of Larry Kramer's play The Normal Heart. Strub's experience touches every issue of the plague years. What a lot of action and life there is in this gripping book. (Andrew Holleran Washington Post) "A story of resilience and righteous indignation, touched with wit." (Elizabeth Taylor Chicago Tribune) "Disarmingly honest. The story of a humble, practical soldier, an unlikely political agitator who came of age amid a community under siege. (New York Times Book Review)

Sean Strub's BODY COUNTS should be required reading for anyone interested in the AIDS epidemic in this country. It is one of those books that is difficult to put down. As I read it, I was reminded how much Mr. Strub's story mirrors that of all of us who were alive and young in large cities in that awful time in the 1980's and 90's until the drug cocktail became available in 1996 when

we literally saw our friends come back from deathbeds in a matter of weeks. We first read of gay men dying of a strange affliction in the NEW YORK NATIVE in 1981, then it was called gay cancer, then something called GRID and finally AIDS. And Larry Kramer's front page article in the NEW YORK NATIVE, "1,112 and Counting," in 1983 sent shock waves into the gay community across this country. We found out just how bad homophobia and fear really were when funeral homes refused to accept our dead. We would hear in a casual conversation with friends that someone whom we had not seen in a few months had died. Families had gay sons whose obits in their home town newspaper listed the cause of death as cancer. And like the author, I remember the first person I ever knew who had AIDS. Mr. Strub's memoir brings it all back home. We would expect the man who founded the magazine POZ to write an honest-take-no-prisoners account of what happened, and he does. All the usual villains are here. Here are some of them: when Ronald Reagan spoke the word "AIDS" for the first time in 1987, way into his second term as President, twenty-one thousand Americans had already died of it. Anthony Fauci at the NIH was uncooperative in 1987 in writing guidelines recommending the inexpensive drug Bactrim to prevent PCP in PWA's even though infectious disease specialists had known as early as 1977 of its effectiveness. When the guidelines were finally issued in 1989, 30,534 people in the U. S. had died of PCP, and approximately 16,929 of the deaths had occurred between the time Fauci was first approached and the date the guidelines were issued. And Bill Clinton gets tarred and feathered too. Mr. Strub feels betrayed by him, someone whose candidacy for President he and so many others had supported, hoping for great things from him. What we got was "Don't Ask; Don't Tell," the Defense of Marriage Act that Clinton now admits was unconstitutional and his refusal to lift the ban on the use of federal money to fund needle-exchange programs to reduce HIV transmission. In Strub's words: "Like many other people with HIV, I felt betrayed by Clinton because I'd believed him during his campaign when he told my ACT UP colleague Bob Rafsky, 'I feel your pain.'" (Mr. Strub also outs Donna Shalala as a closet lesbian.) And he recounts in great delightful detail when he and six others put a gigantic condom on Senator Jesse Helms' house in Arlington, Virginia. Helms he describes as the man in public life who was the greatest enemy of people with AIDS. Finally the author begins his narrative with the protest in December, 1989 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York when ACT UP protesters interrupt John Cardinal O'Connor's Mass because of his position of safe sex and reproductive rights. When Mr. Strub goes to the altar ostensibly to take communion, the priest sees the pink triangle and Silence=Death logo on his T-shirt under his coat. Mr. Strub begins: "'May the Lord bless the man I love, who died a year ago this week.'" (page 3) (From that moment on, I knew that Mr. Strub had my heart.) In sharp contrast are the Elizabeth Taylors and Matilde Krims of the world, the

young people in ACT UP, as well as the multitudes of gay men and lesbians who cared for the sick and dying. Mr. Strub reminds us that AIDS brought gay men and lesbians together as never before. "AIDS helped us cement the concept of a chosen family of friends as the foundation upon which we built a massive and heroic effort to tend to our sick and dying." He closes this book of 400 pages that seems much shorter in a beautiful passage that rises to the level of poetry. He says that even though he has often been furious with the Catholic Church, the church he was brought up in, that he accepts its lesson that life's meaning is found in contemplation, penance and service. In his own words: "Sometimes that service is simply a matter of being present with no other action necessary. Joe Sonnabend [a physician in the thick of treating people with AIDS from the beginning of the epidemic] once let me look at a box of letters and cards he received over the years from the surviving partners and parents of patients of his who had died. . . They all thank Joe for his care and kindness, but I was struck by how many simply thanked him for 'being there' for the person they loved. When I see someone very ill or hospitalized and feel helpless, not knowing what I can do to help alleviate their pain, I remember those cards and remind myself that even when all I can do is 'be there,' that is enough." There is so much more than I cover in this little review: Mr. Strub's early life in Iowa, his political life in D. C., his producing of the play THE NIGHT LARRY KRAMER KISSED ME, the loves of his life, his many friends in the gay and AIDS community. This is a fantastic book.

Sean Strub has written a remarkable book that combines personal memoir with a riveting social history of the HIV/AIDS crisis. An activist, entrepreneur and the founder of POZ magazine (aimed at HIV-positive people), Strub tells the story through the events of his own life, forthrightly describing early sexual abuse and the emotional pain of being closeted, to his coming out as a gay man and, later, his own diagnosis with HIV and his close brush with death. Fortunately, he came back from the brink with the help of some of the new drug "cocktails" that became available in the 1990s. Strub is healthy now and still involved in multiple activities, from historic renovations in Milford, PA, to launching the Sero Project, an attempt to decriminalize individuals' HIV status. I have seldom read a memoir as open and revealing in terms of personal details as this one. But I guess no less should be expected from the publisher who used to run his own blood counts and other details of his struggle with AIDS and Kaposi's sarcoma in his monthly column in POZ. I came away from this book with a deeper, richer understanding of the inner life of gay men and their response to the disease, as well as a feeling of love and appreciation for the author, for sharing so much of himself and his experience in these pages. Strub's story helps me better understand other gay men I've

known, including someone close to me who died of AIDS in 1990. There's plenty of People magazine tidbits along the way, since Strub seems to have a Zelig-like knack for being on the scene -- whatever that scene might be. He got to know Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal, and met Bill Clinton, Robert Kennedy Jr. and many other political bigwigs (Strub was the first openly gay man to run for Congress, in 1990). Walking home from a dinner party in 1980, he happened upon the scene of John Lennon's murder, and watched as the police lifted the former Beatle into the back of a cruiser because they didn't want to wait for an ambulance. Later, he met and became friendly with Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono, who contributed to AIDS charities. Warning for straight people: There's the occasional graphic description of gay sexual practices and how they may (or may not; there's debate) have contributed to the AIDS epidemic. As I said in the title, this may be the most honest, forthright memoir you will ever read.

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