

THE MYTH OF HETEROSEXUAL AIDS

Michael Fumento/Basic Books—A New Republic Book/411 pp. \$22.95

Steven C. Munson

A few years ago AIDS produced an outburst of national hysteria quite unlike anything in recent memory. Today it has been relegated to the status of a national piety. It remains, of course, of acute interest to its victims, their families, and friends, as well as to medical researchers, public health officials, lobbies of one sort or another, and the politicians they seek to influence. But for most of us, AIDS is simply the latest institutionalized fad: something we think we should be interested in or concerned about but to

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which we are actually thoroughly indifferent.

The reason for this seems plain enough: AIDS is not, and has never been, a threat to the health of the vast majority of Americans. As Michael Fumento writes in his exhaustive account of America's reaction to the disease, "other than fairly spectacular rare occurrences, such as shark attacks and maulings by wild animals, it is difficult to name any broad category of death that will take fewer lives than heterosexually transmitted AIDS." Murder, fire, fatal falls, accidental poisonings, gun accidents, suffocation, drowning—each will claim far more heterosexual lives this year than AIDS. In fact, the average American heterosexual has a greater chance of being struck by lightning than of getting AIDS—and only about 360 direct lightning strikes are recorded in the U.S. each year.

Notwithstanding this reality, AIDS continues to be discussed in terms that suggest that anyone can get it. While it is no longer portrayed as another Black Death, the idea that it is some kind of baffling menace capable of striking at random remains intact.

In his effort to trace the development of this idea, Fumento seems to have read just about everything ever written about AIDS. He has combed through books, technical medical journals, popular magazines, newspapers, and television programs. He has also done extensive interviewing and reporting on his own. His book is undoubtedly the most complete and reliable guide to AIDS currently available. What makes it authoritative is that Fumento, unlike most journalists and commentators, has taken the trouble to locate the handful of medical experts who actually know what they're talking about when it comes to AIDS. They include Dr. Alexander Langmuir, a founder of modern epidemiology (the study of epidemics); Dr. Harold Jaffe, until recently the chief epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control; Dr. Rand Stoneburner, director of AIDS Research at the New York City Department of Health; and Anastasia Lekatsas, the city's former

chief investigator of AIDS cases.

Lekatsas's work, in particular, was critical since it was on the basis of her investigations that a determination would be made as to how a particular person acquired AIDS. Her job, in essence, was to resolve cases that at first seemed mysterious:

There was a young guy from the Navy, and his doctor reported that he was a heterosexual. So we sent a worker over, and the guy said no to the questions about homosexuality or bisexuality, and the worker kept going through the forms. There was a question, "What percentage of the time during sex did you or your partner insert a fist in the rectum?" He answered, "Fifty percent." I think he didn't realize that heterosexuals don't do that. So we kept investigating, and eventually we found out that he was homosexual.

Like this sailor, more than a few of the men who got AIDS were ashamed to tell the truth about themselves (this appears to have been the case with infected Haitians, one of the three risk groups identified early on). Often they resorted to the lie that they must have contracted the disease from a prostitute. Since few of those responsible for interviewing AIDS patients were as skeptical and persistent—and as careful about drawing conclusions—as Anna Lekatsas, the claim that AIDS was being spread heterosexually by prostitutes gained ready acceptance.

As Fumento shows, this claim played a decisive role in transforming AIDS in the public mind from a disease primarily afflicting homosexuals and intravenous drug abusers (who were overwhelmingly black or Hispanic, urban, and poor) into a disease that posed an equally serious threat to white, suburban, middle-class heterosexuals. For a variety of reasons, including ignorance, political expediency, and deference to the notion that homosexuality is a natural alternative to heterosexuality, AIDS was systematically misrepresented by those to whom the public looked for guidance. Both the government, in the preeminent form of the Surgeon General, and the media chose to ignore the specialists who were developing a true picture of the disease and to follow the path of sensationalism, declaring, on the basis of nothing more substantial than reshuffled statistics, that the AIDS virus could be transmitted just as easily through heterosexual (vaginal) sex as through homosexual (anal) sex. Making such pronouncements on the basis of invalid research, or in some cases no research at all, doctors, public health officials, and journalists differed little in their behavior from the tabloids, talk shows, and sex experts; indeed, the irresponsibility of one only seemed to reinforce that of another. By the time the campaign of hype and fear had peaked,

some people were prepared to believe that AIDS was as transmissible as the common cold.

In truth, of course, AIDS is extremely difficult to transmit. Unlike colds, measles, influenza, and pneumonic plague, it cannot be spread by coughing or sneezing; unlike malaria and bubonic plague, it cannot be spread by insect bites; and unlike syphilis, gonorrhea, and other sexually transmitted diseases, it cannot be spread by mere genital contact. The AIDS virus is blood-borne. That is, it can be spread through blood-to-blood contact or through contact of some other bodily fluid—e.g., semen—with the blood of a recipient.

You can get it, for example, if you are a homosexual who engages in receptive anal intercourse, a practice that can cause ruptures that give semen from an infected partner direct access to your blood vessels; or if you are a drug addict who shares a needle that contains traces of blood drawn from an infected user; or if you are someone who receives blood from a contaminated supply, which is how hemophiliacs were infected before sophisticated blood screening was introduced. You can also get it if you are a woman suffering from genital ulcers who has sex with an infected man. The prevalence of other sexually transmitted diseases is, in fact, one of the factors—along with widespread (though publicly denied) bisexuality, unusual sexual customs, and backward medical care (including the practice of re-using syringes and a lack of blood screening)—that has contributed to the spread of AIDS among heterosexuals in Africa, where the disease has taken an altogether different course from that in the U.S.

Here, the long-predicted "breakout" of AIDS into the general population never materialized for the simple reason that, by itself, normal heterosexual sex—even between men and women who are considered promiscuous—is a highly inefficient means of transmitting the AIDS virus. The widely trumpeted notion that heterosexual promiscuity would be the vehicle of a full-scale national epidemic was, as Fumento conclusively demonstrates, a perfect inversion of reality. In fact, it was the unparalleled promiscuity of homosexuals—of men who engaged in repeated acts of anal intercourse with literally thousands of other men—that led to the outbreak of AIDS and assured its spread, first throughout the homosexual community and later on to others.

For reminding us of this unpleasant truth, Michael Fumento deserves a large measure of our gratitude. □

A TENURED PROFESSOR

John Kenneth Galbraith/Houghton Mifflin/197 pp. \$19.95

James Bowman

Once upon a time there was a poor governess whose life had been largely spent amid romantic daydreams of her own invention. Having recently recovered from an unhappy and unreciprocated passion for a married employer and on the verge of descending into old maidenhood, she wrote a novel about a poor governess who captivates her wealthy and romantically mysterious employer. When it transpires, in the novel, that the man is married—to a madwoman who is kept locked up in the attic—he begs the heroine to stay with him. She refuses. Another man, a minister of the church, falls in love with her, but, though tempted, she rejects him because of her hopeless passion for the first man. Then there is a fire, the madwoman in the attic is burned to death, and the widower, having been blinded in his attempt to save her, contacts his lost love, the governess, by telepathy to let her know that he needs her more than ever. She returns to him and they live happily ever after as a rich married couple. Oh yes, the man's sight is partially restored in the end.

Jane Eyre was an enormous success. All over the English-speaking world, young ladies thrilled vicariously to Charlotte Brontë's exercise in wish-fulfillment. Green girls whose boringly domestic futures promised little of romance found there a romance for themselves that was almost believable; plain girls who knew that they would be lucky to marry at all found there a wild hope that, like plain Jane Eyre, they might by virtue of wit and spirit alone enthrall someone like the dashing Mr. Rochester—someone rich and visually handicapped; moral girls who were getting tired of saying no found there a welcome confirmation that saying no eventually pays off—guys like Mr. Rochester respect you more for it in the end.

Now, nearly a century and a half later, an old economics professor, whose voice has been little heeded among economists or businessmen, has written a novel about a young economics professor who is so brilliant that economists and businessmen alike are

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forced to sit up and take notice; a clever pundit whose contributions to political discourse have been treated with little deference in Washington has written a novel about a man whose wealth and power, amassed by sheer cleverness, shake Washington to its foundations; a left-liberal, whose tired prescriptions for the common weal are increasingly disregarded even by those who call themselves "liberal," has written a novel about a left-liberal who is able to advance progressive causes from his house in Cambridge without the tiresome necessity of getting elected to anything. Charlotte Brontë has nothing on John Kenneth Galbraith for wish-fulfillment.

Unfortunately for Galbraith, however, she does have two, more serious advantages over him: the breadth of her appeal and the passion and energy of her writing. Everyone can believe in the image of happiness afforded by the tale of a poor, unattractive girl's marriage, after many tribulations, to a wealthy man who adores her; few can be so excited by the tale of a Harvard egghead who finds true happiness by using his easily acquired wealth to relieve Harvard of its South African securities and endow chairs of "peace studies" at the service academies. At any rate, the theme is something less than universal in its appeal, which is a fact likely to be reflected in the book's permanent reputation, if not in its immediate sales figures.

It is true that Professor Galbraith, who has a reputation for wit and urbanity to keep up, writes well in a desiccated sort of way. But he works so hard at being witty that the result might be described as urbane blight—a murrain upon the human and dramatic landscape of the novel. Here he is at the top of his form:

By long custom, social discourse in Cambridge is intended to impart and only rarely to obtain information. People talk; it is not expected that anyone will listen. A respectful show of attention is all that is required until the listener takes over in his or her turn. No one has ever been known to repeat what he or she has heard at a party or other social gathering, only what he or she has said.

Clever (if trendy). But the information is gratuitous, an academic distillation of some offstage experience whose comic potential he couldn't be bothered to exploit dramatically. What a price the poor professor has paid for this insight into the social mores of Cambridge, Massachusetts! His years of familiarity with that milieu seem to have robbed him of his own ability to listen—and so to create interesting and believable characters. The only real character in this book is its omniscient narrator, who sounds suspiciously like good old Uncle Ken himself, everybody's favorite socialist.

Even the ostensible hero, Montgomery Marvin, does not so much as rise to the level of his creator's alter ego, as *Jane Eyre* does, with some benefit to her eponymous romance. For one thing, Marvin has nothing of Galbraith's wit and patrician charm. For another, Galbraith has nothing of Marvin's economic genius. That genius results, in *A Tenured Professor*, in something called the IRAT, or Index of Irrational Expectations—a fool-proof scheme for anticipating movements in the stock market, or in individual stocks, which we know is based upon the natural assumption of the Harvard petty gentry that the crowd is always wrong but about which further details and technicalities are tantalizingly unforthcoming. It would be something if the book was at least useful, like Napoleon Hill's *Do You Sincerely Want to Be Rich?* But Galbraith's implicit advice boils down to this: buy low, sell high—or rather, buy high, sell short. Don't quit your day job.

Moreover, you'd think that the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo would have some better use for the money than reforming the military-industrial complex or countering the pernicious influence of Political Action Committees. But Montgomery Marvin is more boring than St. John Rivers, the earnest missionary who fails to persuade Jane Eyre to go off to India with him. He does have a mad wife, it's true; but instead of locking her in the attic he encourages her to blackmail large corporations to put more women in executive positions—not the most original sort of lunacy these days. Even liberals, it seems to me, would rather read a novel based on the exploits of Donald Trump.

Of course, they may be out for another sort of delectation. For all I know, what passes for political satire in *A Tenured Professor* may have them slapping their thighs and wiping the tears of laughter from their eyes. Perhaps it does. Here is an example of it. See what you think:

A Soviet ambition to take over and run anything so intricate as the West German or Japanese economy was coming to seem somewhat improbable. So also its passion, which was shared by many Americans, for mutually assured destruction. None of this, however, could be an excuse for relaxation in weapons development [sic]. That had a need and a life of its own. That need and that life were threatened by SPELCO's ill-advised, irresponsible preparation for peacetime production.

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