

This superb collection of poetry, fiction and drama, culled from its pages published over many years, *Art & Understanding: Literature from the First Twenty Years of A&U* is a worthy, artistic, and important literary achievement, reminding us that the fight against AIDS is winnable but not over.

—Stanley Bennett Clay, author of *In Search of Pretty Young Black Men* and *Armstrong's Kid*

I admire and respect the work *A&U* has done for the AIDS pandemic through its literary crusade, providing insight and perspective through personal stories to illustrate the reality of the disease.

—Nick Adams, actor and AIDS advocate

A&U provides education, entertainment, and enlightenment for all ages; it's hard to combine all three under one banner, and it's especially hard to do it continually for 20 years. Here's to a job well done and to their continued success at doing so.

—Keir Gilchrist, actor



Literature from the First Twenty Years of A&U

Edited by Chael Needle and Diane Goettel

With a Foreword by David Waggoner



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Press



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Some of the pieces in this anthology may be slightly different than they were when they were originally published in the magazine.

“Nutmeg” © 1997 Lesléa Newman from *Still Life with Buddy*, Radnor, Ohio: Pride Publications. Reprinted by permission of the author.

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FOREWORD

Looking back and remembering when the first issue of *Art & Understanding* came off the presses, I didn't think that twenty-three years later, there would still be a magazine publishing fiction, plays, essays, poetry, and creative nonfiction about the AIDS crisis. In fact, I didn't think there would still be AIDS, or at the very least, AIDS discrimination.

What you have before you are the first twenty years of *Art & Understanding*, now commonly known as *A&U*; it's been a microcosm of the publishing history of the AIDS pandemic for two decades and counting. Young voices and older voices, unpublished fiction writers and bestselling poets alike, have been published in *A&U*. Some have likened *A&U* to a literary Quilt, featuring writers of all acumens. Some still in high school, some Pulitzer prize winners, all of *A&U*'s writers share the common thread that AIDS has affected their lives—and that they have chosen to write about it.

Although *A&U* features writers whose first language is English, there have been many instances where their work is known outside the United States. But in total, this book is truly American. It has, in a sense, a unique place in contemporary literature, for it doesn't pretend to be the best of AIDS writing; rather, it claims—and I think rightly so—a different kind of “best of” status. It is a book about the American imagination and how the realities of AIDS were written by those we have lost, and by those we are still fortunate to have writing about them. This book is a sampler of the variety of voices united against AIDS. The artistic vision of the hundreds, if not thousands, of Americans who have put aside their day-to-day literary activities and, with fortitude, have clearly spoken of the pain, the sorrow, and the insult that a virus has made of the bodies of millions.

This virus that causes AIDS is a muse of sorts. This wicked biological entity shared by so many in either their blood or in their familial relations, this destroyer of families and communities has united all of us to speak the truth, and not simply mourn through elegies for those who have fallen. Americans, through their literature, have always confronted the darkness, the untamed wilderness, the unknown but not unbearable. American writers are still writing against the failing light; against the sun that rises in the east on one shore, and sets in the west on the other.

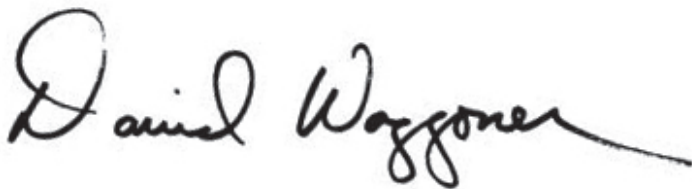
Likewise, AIDS has extinguished many literary lives—the numbers are staggering and too long to list in this foreword—but take my word for it, the losses are remembered here by both *A&U*'s collected authors and the readers they address. For any publishing enterprise requires an audience, and without one, it is surely a vain enterprise. What makes *Art & Understanding: Literature from the First Twenty Years of A&U* so expressive of this community of pain but also relief is that we continue to this very day to recognize that the literary community cannot be obliterated by a single virus. The virus has too many foes. And it has too many words pitched against it. Like some sort of mythological monster, AIDS is the Medusa and the writers in this anthology are its fearless Perseus. Not afraid to look at the virus in all its ugliness—through reflection rather than blinded by fear—*A&U*'s writers are not just about vanquishing a disease that continues to ravage entire continents. Rather, *A&U*'s mission has always been to preserve for future generations what it was like to live through the age of AIDS: *A&U* is a literary time capsule. Not an ancient relic that you have to dig out of the ground fifty years hence, but something that reads as fresh as it did when the first voices—some of them published here for the first time—were brought forth.

Sure, there has been a diminishing of the AIDS press, as it once was called, but there are still hundreds of important Ameri-

can writers who still create important AIDS-themed literature. We've all noticed a gradual lessening of the HIV/AIDS crisis in America. More men, women, and children are thriving due to the direct effect of antiretrovirals. Although universal access is still a dream and not a reality, there has been a sharp decline in AIDS deaths here and abroad. A magazine built out of a crisis, or rather as a response to a crisis, *Art & Understanding* (A&U) has brought together disparate voices, both young and old, poor and wealthy; but all sharing a common goal: to destigmatize the disease, make it less foreign and more familiar to the hundreds of thousands of the magazine's readers, both afflicted by the disease or impacted by its destruction. Today, twenty years after the first issue hit the stands, many of the same readers are still with us—due in part to the success of their medications and due in part, I hope, to the talents of the poets, essayists, fiction writers, and dramatists that continue to write for A&U.

Herein is collected in this, an anthology of twenty years of *Art & Understanding*, the remembrance of the early years of an epidemic as well as the ongoing aspirations of newer voices who will, I hope, inspire a new generation of literary AIDS activists (and readers) to continue to write against AIDS. If anything, this anthology is proof that Writing=Life, and that those writers we have lost are best remembered by those who are following in their footsteps, one word at a time.

—David Waggoner

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Waggoner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal tail at the end of the name.

INTRODUCTION

Around 1991

“No one writes about the dead anymore./The fear of infection and loss isn’t so dramatic now,” writes Raymond Luczak in his backward-glancing poem, “Two Decades and then Some,” included in this anthology.

Twenty-three years ago, when *A&U* was launched, AIDS was a decade old in the public consciousness, and yet attention to the disease was waning even then. News reports dwindled and fell into their still-current cadence of “event” coverage—new discoveries, new statistics, new pledges of funding, new strategies, new appeals. This archiving is only one kind of history, however—linear, chronological, big-picture. It helps us make sense of broad shifts, but it also tries to shoehorn AIDS into a narrative of progress.

Yet AIDS does not fit into a narrative of progress, unless one looks at the pandemic from a great distance, like a series of snapshots from Google Earth. Health rebounds; health falters. Vaccine trials fail. Prevalence rates go down, and then up. A once-suppressed virus develops resistance. Stigma abates and then is just as quickly reactivated. The pandemic continuously uncovers anew the systemic forces that persist—poverty, racism, gender oppression, homophobia, ableism—and exacerbate our life chances in the age of AIDS. So, writing a history demands closer attention to the synapses of everyday life, their sparks and pulses, their sputterings and breakdowns, minding the gap from here—to there.

How does one mark time when our clocks run differently?

A timeline runs through the anthology, noting who and what over the first twenty years have shaped the collective impact

of HIV/AIDS on our lives: scientific discoveries, protests, advances in treatment, the deaths of public figures from AIDS-related complications, advocates who have stepped forward, organizations that have been formed, major works of art. Interwoven with this is another kind of timeline. The poetry, plays, fiction and nonfiction that make up the anthology—call it the history of how and why we care. It accounts for unscheduled emotions and unscripted thoughts. It's the record of our realities that nobody asked for—hearts burdened with others' disaffection; minds busied with processing stigma and discrimination and alienation; bodies avoided or banned or untreated; but, also, speaking out against untruths and injustices; making positive changes that benefit the lives of others; fashioning a path to wellness.

Against fear

Our society still wants to see AIDS through the lens of isolated individuals buffered by fear. Fear encourages us to close ourselves off to others. Fear encourages us to worry about our own survival, and not the survival of others. But survival is never an independent feat. We need others. We forge relationships, ones not sanctioned by the flows of capital or the pressures of patriarchy. Literature, like AIDS, lays bare the open secret of our interconnectedness. Here is the network by which all of our bloodlines are connected. Here are the genealogies of our affection.

Although the anthology is organized chronologically, taking five-year strides at a time to cover the first twenty years of *A&U*, it also showcases themes and issues that recur.

Against fear, we offer humor. In “Pouf Positive”, a one-act-play by Robert Patrick, we meet Robin, a man whose body fails where his dignity and wit do not.

Against fear, we offer activism. Paula Martinac's heroine, Meg, honors a dear friend by participating in civil disobedience. She demands, "Money for AIDS!" in Senate chambers, a photograph of her friend pinned to her chest.

Against fear, we offer empowerment. See "Property Values" by Aldo Alvarez, which features a couple able to stand up to prejudice with the support of their family.

Against fear, we offer compassion. In "The Clay Ring" by Angela Lam Turpin, ex-lovers eke out enough time for tenderness.

Each piece of writing in this collection is an offering, a memory, an elegy, and a guide for the living.

Names project

The intent of the magazine was to archive cultural responses to AIDS—to become a meeting place of sorts for likeminded writers, artists, and readers. The loss of lives in the arts community was devastating. By 1991, in the literary arts alone, we had already lost Sam D'Allesandro, Allen Barnett, Joseph Beam, Bruce Chatwin, Nicholas Dante, Tim Dlugos, Robert Ferro, John Fox, Hervé Guibert, Michael Grumley, Michael Lynch, Peter McGehee, Cookie Mueller, and Manuel Ramos Otero, among many others. We would soon lose Steve Abbott, Isaac Asimov, Harold Brodkey, William Dickey, Melvin Dixon, David B. Feinberg, Essex Hemphill, James Merrill, Paul Monette, John Preston, Assotto Saint, George Whitmore, David Wojnarowicz, and Donald Woods. The loss did not stop there. Yet writers kept finding places to meet and share words with others. These poems, stories, plays, and essays are some of those meeting places.

In an essay adapted from a keynote speech at OutWrite '92, an LGBT writers conference, Melvin Dixon writes about how

we can preserve the future of gay and lesbian publishing in the face of generational loss, “[l]esbians lost to various cancers, gay men lost to AIDS,”¹ in the face of his own death. He asks: “What kind of witness will you bear? What truth-telling are you brave enough to utter and endure the consequences of your unpopular message?”² And though he was speaking about gay and lesbian literature, he was also, in effect, speaking about AIDS literature:

“...As for me ... I may not be well enough or alive next year to attend the lesbian and gay writers conference, but I’ll be somewhere listening for my name.

I may not be around to celebrate with you the publication of gay literary history. But I’ll be somewhere listening for my name.

If I don’t make it to Tea Dance in Provincetown or the Pines, I’ll be somewhere listening for my name.

You, then, are charged by the possibility of your good health, by the broadness of your vision, to remember us.”³

The literature collected here carries the torch of Dixon’s provocative challenge...

—Chael Needle & Diane Goettel

1 Dixon, Melvin. “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name.” *Love’s Instruments*. Chicago: Tia Chua Press, 1995. Print 73–79.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.



Literature from the First Twenty Years of A&U

1991–1995

1991 The Red Ribbon becomes the international symbol of AIDS awareness thanks to the work of Visual AIDS two years earlier. • “Magic” Johnson announces he has HIV. • Queen’s Freddie Mercury and movie star Brad Davis die. • *Art & Understanding* (later called *A&U*) becomes America’s first nationally distributed HIV/AIDS lifestyle magazine.

1992 CDC expands the definition of AIDS to include women. • Tennis star Arthur Ashe discloses he has AIDS. • Actor Anthony Perkins, actor Robert Reed, artist David Wojnarowicz, writer and scholar Melvin Dixon, and sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov die. • Disclosing she is HIV-positive in a speech, Mary Fisher advocates for AIDS at the 1992 Republican National Convention.

1993 AZT is found to prevent the transmission of the virus from mother to child. • U.S. Congress and President Bill Clinton approve an immigration ban for HIV-positive people from entering the United States. • Tony Kushner’s AIDS opus *Angels in America* opens on Broadway. • Derek Jarman releases the film *Blue*. • Holly Johnson, lead singer of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, divulges he is HIV-positive. • Singer Héctor Lavoe dies.

1994 Tom Hanks wins the Oscar for best actor for his role as a PWA in the hit film *Philadelphia*. • Pedro Zamora, a gay HIV-positive Cuban American, joins the nascent reality show *The Real World* on MTV. • Bill T. Jones debuts *Still/Here* to rave reviews. • Filmmaker and writer Marlon Riggs and poet Assotto Saint die. • David B. Feinberg publishes *Queer and Loathing: Rants and Raves of a Ragging AIDS Clone* shortly before his death. • E. Lynn Harris’s *Invisible Life* becomes a best-seller.

1995 FDA approves HAART—highly active antiretroviral therapy—a cocktail of drugs that slows the progression to AIDS in HIV-positive patients. • Olympic medalist and swimming star Greg Louganis announces he has HIV. • June 27 is declared the first annual National HIV Testing Day. • Record producer David Geffen donates \$4 million to GMHC and New York’s God’s Love We Deliver, making it the largest single cash donation to the AIDS cause to date. • Rap star Eric “Eazy-E” Wright dies. • Mark Doty publishes *Atlantis*.

David Bergman

The Care and Treatment of Pain

In memory of Allen Barnett

I came to learn what the well can learn
from the dying and the gravely sick:
the fine art of living with the quick
unknitting of flesh. Tired and gaunt,
he faced me across the small banquette
and spoke as rare and welcomed rains
steamed up, like smoke from a cigarette,
the dark windows of a restaurant.

“See these bubbles rising from my head,
purple cancers ‘winking at the brim’
which nothing’s stopped, not even a grim
experiment with interferon
shot straight into my tumorous scalp.
So far the only result has been
I can find how far the lesions spread
by counting the needles going in.

Yet by the eighth I seem to lose track,
and at the tenth, I begin to curse
and not to myself. Meanwhile the nurse
continuing to work without pause,
reserves her comments until she’s through:
‘This wasn’t so bad. It hardly hurt.
You need a positive attitude.’
Then leaves me listening to her skirt

rustle down the antiseptic hall.
I’m free to go. I gather my things,
coat and hat and a lampshade I brought
for a friend even sicker than I
who can’t get out and lives nearby.
But on the street when I feel the sting
of the wind pushing me to the wall,
I allow myself the chance to cry,

this once to luxuriate in pain,
to bathe myself in the swirling tide
of the purest grief and then to ride
our agony so that I can reach
what has always stood on the other side:
a hopelessness that is not despair,
but a truth meant to bring me no where
except to myself and to this time.

And there I am in the busy street
surrounded by those who do not care
whether I'm to live, or how, or where
as long as I ask nothing of them.
They turn as I stagger on my feet,
a joke that can't even force a groan,
a drunken reveller who stands alone,
his humorless lampshade in his hand.

If now it seems I have only pain
to remind me that my life is real,
I mention it not as an appeal
for sympathy or understanding,
rather from a wish to make it plain
that it's earned a certain tender love
that I used to give to other things
which now I have no desire of."

He smiles at me—the lesson done,
and grabbed the tab and rose from his seat,
"Next time," he said, "it'll be your treat,
that is if there'll be another one."
He took from the rack his coat and hat,
a half-read book and a hand-carved cane,
and throwing a kiss to where I sat,
he walked through the cool Manhattan rain.

Easter Sunday, 1991

Mark O'Donnell

Pandora Then Heard a Small Voice
a friend has been diagnosed with AIDS

“Don’t despair yet. I am Hope, Pandora!
Not a part of the mere world
—now overcast with pox,
roiling, many-fingered evils
and flying carnivorous fauna and flora—
but here, safely curled
in your tiny, infinite box,
exempt from the blackened air’s upheavals.

I am Hope, the unspendable coin—
because to remain yours
I must remain virgin mystery.
The escaped and inescapable ills
I’m too frail to join
on their flight to colonize all shores.
I will recline, glinting, hinting while history
spins caterwauling over the hills.”

Michael Lassell

Brady Street, San Francisco

for Roberto Muñoz

The apartment
is still standing, still about to fall.
It's circled now in Technicolors of
competing graffiti
more artful than we were to
stay in love.
Our names in cement are long gone.
It's my first time back since the news.

From the street
nothing seems to have changed.
My mind too has trapped the action in mid-flight:
how I hid in the closet (naked) the
first morning your family descended unannounced
and told your father we'd had
balls for breakfast when my Spanish slipped on
eggs. You shot your
one-note nasal laugh and spun on your heel,
but I'd cracked the shell of tension.
Your mother sat on the couch—
a miniature goddess of plenty, her feet
not touching the floor—and adopted me
in her knowing smile.

Here's a junk drawer more of memories:
an orange cat that lived through an airshaft fall;
the Twin Peaks fog from our bedroom window bay;
snacking on Stevie Wonder and your skin;
the double mattress we had to carry home
on our backs because
it cost every cent we'd saved.

After the first fight over nothing you
slammed into the street. I screamed
from the third floor into the dark I'd
die if
you didn't love me; you cried and
crept back up the stairs creak by
indolent creak.

We stayed together.

That time.

And when the loving was over—
three years, two apartments,
and a continent later—
no one died. Not
altogether. At least not
right away.

We left behind the odor of queers in the carpet,
the grease from our last
cooked meal,
a hole I punched in the plaster with my anger
and covered with the Desiderata so
the landlord wouldn't howl.

You see, it only takes a score of years
to make the bitter memories sweet,
like lemons in a sugar glaze.
I'd eat an orchard of them for you now
if you could be alive again to see me try.