

The Other Pandemic

An AIDS Memoir

DISCUSSION GUIDE

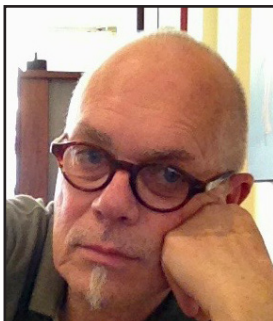


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ABOUT THE BOOK

Before COVID-19 made *pandemic* a household word in 2020, there was the AIDS pandemic of the 1970s through 1990s. Author Lynn Curlee explores the parallels and differences as he recounts life in New York and Los Angeles when HIV/AIDS silently took hold of the gay community. As it became a full-blown public health crisis, Curlee watched in horror as HIV/AIDS, divisive politics, and discrimination cost many people their lives.

With honesty and heart, Curlee tells the stories of the many friends and loved ones who he lost to the disease, including his own life partner. LGBTQ+ rights and access to health care are still under threat today. *The Other Pandemic* is a stark reminder of how history speaks to the present, and this window to the past is a valuable tool for understanding our current cultural landscape.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Curlee has a master's degree in art history and has both written and illustrated more than a dozen books for children, including *Trains*; *Skyscraper*; *Ballpark: The Story of America's Baseball Fields*; *Capital*; and *The Great Nijinsky*, a YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults finalist. His work has been exhibited in Los Angeles, New York City, and Long Island.

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ABOUT MEMOIR & STORYTELLING

- Why is this book called *The Other Pandemic*?
- Why do you think Lynn Curlee begins this memoir with a prologue about the COVID-19 pandemic? Why does this prologue begin with a very personal narrative about the death of Justin Hunter’s parents? How does Lynn Curlee compare and contrast the HIV/AIDS pandemic of the 1970s through 1990s with COVID-19?
- Fifty years later, the author is still in touch with many of the friends he made as a young man in New York. Can you imagine still being close with your current friend group? Can you guess which friendships will stand the test of time?
- If you were writing your own memoir, how would you describe your social life? Who would be the most important characters? What friendships and/or romantic relationships would you write about? Lynn Curlee often provides background context, like a description of the 1970s disco scene. What parts of your life do you think you would have to describe or explain for an audience fifty years in the future?
- Lynn Curlee adds a joke about his friend group overusing the trendy word *fabulous*. What are some trendy words that you find yourself using a lot?
- How does Lynn Curlee describe his experience of coming out to his parents? What were the stakes of coming out to family and friends in the 1970s and 1980s?
- What changes did the author notice in New York life when he moved back in 1982?
- What do you think of Lynn Curlee’s choice to intersperse his personal narrative with a time line of broader events related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic? How does this structure emphasize the pacing of certain events along the time line (for example, the distance between the first reported AIDS deaths in chapter four and the establishment of a presidential commission on HIV—six years, five chapters, and thousands of deaths later)?
- How did the news of John’s diagnosis affect John and Lynn? What were some of the items on their bucket list?
- Between John’s diagnosis and his final illness, a large number of Lynn’s friends died of AIDS. How does he describe the emotional impact of these repeated losses?
- How does Lynn Curlee describe the progression of John’s illness and the experience of his death? What stands out to you in these chapters? Why do you think the narrative portion of this memoir ends not with John’s funeral, but with the funeral of Joe Palmeri?

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- *The Other Pandemic* includes many references to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Masque of the Red Death,” as well as a few paintings inspired by the story. What is the connection between this story and the AIDS pandemic? Do you think these connections also hold up when comparing “The Masque of the Red Death” to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Why do you think Lynn Curlee discusses the probable origins of AIDS at the back of the book, rather than placing this information directly in the narrative?
- Discuss the author’s note at the end of *The Other Pandemic*. How did Lynn Curlee wrestle with the decision to write this memoir? Do you think you would feel a similar conflict about writing your own memoir?
- In the author’s note, Lynn Curlee acknowledges his good fortune during the HIV/AIDS pandemic—that he and his partner were older and financially secure with health insurance and supportive families. In the epilogue, he also discusses how lucky he was to come through young adulthood as a gay city-dweller without contracting HIV. Why do you think he reflects on good luck as a survivor of an enormous community tragedy? How do these acknowledgments resonate with the quote from Charles Kaiser’s *New York Times* article, “We must explain how we survived: mostly by dumb luck. And then do justice to the other half of our generation who did not . . .” (pg. 142).
- Listen together to the musical references listed in the back of the book. Why did Lynn Curlee select these songs as part of his memoir? If you had to choose only five songs to reference in your own memoir, which songs would you choose? Why?

ABOUT HISTORY

- “Imagine that it is 1960, and you are twelve years old.” (pg. 7) Discuss this prompt. What was childhood like in the United States in the 1960s? What was happening in the world? How did people get information? What are the differences and similarities between a 1960s childhood and a 2010s childhood?
- What are some of the national and world events that Lynn Curlee remembers happening when he was a teenager and young adult? What was the “agonizing decision” (pg. 14) he would have faced if he had been drafted into the military?
- What was life like in New York in the early 1970s? What drew Lynn Curlee to the city? As a young adult, would you want to move to a very different setting from the one where you grew up? What draws you to the idea of that destination (or to the idea of staying in a familiar setting)?
- What were the similarities and differences between the city disco scene and the Fire Island Pines scene? How did the Pines become “ground zero in the crisis to come”(pg. 35)?

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- Why did Lynn Curlee decide to move to Los Angeles at thirty-one years old? Have you ever moved a long distance? What was that experience like? How would that experience be different in 1979, before the internet? How did the author's life change in Los Angeles?
- Who was the first person Lynn Curlee knew who died from AIDS? How did the general public learn about the early signs of the pandemic?
- Lynn Curlee describes the gift of a CD player in 1982 as a great upgrade from vinyl—"Now we could listen to Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms without the annoying pops and scratches that were inevitable with vinyl LPs" (pg. 49). Nowadays, vinyl has come back into fashion. Why do you think old technologies sometimes enjoy a renewed interest? If you're personally interested in vinyl, why does it appeal to you?
- Discuss the long sidebar about the social and scientific understanding of AIDS in the early 1980s on pages 50 and 51. What were some early theories about the spread of HIV, and how are they different from what we know about HIV today? How did the introduction of AIDS to the blood supply change political and medical attitudes towards AIDS? Do you see any parallels between the early days of the AIDS pandemic and the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are some examples of HIV/AIDS-related discrimination from the early days of the pandemic? How have activists, medical professionals, and celebrities worked to combat the stigma of HIV/AIDS?
- Why was there resistance to being tested for HIV/AIDS among gay men when the first commercial blood test was approved in 1985?
- Have you heard of some of the AIDS activist organizations and events mentioned in this book, like the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), The Big Splash, the NAMES Project (aka the AIDS quilt), and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)? What were some of the goals of these organizations and projects? How did/do they accomplish these goals?
- At the end of chapter nine, Lynn Curlee discusses the fundamental uncertainty of the AIDS pandemic—"It seemed like life or death was determined merely by an arbitrary throw of the dice" (pg. 85). What contributed to this deep uncertainty?
- How have HAART therapy, PrEP, and other advances changed the experience of HIV/AIDS in the United States?