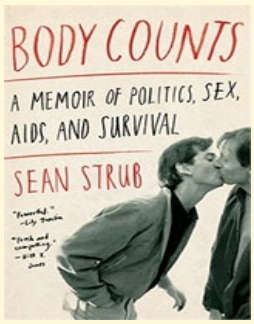
February 1, 2014

A Life Lived in Technicolor: Sean Strub's *Body Counts*

by Thomas Uskali



Sean Strub's *Body Counts*.

Sean Strub's intensely honest new book, *Body Counts: A Memoir of Politics, Sex, AIDS, and Survival*, captures an era and an ethos through one man's life–a life linked to a dizzying number of well-known people and events. Strub tells his story through vignettes recounted with breathless energy. As he puts it, he wanted his writing to be "off the cuff and intuitive."

Body Counts is a vivid memoir of one man's eventful life, yet it is also a valuable social history that chronicles the beginnings and the maturing of the gay rights movement and, most urgently, the terrifying first-wave of the AIDS crisis and the rise of ACT UP and a new form of activism.

Perhaps most profoundly, the book fulfills the responsibility Strub accepts as a person with AIDS who survived and who is thus obligated to witness on behalf not only of himself but of those who did not survive. Strub's life is entwined inextricably with some of the most significant events of the American movement for equal rights.

Sean O'Brien Strub, born in 1958 to a conservative Iowa family, was interested in politics from early on. He became an Iowa State Senate page in 1975, and thanks to Iowa Senator Dick Clark, ended up as an elevator operator for the U.S. Senate from 1976 to 1978, a plum job for a young political aspirant.

Strub had a good memory for faces, and he quickly mastered the rituals of the Senate. He shares stories about the polite and courtly Robert Byrd from West Virginia, prickly John Tower of Texas, and Edward "Ted" Kennedy, who spotted a copy of *Trinity* by Leon Uris that Strub was keeping near the elevator seat. Kennedy commented that his mother had recently given him a copy, and for the next weeks they chatted about their progress through the novel.

Strub attended undergraduate classes at Georgetown University, but his part-time work at the Capitol was far more interesting to him, and it was not long before he parlayed his connections into political consulting work.

Throughout this part of the narrative, we see Strub's youth, canny sense of timing, and surfeit of charm place him in the "action zone."

At the same time, however, he was also struggling with his identity as a gay man. He recalls: "I was neurotic and insecure, and my eagerness to be wanted left me vulnerable." In addition, his Roman Catholic education had given him little information about sex. Plus, he had been sexually abused by two different school authorities.

Washington, D.C. in the 1970s illustrated the "controlling power of the gay closet." Strub notes that at that time, "many, if not most, gay men woke up every morning with the belief that they would rather kill themselves than be identified publicly as homosexual."

Still, Strub watched as a few at the vanguard stepped forward: activist Frank Kameny, the decorated U.S. Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich who came out in *Time* magazine in 1975, and professional football player Dave Kopay. Further, he was reading the *Washington Blade*, D.C.'s weekly gay newspaper, which, to Strub's amazement, used "real names and photographs of openly gay and lesbian people."

The memoir captures the way gay men in the 1970s were forced to "extrapolate" in their social engagement with other men, figuring out even the most basic information through subtle clues. Strub's honesty about his own lack of sexual experience makes this book all the more compelling–he admits, for example, that he was not even sure *how* men could engage in sexual intercourse.

As with many young people of the era, Strub's first meaningful social contact with gay men was at a bar. In his case it was Lost and Found, located "in a nameless warehouse district . . . several blocks southwest of the Capitol." It was there he met fellow Senate staffers who "invoked an unspoken omerta-like agreement not to share the secret life with others."

Notably, Lost and Found was a favorite hangout for Michael Hess, another Midwestern Roman Catholic and successful politico who frequented the bar in the mid-80s. The story of his birth mother, who gave Hess up to a convent in Ireland, is the basis for Stephen Frears' acclaimed 2013 film *Philomena*, starring Judi Dench.

In 1978, soon after Harvey Milk's assassination in San Francisco, Strub was in New York, where he had his "first exposure to a group of *angry* gay people."

It was a transformative experience. He found New York to be more of a spiritual home than Washington had ever been for him. As he recalls, in D.C., "Anyone too out was labeled a 'militant homosexual' and sent to the sidelines, uninvited to insiders' parties–and unemployable in mainstream politics."

Soon thereafter Stub moved to New York. He enrolled at Columbia, though the university was less significant in his education than the city itself. He notes: "In New York as at Georgetown, I found my off-campus education far more interesting than classes. I was on my own, at loose in Sin City, enthusiastically exploring the sexuality I had long denied myself."

In a letter to his parents in Iowa, he wrote: "If my lifestyle prevents me from running for political office, or from living without scandal in Iowa City, so be it. I've accepted that. No one can ever blackmail me, and I'll know I'm helping toward the day when there won't be 15-16-17-year-old gay men and women committing suicide or feeling self-hatred. . . . "

Strub seems to have been born for his work as a political consultant, which he began by creating campaign literature and then pioneering direct mail strategies for gay rights organizations. It is remarkable to see how deftly he moved from straight-laced Washington, D.C. to New York. Strub's diligence, determination, and self-effacing nature all played a role.

In 1982, Strub worked with the founders of the Human Rights Campaign, then just getting off the ground. They were amassing endorsements for their initial fund-raising letter, and it was Strub who thought to ask Tennessee Williams for his support.

The story of their meeting and the delicate footwork required to land Williams' signature is charming. The last time they met in Key West, Williams grandly introduced Strub as "the person who got him to help start the gay rights movement!"

Strub arrived in New York at its sexual peak and at a moment of great peril. By 1981, gay men were showing up in clinics with unusual symptoms, part of the AIDS epidemic's first wave. In those early days of AIDS numerous theories proliferated about its cause. Some thought the disease was brought about by multiple, cumulative sexual behaviors, while others believed that a specific viral agent "was transmitted by having sex with an infected person," also called "the fatal fuck."

It was not until the mid 1980s that the HIV antibody test became widely available, but in New York, as in other major cities, "there was a lot more discussion in the gay community about reasons not to take the test than people actually taking it."

Strub shrugged off a series of what he thought were minor ailments even as he watched friends and colleagues die. The worry in his tone at this time is palpable. Those who read Strub's memoir through the lens of personal history will find themselves gasping in recognition.

Strub's own diagnosis as HIV positive did not come until 1985. By then he was working with the nascent PWA (People with AIDS) organization, who asserted that people with AIDS were neither "victims" nor "patients," and they should "be their own health experts."

In the next years, Strub's activism became supercharged, propelled by passion and a medical diagnosis that was then seen as a death sentence.

In 1986, Strub worked with opponents of Proposition 64, California's draconian measure to quarantine people with AIDS, which was polling strongly at the time. Strub's "No on 64" fundraising letter and help from heavy-hitters brought in the money and momentum to defeat Proposition 64. "Absent our campaign to defeat it," Strub writes, "it almost certainly would have passed."

In 1989, Strub asked Keith Haring to create a logo and poster to launch National Coming Out Day. In the same year, he participated in the ACT UP protest at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, a controversial and powerful display of a new breed of activism.

Strub also took part in the 1991 protest against homophobic Senator Jesse Helms that placed a giant inflatable condom over his house, emblazoned with the slogan, "A condom to stop unsafe politics. Helms is deadlier than a virus."

Despite ongoing medical issues, including bouts with pneumonia and other infections, Strub made an electoral bid in New York's 22nd Congressional District in 1990. He was likely the country's first openly HIV-positive political candidate. While he did not win, he received 46% of the votes in the Democratic primary.

In addition to the good showing, he also netted a memorable editorial from the Rockland County *Journal-News*, which wrote, "Sean O'Brien Strub has much to be proud of despite his loss. . . . He admitted his homosexuality up front; he spoke strongly about the serious issues of the economy and human need . . . [M]ore voters realize how silly it is to reject people because of their race or sex. Now let's add sexual preference to the list."

Through his involvement with ACT UP, Strub met David Drake, who had written the autobiographical one-man play *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*. This groundbreaking play about "the restorative power of activism," uses Kramer's *The Normal Heart* (1985) as the centerpiece for a series of vignettes. Strub, who ended up producing the off-Broadway production, notes: "For young gay men who knew little of what AIDS had done to the gay community in the previous decade, it was an especially valuable message." The show made its off-Broadway premiere in 1992, and was made into a film in 2000.

After long battles with other HIV-related symptoms, Strub contracted Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions in 1994. He feared the end was near, but rather than retreating from life, he marched into a new venture. With funds obtained from cashing in life insurance policies, Strub launched *POZ* magazine in April 1994.

POZ was groundbreaking. As a "lifestyle magazine" focused on people with AIDS, it brought the disease, its treatments, and the entire continuum of care into the mainstream. In its first issue Strub proclaimed the approach the magazine would take: "informed skepticism to conventional wisdoms and alertness to alternative options employed by trusted doctors and people with AIDS."

POZ often went head-to-head with drug companies and physicians, warning readers about the side effects of particular medications, and offering "in the trenches" advice. It also addressed the rise of "barebacking," or sexual intercourse without a condom, a subject considered taboo outside the gay community.

In 1996 Strub began taking protease inhibitors, and the effect was dramatic. Within weeks he was feeling better than he had in years.

He became part of the phenomenon that the *New York Times* labeled the "Lazarus syndrome," where new medications were bringing people with AIDS "back from the dead."

Strub's work since the 1990s has been "quieter," and he now lives in rural Pennsylvania, where he helped revitalize his small town of Milford into a weekend travel destination.

Compared with other social histories that chronicle the early days of the AIDS epidemic and life in New York, this book is primarily a personal history, rich with intimate details and gossip. Strub's focus on maintaining a fast-paced chronological narrative means that some of the threads get lost; readers will find themselves flipping back pages to remind themselves of when or where something is happening.

However, Strub's method creates a sense of immediacy that is quite remarkable. As Ari Shapiro of NPR writes in the "Advance Praise" section of the book: "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."

In the video below, Strub speaks of the social and political context in which the AIDS epidemic arose.

Sean Strub is an activist and writer who has been HIV positive for more than 33 years. He is the founder of *Poz,* the leading independent global source of information about HIV, and served as its publisher and executive editor from 1994 to 2004. He presently serves as the executive director of the Sero Project, a network of people with HIV fighting for freedom from stigma and injustice.

He was the producer of David Drake's play, *The Night Larry Kramer Kissed Me*, which has now been performed in more than 20 countries. In 2010, he co-founded the Positive Justice Project and produced the short documentary film, *HIV is Not a Crime*, about HIV criminalization in the U.S.

He and his partner, Xavier Morales, live in Milford, Pennsylvania and New York City.

Body Counts: A Memoir of Politics, AIDS, Sex, and Survival. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. Learn more about *Body Counts* by visiting this site.

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