

Look back with less anger



Courtesy Derek Frost

Derek Frost and Jeremy Norman, whose love and commitment to each other endured a great health crisis

Derek Frost and Jeremy Norman were in the hotbed of London's gay scene when AIDS struck. Frost's memoir of that high-octane time is painfully sad yet ultimately uplifting, writes **Damien Woolnough**

LIVING AND LOVING IN THE AGE OF AIDS: A MEMOIR

Derek Frost
Penguin, Nonfiction, 288pp, \$29.95

The dance floor of London's legendary gay nightclub Heaven was a hedonistic escape from England's everyday grey, but for Derek Frost — artist, activist and member of Britain's gay A-list — it was also a home away from home. The enduring gay mecca was founded by Frost's partner, Jeremy Norman, who commissioned his lover to create the cavernous venue's interiors.

Frost and Norman met in 1977 and, as the architects of gay London's grinding epicentre, mixed in a circle of models, aristocrats and dance floor denizens.

While making the most of an open relationship in an era when homosexual activity in England had been decriminalised for barely a decade, the couple forged an emotional commitment that would be put to the test by the coming scourge.

In the early years of running the London equivalent of New York's legendary Studio 54, the scene in *Living and Loving in the Age of AIDS* is set for a gossip memoir, with interior decorator David Hicks (husband of Lady Pamela Mounbatten) lustfully lunging at a young Frost as he makes his way in the design world.

There are appearances from GQ cover stars and Frost's former lover and Oscar-winning director John Schlesinger, but salacious scenarios are not the author's stock-in-trade. Gossip and glamour are pushed to the background in 1981 with the arrival of AIDS, appearing in *The New York Times* as a "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" while Frost and Norman are enjoying the drug-fuelled delights of Key West.

The tears do come with Frost's extensive list of talented friends taken by AIDS, making it difficult not to think of the losses of gay men in Australia's creative community

A senior member of the LGBTQI+ community, Frost catalogues the horrors of the advancing HIV virus, watching friends and colleagues dying in weeks and months, enduring the blighting skin cancer Kaposi sarcoma and blindness with cytomegalovirus, with the respect of a journalist on the frontlines of a war and the grace of a lucky survivor.

Sexual liberation and hedonism are replaced by increasingly visible homophobia. Cue Mother Teresa preaching that "AIDS is God's retribution for sexual misconduct" giving rather unsaintly voice to the prevailing unspoken opinion of the time that "they're getting what they deserve".

While anger burns deep between the lines of Frost's recollections, as he shames US president Ronald Reagan for his devastating inaction and condemns queer artists such as Andy Warhol, Francis Bacon and Robert Mapplethorpe for failing to address AIDS through their work, his calm approach has its own power.

Works filled with anger have ignited AIDS activists since Larry Kramer's 1983 essay and call-to-arms *LII2* and *Counting*, Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On* and Tony Kushner's classic play *Angels in America*. There also has been the Oscar-bait performances of Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia*, Jared Leto in *Dallas Buyers Club* and Rami Malek in *Bohemian Rhapsody* to appeal to those in need of emotional extremities.

Instead, Frost provides a relatively stoic and considered timeline of the advance of AIDS, informed by his experience.

In 1991 the couple are finally tested, with

Norman returning a positive result for HIV, and while Frost acknowledges the devastation that they feel, this love letter to their relationship chooses to focus on action rather than emotional turmoil.

Instead of sitting back, writing cheques and simply wearing red ribbons on red carpets, the couple went to work raising money for those in need, long before Norman's diagnosis. Inspired by Kramer's play *The Normal Heart*, the pair helped form *Crusaid* in 1986, a charity dedicated to assisting those in immediate need.

With Norman's diagnosis the journey becomes a personal history of AIDS as well as a fraught race against time for the couple, with the pair working on health programs in Africa and Asia. That race is against the medical trials for drug cocktails of antiretroviral medication that make a direct attack on the HIV virus and slow its multiplication.

While doing this the couple continue pursuing new business ventures and found the charity *AidsArk*. Frost trades cannabis for natural highs through yoga and they cement their relationship with a civil partnership and then marriage. They really nail the "Living" part of the book's title.

Even with Frost's matter-of-fact delivery there are triggering echoes for any gay man and ally who lived through the era of AIDS in Australia, with our *Grim Reaper* commercials, Fred Nile-fuelled homophobia and media circus around the discrimination faced by HIV-positive child Eve van Grafthorst.

It's the writer's lack of apology for being gay, for having enjoyed sex and for occasionally having an illicit good time that saves you from using your entire excess stock of Covid-19 toilet paper as tissues.

The tears do come with Frost's extensive list of talented friends taken by AIDS, making it difficult not to think of the losses of gay men in Australia's creative community, including actors John Hargreaves, Timothy Conigrave (author of *Holding the Man*) and performer Peter Allen.

As a reward the book offers Frost's own happy ending along with medical advances such as the arrival of PrEP, which helps prevent HIV infection.

It's a qualified joy with UN global statistics showing that 32.7 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses since the start of the epidemic. Recorded Covid-19 deaths currently sit at 3.1 million globally. These numbers can seem overwhelming but Frost shows what the simple acts of living and love can accomplish.

Damien Woolnough is a Sydney journalist and former editor of *vogue.com.au*.

All revenue due to the author from sales of the book will be donated to *AidsArk*.