

A Wrinkle in Time

By Karen Green

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Back in the very early 1980s, when I was working as a bartender at the Grand Hyatt New York, we had our own version of those light bulb jokes:

Q: "How many straight New York waiters does it take to change a light bulb?"

A: "Both of them."

And we would all shriek with laughter.

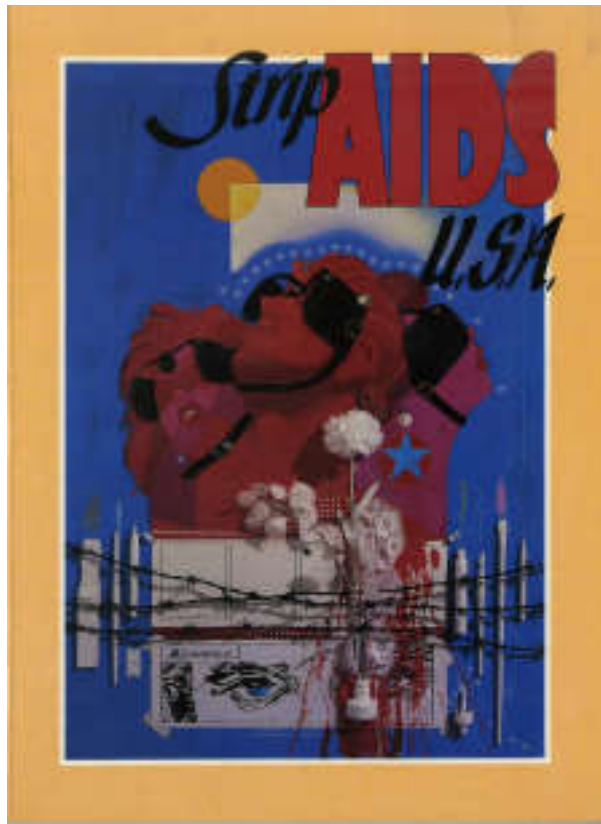
But then Ramiro, one of my fellow bartenders, got sick with some strange, wasting disease that his doctors couldn't figure out. And he died.

And then a bunch of the rest of the people I worked with died. The amount of ignorance of what it all meant was staggering. When my friend Kenny first went into the hospital with pneumocystis pneumonia, the nurses were afraid to come into his room, and left his meals on the floor inside his door. This went on through pretty much the entire 1980s.

And that's how I learned about AIDS.

I think about those times a lot, still, and a stark reminder of them came across my desk recently. Our library received a gift of several boxes of comics that had been given to one of our faculty, who in turn donated them to our Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Just about the same time, I was contacted by a fangirl library-school student who was looking for a project to do with me; we hired her as a summer intern to catalog the gift (on which she did a great job, and now she's interning at Marvel: hi, Caitlin!).

Much of the gift was made up of one-off comics from the Bay Area in the late '80s and early '90s, but mixed in were some graphic novels and comics compilations—i.e., books with ISBNs—and we pulled those out to add to the general collection. One of them was a 1988 book called Strip AIDS USA.



Just as the British led the way in 1984 with Band Aid and "Do They Know It's Christmas," inspiring our USA for Africa and "We are the World" in 1985, this book had begun with a 1987 collection called *Strip AIDS* done as a fund-raising project for London Lighthouse, a support center for people with HIV and AIDS.

The legendary underground comix artist Trina Robbins had seen the UK compilation at a comic-con in London, and she wanted to create an American version. Eventually, Robbins brought Robert Triptow and Bill Sienkiewicz in on the project as co-editors.

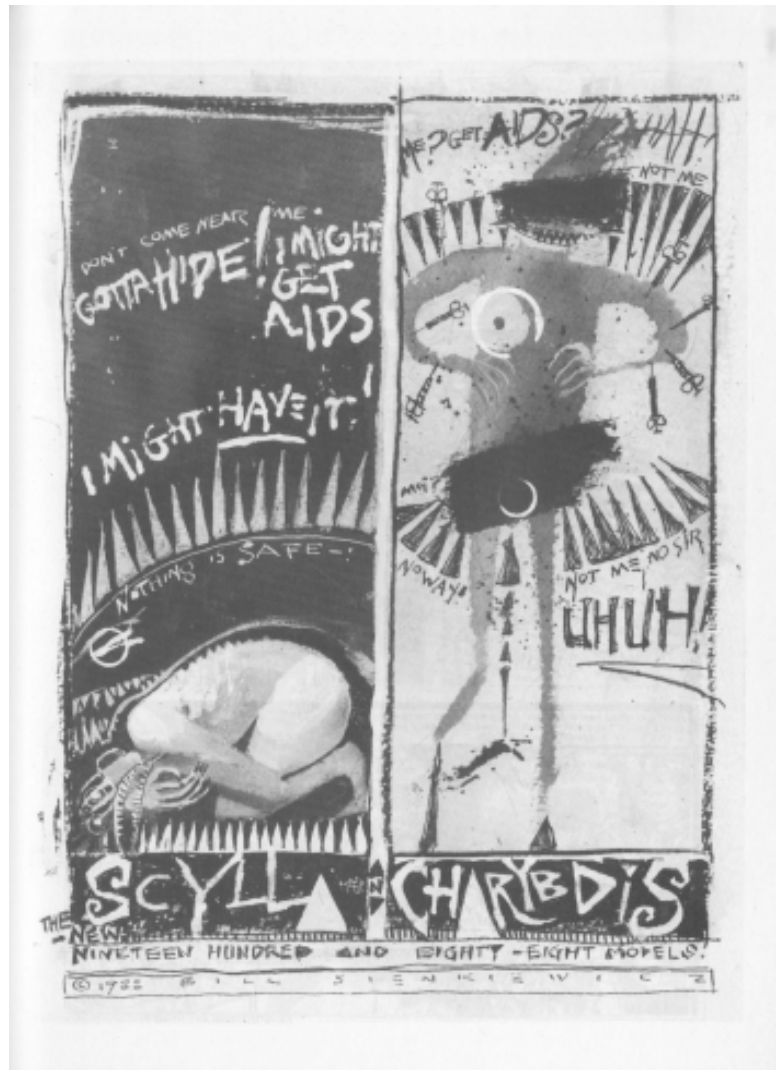
I haven't been able to get my hands on a copy of the UK original, so I have no idea who or how many people they included, but *Strip AIDS USA* lists over 120 creators on its opening page, from Will Eisner to Bob Burden to Spain to Harvey Pekar to Frank Miller to Los Bros Hernandez.

The comics in the collection fall into a few clear categories. There are comics that attack the people or institutions that helped foster ignorance about HIV and AIDS: Ronald Reagan, who dragged his feet on funding research; televangelists, who referred to AIDS as the Wrath of God, directed against what they considered the abomination of homosexuality; the Catholic Church, which discouraged life-saving condom use because of their position on birth control. There are didactic comics, trying to dispel myths such as the possibility of catching AIDS from a toilet seat or sharing a drinking glass. This Colleen Doran page sums up the frustration felt by those trying to educate a populace all too willing to believe the worst:

It's these last that I found the most moving. Many of them try to address the two extremes of people's reaction to the epidemic: the paranoia that inspired individuals to shut themselves off from all human contact, and an extraordinary fecklessness, leading to stupid risks and foolish choices. Sometimes, as in this Bill Sienkiewicz page of a modern Scylla and Charybdis (with the letter A transformed into the triangle symbol co-opted by the gay rights movement), the two extremes are placed side-by-side for contrast (see below).

And it's these that capture best the spirit of the time. No one knew for sure what was happening. Misinformation about AIDS was as prevalent in the '80s as information about terrorist threats was after September 11. The sky was definitely falling, but there was a lot of debate as to whether to respond like Chicken Little or Foxy Loxy.

What makes *Strip AIDS USA* such an important acquisition for an academic library, however, isn't merely the content. Nor the juxtaposition of, say, a traditional giant such as Will Eisner next to a relative newcomer such as Bob Burden (a juxtaposition I used in this slide from my MLA talk last month). Nor the range of artists included. What makes it important is the very fact of it: an artefact of social history unlike any other.



There are comics and graphic novels that deal with HIV and AIDS. Frederik Peeters' *Blue Pills: A Positive Love Story*, for example, looks at the often tricky negotiations of a relationship between an HIV- man and his HIV+ girlfriend (who also has an HIV+ son). The girlfriend's diagnosis comes much later than the first, raging outbreak of the 1980s, however, at a time when such a diagnosis led to a managed pharmaceutical solution rather than the morgue (as long as you're not living in the Third World, that is). *Blue Pills* is about living with HIV; *Strip AIDS USA* is about trying not to die from it. I'm not claiming one is more important than the other—just that the latter is telling a different story, and it's not a story told in many comics.

The Library of Congress Subject Heading assigned to *Strip AIDS USA* is "AIDS (Disease)—Comic books, strips, etc." (For those scoring at home, the heading for *Blue Pills* is "HIV-positive persons—Comic books, strips, etc.") I was curious to see what else shared this specific heading, so I went to WorldCat, which combines the library catalogs of 25,000 research and public libraries, and searched on that same subject heading for the decade of the 1980s.

What I found was entirely of the informational category: comics published by local health departments, task forces for AIDS awareness, or African public service organizations, using the graphic medium in hopes of attracting interest and attention. Works like these are not unlike the compelling "Decision" series that ran in the New York City subways from 1989 through the early 1990s, in which Latin lovers Julio and Marisol must deal with losing relatives in AIDS-related deaths as well as cultural imperatives against safe sex habits (man, I wish someone would put those strips up on the web; I was *addicted* to them).

Only *Strip AIDS USA* and its British progenitor, however, from what I've found, featured professional comics artists writing about the experience of dealing with the epidemic—unless you can count the 1987 comic, *AIDS is Looking for You*, created by conservative Christian artist Dick Hafer (also responsible for the breathtakingly homophobic *Homosexuality: legitimate, alternate death-style* from a year earlier). But let's just say he wasn't coming from quite the same positive place.

The *Strip AIDS* books are time capsules, testaments from the past, re-creating a time and place that many have forgotten. For scholars of social history, looking at contemporaneous reactions to the AIDS epidemic, or trends in health policy, or the history of the gay rights movement, these books serve as important primary source documents. The very fact of them is as important as their content.

There are similar responses to more recent tragic events. I'm thinking of works like DC's early *9/11: Artists Respond*, which is filled with moving and valedictory pieces, as well as memoirs and reactive pieces such as Art Spiegelman's 2004 *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Henrik Rehr's 2005 *Tribeca Sunset*, and this past year's *American Widow*, in which the artist Choi gives form to Alissa Torres' own story of loss.

The attacks of 9/11, however, were a (literally) explosive one-time event, and while these stories convey the tremendous visceral experience of living through that day, or losing friends and loved ones, and of the emotional toll of recovery—briefly and hauntingly captured in Dean Haspiel's *Street Codeweb* comic episode "Doored" (sadly, unlikable directly, but at pages 23-36 here)—they deal primarily with aftermath. In 1987 and 1988, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, there was no aftermath; there was only math: 100,000 Americans reported infected by 1989, and no cure in sight.

Books like the *Strip AIDS* compilations represent postcards from the front lines of a war that

once seemed to have no end. They document a time of fear and hope and solidarity, in the words and art of that time, and they still have a lot to say.

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