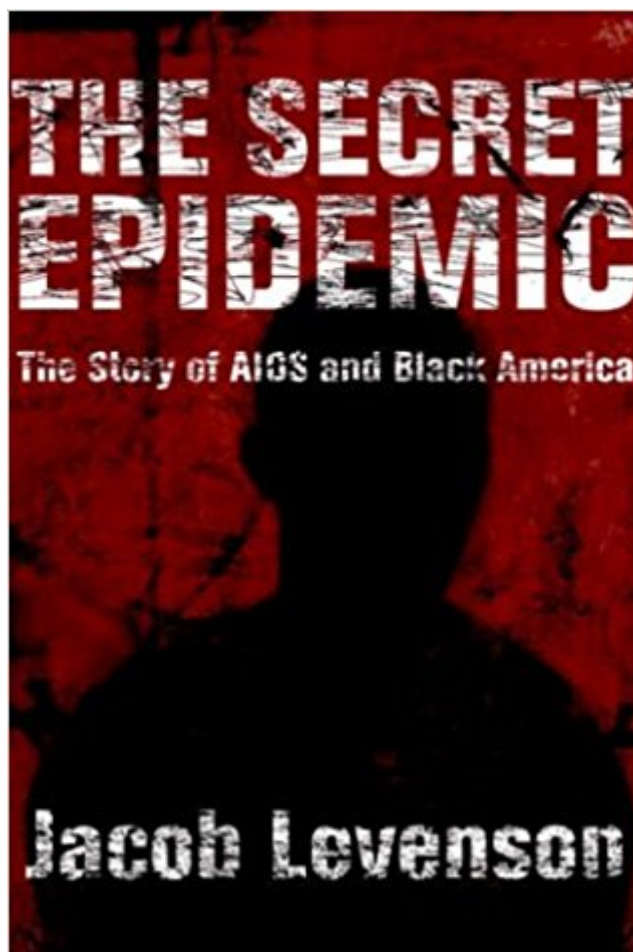


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The Secret Epidemic: The Story Of AIDS And Black America



Synopsis

As we enter the twenty-first century, AIDS in America has become primarily a black disease. African Americans now constitute 50 percent of all new HIV cases, and AIDS is one of the top causes of death in young black men and women. The story of how this came to pass reaches across half a century, from the Great Migration north to the boom of the postwar era and the subsequent urban decay, the advent of heroin and crack, and the rise of the new South. In *The Secret Epidemic*, Jacob Levenson tells this story through the experiences of the people at its center. Mindy Fullilove, one of the first black researchers to investigate the roots of the epidemic, leads us from San Francisco to the early appearance of the disease in Harlem and the South Bronx. Desiree Rushing must reconcile her crack addiction and HIV infection with the fate of her city, family, and the black church. Mario Cooper is a gay son of the black elite who becomes infected, works to mobilize the Congressional Black Caucus and the Clinton White House to respond to the epidemic, and eventually confronts the boundaries of American race politics. And David deShazo is a white social worker thrust into a hidden, rural black world in the heart of the American South, where he struggles to prevent the spreading epidemic and help two infected black sisters survive with the disease. Interweaving personal stories and national policy, the legacy of discrimination and the battle for civil rights, sexuality and the role of the black church, this is a significant book for our time—•a portrait of a devastating epidemic and an examination of our changing understanding of race in America.

Book Information

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Pantheon; 1 edition (February 3, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0375421750

ISBN-13: 978-0375421754

Product Dimensions: 6.7 x 1.1 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #837,962 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #108 in [Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > AIDS](#) #172 in [Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Pathology > Diseases > AIDS & HIV](#) #1869 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Research](#)

Customer Reviews

In 2001, African-Americans made up 54% of all new AIDS cases in the United States. Levenson, a journalist whose work has appeared in *Mother Jones* and the *Oxford American*, delivers a fascinating, largely anecdotal account of the lives of the people behind that little-known statistic, from the patients infected with the disease and their families to the medical researchers and AIDS workers who struggle with their own race- and health-related demons. The portraits include two HIV-positive teenage sisters living in a trailer park in rural Alabama and their plainspoken white social worker; an ambitious black psychiatrist who makes AIDS research her personal fight and concludes that the disease's spread stems from a much larger process of community destruction; and a torn middle-class couple who try to hide their son's diagnosis with AIDS from other family members. Levenson incorporates epidemiological statistics and the Clinton administration's political policy squabbles into the stories, but it is the book's personal elements that stand out: the psychiatrist's struggle to effectively convey her findings on AIDS and black America to colleagues and policy makers, the Mississippi-born social worker's guilt over the spread of the epidemic through forgotten Southern towns, an HIV-positive patient's transformation from crack-cocaine addict to born-again Christian and community activist. Levenson manages to get inside the heads of his subjects and never condescends or lets his own feelings interfere with their stories. Only in the epilogue does Levenson offer his own conclusions, arguing that the nature of the racial gap, more than the architecture of any particular social policy, lies at the root of the failure to stop the spread of AIDS in black America. Filled with highly readable prose and personal dialogue, this book has the potential to appeal to even the most casual reader. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

“Jacob Levenson’s *The Secret Epidemic* ought to be must-reading for anyone interested in the destruction AIDS has wrought on black America. This is an important book.” —Julian Bond

“To say that Jacob Levenson’s *The Secret Epidemic* is a must-read is to say that it is a compelling, impassioned, and deeply humane work of writing and that it is an urgent, necessary alarm for anyone who thinks the AIDS epidemic in America has been tamed. Think of this book as the sequel to Randy Shilts’ *And the Band Played On*—the arrival of a major author with a hugely important story to tell.” —Samuel G. Freedman

“The importance of this book at this critical juncture cannot be underestimated. It is too easy to overlook the fact that AIDS is still epidemic in our country, especially in impoverished rural and urban areas. *The Secret Epidemic* promises to open up the

range of the public's vision and also public discourse on this public and private health crisis facing the African American community and, indeed, the country as a whole.

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

This book had me very emotionally invested in the lives portrayed. This book is also great to explore the struggles of minorities despite now being "equal" in a way that I've never seen illustrated before: through our nation's healthcare system!

Purchase for one of our daughters, as it was required reading for a class. She said it was very enlightening and informative.

This is a fantastic book but I am worried that it renders black gay men invisible once again. According to the CDC's own statistics, the number one transmission for AIDS in black America is through unprotected sex between men. Still, Levenson focuses on the stories of (straight) black female PWAs rather than gay black male PWAs. He goes into detail about white gay organizations fighting with black (probably straight) organizations over funding. Never once does he describe which type of non-profit would be mostly likely to effectively assist gay black men. Levenson intimates that white gay men contract AIDS mostly through gay sex, but black Americans contract it mostly through drug use. Again, this is not true: statisticians have proven this fact again and again. The author shows his deep empathy for the struggles of HIV-positive, rural, black women, but he says nothing on HIV-positive, rural, black, gay men. Levenson, even unpurposely, implies that, "All the gays are white and all the blacks are straight." Black gay men are tokenized here and this book tacitly continues the fallacy that a person can only belong to one oppressed group. In his defense, I wonder if Levenson takes the spotlight off of gay black men because this group has already spoken about their struggles with HIV so effectively. (Examples include "Tongues Untied," "Brother to Brother," Essex Hemphill's essays, E. Lynn Harris' first novels, etc.) J.L. King brought national attention to black men "on the down low." However, black gay leader Keith Boykin has attacked King's presentation as flawed and dangerous. So maybe Levenson didn't "even want to go there." Levenson has lived in New York City and the Bay Area; he cannot possibly say he could not get contact with HIV-positive black gay men to tell their stories. I wonder if Levenson felt that not enough has been written on black women and AIDS and thus he wanted to carve his own niche. Black women do have higher rates of education and work in the social services at higher rates than black men. Thus, perhaps he focused on women because they will be more likely to read

and spread the word on his text. Like everyone, I am concerned how HIV transmission keeps jumping among black women. Still, the reality is that the majority of HIV-positive blacks in the United States are male. In fact, no HIV-positive, straight, black man is covered in this book. This book is highly readable. Levenson takes scientific jargon and public policy squabbles and makes them comprehensible to the average person. His style must be highly influenced by Randy Shilts. Though I love me some Keith Boykin, his "Beyond the Down Low" took forever to read whereas Levenson's book is an undifficult page turner. His mastery of journalism, narrative, and academic research shines through as he blends these genres together wonderfully. For those who love hearing conspiracies theories aimed against black America, this book is full of such ideas! Like Shilts' "And the Band Played On," Levenson discusses the battles that take place behind closed doors. While Shilts covered the non-racialized (read: white) aspects of AIDS, here, Levenson spells out how activists and some scientists have from the beginnings asked, "And what about people of color?!" Levenson is considerate and fair-minded when covering sides of debates. For example, he makes it understandable why San Franciscans wanted to hoard funds when the numbers showed that AIDS was spreading nationally. He makes Congressional Black Caucus members sound sincere, even as others have condemned them for being slow to take action. I actually do think he gave scant attention to the failure in black churches and black national organizations, But again, maybe he felt that Cathy Cohen had already covered that angle well in "The Boundaries of Blackness." Though Magic Johnson is mentioned once, there is much about blacks and AIDS that I felt he left out. He says little about AIDS' origins in Africa. He says nothing about Gaetan Ducloux (aka "Patient Zero") contracting AIDS while having sex in Africa. He never mentions Haitians. He says nothing about the AIDS-related death of the supposedly heterosexual black newscaster Max Robinson. This was not a chronology of Black American AIDS; it was more a series of controversial matters and real-life narratives on this topic. The book says little about current arguments over the slicing of the AIDS pie. For example, has AIDS in Africa overshadowed Black American AIDS? Have new statistics stating that young gay men are not protecting themselves made AIDS seem more related to gays again? This is not a comprehensive book, but it is provocative and does shed light on important matters. All public policy majors and workers in public health departments should read this book. I loved this book despite its major flaw.

This is an exceptionally well written, well researched look into not only AIDS and black America, but into some of the darker corners of American life itself. Levenson writes with clarity and empathy while answering the tough questions that until now, only a few have known how to ask. This book is

an absolute must-read for anyone interested in our society, the spread of AIDS and how black America got left holding the bag.

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