

Still Positive: A Memoir

Julie Lewis

Jenny Koenig, Contributor

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Still Positive is a frank, insightful memoir about living with an HIV diagnosis.

Julie Lewis's appealing memoir *Still Positive* covers decades of living with a chronic illness; it includes advice for survivors alongside a detailed chronicle of the AIDS epidemic.

In 1990, Lewis, the mother of three young children, was beset by overwhelming fatigue. After a number of medical visits and tests, she received the shattering news that she was HIV positive. She traced the transmission back to blood transfusions that she had received after the birth of her first child six years earlier.

Lewis writes with honesty about the fear of death and social stigmas associated with HIV and AIDS; both hung heavy over her life. She and her husband grieved, prepared for her demise, and informed a few family members and friends about her diagnosis. There are poignant anecdotes about how she broke the news to her children too. Azidothymidine was the sole drug available to her, but its powerful side effects only piled on to her physical and emotional debilitation. There's a sense of immediacy to the book's recollections of fear—of losing essential health insurance, being shunned by neighbors, and being turned away by insensitive health-care professionals.

The prose is matter of fact and conversational, though a few of its more passionate passages are punctuated with well-aimed profanities. It evokes a particular period in time well. Lewis was diagnosed during the first decade of the epidemic, and her memories reflect a frightening era for HIV and AIDS patients—one with “few answers, surrounded by fear, cloaked in stigma.” The book recalls how other HIV-positive people around the US were subjected to protests and discrimination—even children. In counter to this, the book includes direct expressions of support toward the LGBTQ+ community and is vehement in its critiques of those who perpetuate the idea of “innocent victims.” There are also frequent acknowledgements of Lewis's privilege as a white, heterosexual, Christian woman, which helped when it came to her access to quality health care and in winning a large settlement from the blood bank that didn't screen her postpartum blood products.

However, the book becomes less even by its ending, where its narrative trails off. Indeed, its conclusion is rushed in comparison to the rest of the book, which is replete with sobering historical and personal details. Information about Lewis's medical experiences fade away; more attention is devoted to the successes of her Grammy award-winning youngest son.

Still Positive is a passionate, personalized view of the social history of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, showing how it reshaped public health, medical care, and citizen advocacy around the world.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (April 18, 2023)

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