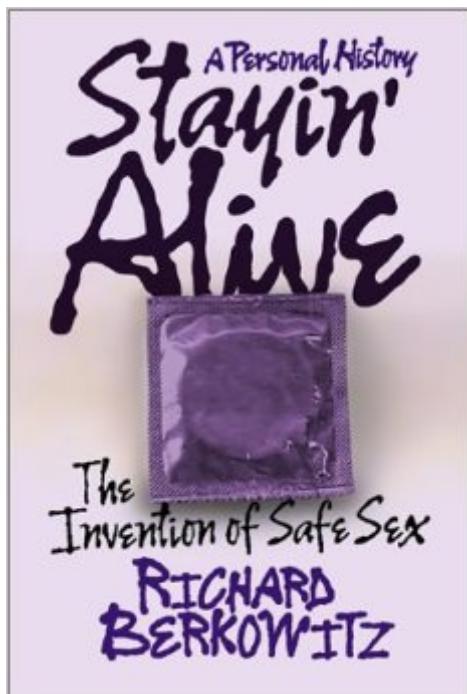


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Stayin' Alive: The Invention Of Safe Sex



Synopsis

While the practice of “safe sex” has become an American habit over the past twenty years, few are familiar with its controversial origins and fascinating social history. *Stayin’ Alive* is the story of how reaching for a condom became as automatic as buckling a seat belt, a story compellingly and frankly recounted by activist and journalist Richard Berkowitz who arrived on the frontlines in the war on AIDS in 1982 and has been writing about it ever since. Berkowitz takes the reader on a graphic but moving account of his personal sexual journey coming out amid the sexual abandon of the 1970s and waking up to horror of AIDS in the 1980s. For younger readers with no first-hand experience of what it was like living through the erotic exuberance of the sexual revolution nor the grisly aftermath, the author offers a vivid portrayal that puts the invention of safe sex into fresh, compelling context for a new generation. “Safe sex” was born out of the tireless crusading, politicking, and advocacy of an unlikely trio whose lives revolved around sex and the consequences of sex: the author, the author, the AIDS researcher and physician Joseph Sonnabend, and the late author, activist and singer Michael Callen. Berkowitz recounts how their work found a way to enable a generation of gay men and sexually adventurous heterosexuals to continue celebrating their sexuality without risking their lives or the lives of their partners - in two words, “safe sex.”

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Richard Berkowitz, AIDS activist and a freelance journalist (and former S&M Hustler) writes a compelling history of how safe sex was invented back in the late 80's. It's hard to imagine now, but

there was a time when using condoms was unheard of. There was, apparently, a time when they were quite difficult to obtain because no one used them. That's all well before my time -- back when God was a child. By the time I was old enough to know about sex, safe sex was already the watch word. But back in the time before time, safe sex was unknown. However, once the direction of the epidemic became obvious -- and more importantly for the author, after a scare of his own -- Berkowitz details how he found ways to continue his work as a hustler, and yet stay safe. His experiences became the basis of the safe sex advice now routinely given out by clinics, educators, and doctors. What I found most interesting about this book, however, was that it is the first time I've ever read or heard anyone take responsibility for their own behavior and how that behavior unwittingly contributed to the AIDS epidemic. Basically Berkowitz argues that, given the huge number of STDs that many gay men were being infected with in the late 70's and early 80's (infected, and reinfected, and reinfected) people should have realized that such promiscuity was going to have consequences greater than a quick shot of penicillin could cure. He's not laying blame, he's taking responsibility, an important difference, but it's the first time I've read a book where someone had the courage to do it. This is a short read, but worth a few minutes of your time. Especially if, like me, much of this is history for you.

This is a must-read for anyone interested in gay men's lives, sex lives, STI/HIV history. The writing is personal, and can be campy, and a little formulaic at times (but nothing as disappointing as the book cover design); the writing does not flow with romantic language, but the story is most compelling. While there is an abundance of erotic fiction available for gay men, there is little memoir writing about this time period that is so explicit, honest, and powerful. This is where *Staying Alive* comes in. Aside from Martin Dubermann's "Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS," there is not an extensive discussion outside of these two books of what it was like in the trenches with early safe sex proponents Michael Callen and Dr Joseph Sonnabend. The companion movie to this book, *Sex Positive*, is worth watching for sure. In both, we get to see Richard's colorful personality come alive, sometimes in ways that the lure of celebrity can coax with inflated promise; Richard's shyness runs countercurrent to his bold emotions, but we see that his efforts were selfless and heroic, despite how troubled his personal life became. All that aside, we learn of the sense of betrayal of Berkowitz for his critiques of men's lack of sexual safety responsibility, and how he was shut out of so many groups then, and future health activist organizations for his promotion of safer sex behavioral practices. This is similar to Larry Kramer's experience with questioning gay men's unsafe sex, except that Larry had financial resources, social

prestige, and a writing career which off-the-grid working class Berkowitz did not. We owe an enormous amount to Berkowitz for his determination to pioneer sex protection strategies. He is not an apologist that played by mainstream expectations, which could have problematized his credibility with future activist health work. But who are we without our complications?

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