"Time passes, and people forget. Don't let them": *Like A Love Story* and the Educational Strength of Historical Fiction

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Set in 1989 in New York City, *Like A Love Story* by Abdi Nazemian (2019) follows three teenage protagonists – Reza, Art, and Judy – as their lives intersect with Queerness, pop culture, and the turbulent early years of the AIDS crisis. The characters in the novel are fictional, but the setting and events are heavily based in reality, supported by Nazemian's own life experiences and research. Consequently, *Like a Love Story* provides readers with an accessible opportunity to learn about Queer political movements such as ACT UP, 1980s pop culture icons such as Madonna, and the reality of living with AIDS before treatments were widely available. Nazemian processes and presents these concepts through the three protagonists, providing readers with an emotional history supported by a factual one. *Like a Love Story* exemplifies how placing sympathetic characters into historically accurate settings creates a valuable tool for teaching history through fiction.

Like a Love Story is categorized as *historical fiction* – an oxymoronic genre which causes confusion about what is fact and what is fiction within a story. In this case, Nazemian accurately represents the setting (i.e. New York in 1989) and events in 1989 (i.e. ACT UP protests, Madonna's "Blonde Ambition" tour) to the best of his ability, drawing on two different types of knowledge. One source he used was his own experiences. In an interview on a literary blog, he states that he "drew a lot from [his] own life for certain details, from fashion to music to language" (Tracy). For example, Nazemian drew on his own experiences to write about Madonna's music throughout the story. When Art introduces Reza to "Like a Prayer," Reza is amazed: he is "unable to find the right words to describe the transcendent experience" of hearing it (52–53). Nazemian himself is a lifelong Madonna fan, crediting her in his Author's Note to the novel with teaching him to see "queerness not as a death sentence, but as a community and an identity to be celebrated" (n.p.). It's likely that his lived experiences informed how her music affects Reza's journey of self-discovery throughout the book, providing readers with a glimpse into a real experience. The second type of source Nazemian used to shape the setting was research. He was not involved with ACT UP in 1989, but writes about real protests in the novel. For example, Art attends a protest at the

New York Stock exchange with Stephen. During the protest, Art experiences people chaining themselves to the balcony of the stock exchange, foghorns overpowering the opening bell, protesters being arrested, and a sign being revealed that says "SELL WELLCOME," referring to the company that increased the price of AZT (62–63). As preserved on the *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project* website, a real protest took place at the New York Stock Exchange on 19 September 1989. During the protest, each event experienced by Art took place (Davis). Evidence of the arrests can be seen in Figure 1: a photo reproduced in Greer. Drawing on his own personal experiences and research, Nazemian accurately recreates historical moments throughout the plot of *Like a Love Story*, so readers learn about real history.


AIDS, AZT & NYSE

AFTER THE ARREST: Seven AIDS activists were arrested yesterday after five of them chained themselves to a banister at the New York Stock Exchange to protest the high cost of the drug AZT. Three of the protesters were said to have AIDS or AIDS-related complex. The seven dressed as floor traders and wore fake IDs from the Bear Stearns brokerage firm. Five of them chained themselves to a banister of a balcony overlooking the exchange floor and unfurled a banner that read, "SELL WELLCOME" — a reference to Burroughs Wellcome, the sole manufacturer of AZT — and blasted horns. Burroughs Wellcome is traded over the counter, not on the NYSE. The NYSE vows to file charges. TOM MONASTER/DAILY NEWS

Fig. 1 Greer, photo by Tom Monaster for *New York Daily News*

Another way Nazemian presents history to readers is through providing access to the contents of Art's notecards. According to Art, the notecards are gifts

"Stephen made me when I asked him what OUR history was" (68). He treasures these gateways into Queer history and culture, and even writes new notecards so he can give them to his future child (412). As objects that exist within the world of *Like a Love Story*, the notecards help to illustrate how many barriers existed to accessing Queer history and culture in 1989, how mentor figures like Stephen worked to share what they learned, and the importance of Queer community to crafting one's own identity. As content written in a comforting epistolary style, the notecards function as a Queer-culture crash course for the reader. The topics of the cards we see in the novel include love (39), Judy Garland (89), Elizabeth Taylor (174), high school (216), and Madonna (330). In the cards covering pop culture icons, Stephen gives a brief biography of the icon and explains her tie to the Queer community. In the card about Judy Garland, for example, Stephen writes that "perhaps [Queer people] identified with her for generations because, like us, she was brutalized and victimized by the system and because, like us, she somehow created so much beauty out of it all" (89). Through this card, readers learn both about how Judy Garland was mistreated in Hollywood, and how Queer people were able to relate to her experiences. In the cards covering more general topics such as "love" and "high school," Stephen discusses how the Queer experience differs from mainstream experience. The notecard on high school starts "There may be no harder place to be queer than high school, a place of bullies and slurs, a place steeped in rituals of heterosexuality" (216). By pointing out the violent and heteronormative aspects of high school, Stephen reveals how it was (and still is) a difficult experience for many Queer people. Through the notecards, readers learn about Queer culture and the importance of having a Queer mentor.

Like a Love Story offers readers a realistic, researched representation of 1980s New York and facts about aspects of Queer culture. But, as Nazemian states in his author's note: "I am not a historian, and this is not a work of nonfiction" (n.p.) What differentiates *Like a Love Story* from nonfiction material is the inclusion of fictional characters. The story is told through the first-person narration of three teenage protagonists who experience the setting and filter it through their perspectives, allowing readers to understand this period of time emotionally as well as factually. Fear and anger are especially important throughout the novel, and the presence of each heightens the reader's understanding of the history.

Fear in *Like a Love Story* communicates the experience of being threatened by AIDS at a time when so little was known about the disease. When the public was

first beginning to reckon with AIDS in the 1980s, there was no clear guidance on how it was transmitted. In "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification," a journal article published in 1987 that analyzes the AIDS crisis through a cultural lens, Paula Treichler points out that before more was known about the transmission of the virus, the risk of AIDS infection was associated with identities rather than acts. For example, The Center of Disease Control listed four high-risk groups (Haitians, hemophiliacs, heroin users, and homosexuals) until 1986, contributing to the idea that "the major risk factor in acquiring AIDS is being a particular kind of person rather than doing particular things" (Treichler 40). This lack of public information about AIDS caused fear in members of so-called "at risk" groups, as their health seemed to be constantly threatened. In *Like a Love Story*, Nazemian communicates this fear through Reza. At the beginning of the novel, Reza has minimal access to AIDS-related information. The first time he encounters it is through reading *Time* magazine as a child, a copy whose cover reads "The AIDS Hysteria" (7). Figure 2 depicts the magazine article in question, featuring a solemn doctor or researcher dropping red liquid in a series of test tubes. Reza narrates his reaction to the magazine: "inside I saw sickness, disease, lesions, young men dying. I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me, this was something I did not know until that moment. Until *Time* magazine informed me that I would die soon. I've been living in fear ever since" (8). Nazemian tells the same story as Treichler and the CDC reports, but through the eyes of an active participant. Reza connects his attraction to other boys with unavoidable death in this passage, echoing the idea that identity itself is a risk factor for contracting AIDS. His lack of information about the transmission of AIDS early on, as well as the fear he exhibits, embodies the chaos of living as a gay man who seemed to be at risk of a deadly virus without necessarily knowing how the risk could be prevented. It's an example of how *Like a Love Story* communicates both the context and the feelings of the AIDS crisis to readers, using empathy to put readers in the shoes of the protagonists.

Fig. 2 *Time Magazine*

Rage is another emotion present in the novel, and it communicates to readers the feeling of injustice. One of many injustices within the AIDS crisis was how the public perception of AIDS being a "gay plague" alienated gay people. A *New York Times* article published in 1986 reported that homophobic attacks in New York City roughly doubled between 1985 and 1986, and that perpetrators often taunted their victims about the disease (Greer). This sentiment existed at the top of politics, as well. A 2015 documentary called *When AIDS Was Funny* unearthed an exchange between a reporter (Lester Kinsolving) and Ronald Reagan's press secretary (Larry Speakes) in 1982, when there were nearly one thousand reported deaths in the United States. In it, Kinsolving asks Speakes to comment on AIDS – referring to it as the "gay plague" – and in return, Speakes taunts Kinsolving by asking if he has it, to press pool laughter (Lopez). These public displays of hostility towards Queer people, amid the explosion of a disease that was threatening their lives, undoubtedly caused reactions of anger. Art is one character who embodies that anger throughout the story. He holds anger for homophobic people in his life: "For Mrs. Starr who wouldn't let me create an ACT UP affinity group. For Darryl Lorde and all the assholes at school, who sneeze and cough words like 'faggot' and 'pansy' into their hands when Reza and I walk by" (296). His anger spills over to loved ones, as well: "'What does that even mean?' I burst out. 'JUST a gay movie?' [...] I can feel Reza tense a little. He can't handle this side

of me" (297–298). Art models how someone might react when constantly having to face injustice as part of an inescapable identity. For some readers, his constant anger frustrates more than it informs. One review from *Storygraph* states that "[Art] was either angry or mad and that was not fun to read at all" (Debchan). On the other hand, some readers have found a deeper meaning behind his rage. In "Melodrama and the Memory of AIDS in American Queer Young Adult Literature," Gabriel Duckels argues that Art's overly emotional expression "politically 're-gays' AIDS from the perspective of the present, and so the previously denied virtue of the queer adolescent during the first years of AIDS is belatedly recognized and aligned with today's adolescent" (318). In other words, Art's anger serves two purposes: introducing politically active Queer youth into the historical narrative about the beginnings of the AIDS crisis, and creating a figure of political resistance that modern youth can recognize and relate to. Art's anger also invites readers to feel angry. As one reviewer writes: "The entire time I was reading, I was angry. I wanted to go back in time and fight alongside the characters, to tell the government where to go, to stand up for the right for people to love who they love, period" (Bigdreamsandwildthings). Readers studying history through literature can learn about injustice by experiencing a character's reaction to it and carry that experience into how they shape the world moving forward. Art's anger is an important aspect of *Like a Love Story* because it teaches readers about the impact of political inaction by putting themselves in the shoes of someone forced to live with the result.

Though by Nazemian's own admission *Like a Love Story* is not a work of nonfiction, the realistic setting and events presented with emotional reactions of characters living through those events make the novel a valuable entry-point into learning about Queerness, 1980s pop culture, and the early AIDS crisis. Aspects of the book pulled directly from history – from the researched and remembered setting to the short history lessons in the notecard chapters – provide readers with realistic contexts to understand what living in New York in 1989 was like. This history is then interpreted through the lenses of the characters who help readers immerse themselves in the setting, providing an invaluable emotional perspective to the real history. I am not arguing that historical fiction should replace other forms of learning about history, rather that well researched stories provide an empathetic approach to learning history that other mediums may lack. Readers of *Like a Love Story* learn about history through relatable individuals, rather than broad, impersonal concepts. This micro approach to learning history encourages readers to think about past events with empathy. As humanity continues to face existential threats – increasingly polarized political ideologies, violent global

conflicts, increased exposure to AI and algorithms, and whatever else is in store – it is imperative that we learn from the past and practice empathy to navigate them. As Stephen tells his loved ones near the end of the novel, "'Time passes, and people forget. Don't let them"' (377).

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