

Reagan, Rhetoric, and Resistance: Analyzing the Social and Political Conflict of Abdi Nazemian's *Like a Love Story*

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Historical Overview and Analysis

Ronald Reagan took office on 20 January 1981. Not six months later, the initial outbreak of AIDS occurred. Reagan would not utter the term “AIDS” even once during his first term as president. Silence for four years. After the death of five thousand victims, Reagan acknowledged, but did not sufficiently address, the AIDS epidemic on 18 September 1985, during a routine press conference (Crowe 432). Silence for two years. On 1 April 1987, Reagan declared AIDS “public health enemy number one” (Gerstenzang). Finally, on 31 May 1987, he called for urgency when tackling the virus, demanding that the American public treat victims with compassion, understanding, dignity, and kindness (Reagan). In 1987, Reagan was suddenly compelled to recognize the ongoing and imminent threat of AIDS, but his efforts to rewrite history were in vain. Reagan’s deafening silence led to the death of thousands of Americans, a fact that history remembers.

One of the most sinister aspects of Reagan’s silence was that it allowed for incorrect, destructive, and outright bigoted narratives about AIDS to run rampant. By the mid-’80s, many believed that AIDS could be spread through surfaces like doorknobs and toilet seats; others thought they could contract the disease through physical proximity, with a 1987 Gallup poll finding that 38% of participants would refuse to work alongside someone with AIDS (Singer and Rogers 13). Paradoxically, the media framed AIDS as a distinctly gay disease, indicating “that the gay community was at risk, and almost everyone else was not” (Crowe 430). These conflicting narratives highlight the extent to which the public was misled, accepting two notions that could not *possibly* be true at once.

Reagan’s absence also meant that staff members could weigh in and symbolically represent the consensus of the administration. Perhaps the most egregious example of this phenomenon was in 1984 when senior advisor Pat Buchanan, arguing that contracting AIDS was a moral punishment, wrote: “the poor

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homosexuals [had] declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution” (“Khachigian”). During an infamous 1983 White House briefing, Press Secretary Larry Speakes chuckled at the mere mention of a “gay plague” victimizing gay men, conveying that staff thought AIDS simultaneously sacrilegious and jocular (Dreyfuss).

It is impossible to sever Reagan’s AIDS response from his legacy as president. The length of his incumbency overlaps with the discovery and development of the AIDS crisis. Despite attempts to rewrite or undo history, it remains true that his response led to the death of thousands of victims and contributed to the toxic spreading of misinformation, homophobia, and religious moral panic. For activists, however, Reagan’s calculated silence was a rallying cry. In her book *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, biographer Jennifer Brief discusses how AIDS inaction would mobilize progressives and “bec[ome] a central pillar in the political opposition to Reagan” (31). After thousands of needless deaths were swept under the rug, activists came together out of necessity. The options were to organize or die.

The most prominent group to form was the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power or ACT UP. In March 1987, ACT UP was founded to bring attention to AIDS, push for a cure, and correct misinformation. The group used disruptive but nonviolent protests and evocative materials such as chants, slogans, posters, and signs to garner media attention (Sember and Gere 968). In the early days, ACT UP released the SILENCE=DEATH poster, now a symbol synonymous with AIDS activism. The poster interrogates apathy toward victims and targets Reagan’s deafening silence, suggesting that his hands are stained red. As the epidemic became increasingly dire, “the politics of the gay rights movement and the conservative counterculture led by Reagan were directly pitted against one another” (Pimm 12). And by the late ’80s, a harrowing political division was sewn into the fabric of America.

Like a Love Story

Abdi Nazemian’s Young Adult novel *Like a Love Story* (2019) intimately portrays and interacts with this political conflict. Set in 1989, the novel centers on Reza, an Iranian-born teenager who moves to New York City at the peak of the AIDS epidemic. While adjusting to his new life, Reza grapples with his sexuality and the decision to conceal his true self. His apprehension to come out as gay stems from two core fears: devastating his mother and dying from AIDS. The latter paralyzes

Reza. He internalizes AIDS myths and misinformation, directly associating homosexuality with the disease, and constantly conjures images of suffering AIDS victims in his mind.

Reza's misinformed fears are shaken through his bonds with Judy, Art, and Uncle Stephen, three characters driven by AIDS activism and disgusted by the silent indifference of Reagan and public health officials. Through these bonds, Reza begins attending ACT UP demonstrations, discovers his love for Madonna, and eventually develops a romantic relationship with Art. Although he initially struggles with self-loathing, his exposure to progressive activism and the personal experiences of Uncle Stephen propel his character development. In the end, Reza hardly resembles who he was on the first page. He ultimately sheds the misinformation and ignorance and embraces his true self. Reza's internal conflict echoes the political conflict: shifting from repression to acceptance.

Before Reza immerses himself in the world of art and Uncle Stephen, his knowledge of Queer identity is intensely colored by his upbringing and family life. In the first half of the novel, conversations about AIDS are absent from Reza's household. Despite living in New York City, the epicenter of the epidemic, the home becomes a haven from the devastating realities of the outside world. However, Reza has already been traumatized at age eleven in the Toronto airport when he saw a copy of *Time* with the headline "The AIDS Hysteria." He describes the impact this discovery has on his internal psyche, stating: "I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me [...]. I've been living in fear ever since" (7–8). In contrast, his mother and sister did not notice the headline and are instead distracted by magazines encapsulating Isabella Rossellini's beauty. Regardless of Reza's emotional turmoil and scars, he initially complies with his family's unspoken policy of silence.

This unspoken agreement echoes and is perhaps shaped by the government's response to the AIDS epidemic. While Nazemian never explicitly outlines the political ideology of Reza's family, the impact that Reagan's rhetoric had on the attitudes of the American public is unquestionable. Dubbed "the great communicator" in the early years of his administration, Reagan had a reputation for directly swaying public opinion with his authenticity and honesty. Ken Khachigian, his chief speechwriter, writes that the former president had the "ability to educate his audience, [and] make his arguments vivid to the mind's eye" ("Khachigian"). He captured the attention of America, persuading them of the importance and urgency of whatever issue he was discussing. Despite his nickname, Reagan's silence on AIDS was deafening. By refusing to address the

AIDS epidemic, Reagan gave the public permission to ignore the crisis and “reinforced apathy towards people with AIDS” (Ortiz 9). However, Reza’s knowledge of his queerness prevents him from feeling apathetic. Instead, Reza constantly disturbs himself with “images of dying men with lesions” (13). He does not have the privilege of simply not thinking about AIDS.

Early on, Reza’s inner thoughts reveal his belief in damaging myths about the contraction of AIDS. However, Reza’s ignorance does not stem from religion or bigotry but from paralyzing anxiety. Art identifies Reza’s unease before they go to meet Stephen, Judy’s uncle who is dying from AIDS, and attempts to alleviate his concern by reminding him: “you know you can only get AIDS from sex and needles, right?” (97). Instead of calming down, Reza spirals:

And what about the hangnail on my finger, which is red from all the times I’ve picked it and is now touching the dirty seat? What if someone else was sitting here before me, and they had a bleeding hangnail on the exact same spot? What about toilet seats – people could bleed on them, or worse, masturbate on them? What about cuts on fingers when we shake people’s hands? (98)

With the benefit of historical hindsight, Reza’s fears may come across as neurotic; however, they were highly resonant in the American public’s understanding of AIDS. One Columbia study even reported that by 1989 approximately 20% of participants still thought the disease could be spread through sharing a glass, a toilet seat, or shaking hands (Singer and Rogers 13). While these numbers were lower than in years previous, they underline how misinformation campaigns can dominate the public’s consciousness.

Perhaps the only member of the Reagan administration whose goal was to properly educate Americans was Surgeon General Everett Koop. In 1988, Koop released an information pamphlet, *Understanding AIDS*, helping to dispel harmful myths, including the myth that AIDS could be transmitted through surfaces. Despite twenty million copies being distributed across the country, some misinformation would continue as conventional wisdom (“National Library of Medicine”). Koop’s inability to reset public attitudes demonstrates how entrenched our initial notions and ideas can become. For the better part of the 1980s, the government did not strive to combat misinformation, allowing fiction to run rampant and dominate the narrative. How can anyone suddenly start believing the right thing after years of misinformation?

We see the theme of challenging misinformation during Reza's initial visit with Uncle Stephen. For Reza, meeting Uncle Stephen means confronting head-on his fears and anxieties about coming out and living as a gay man. This is unease that, again, Art immediately detects: "He shakes Stephen's hand, and Stephen wipes more sweat from his face. Reza smiles politely, but I can tell he's afraid. He doesn't cross into the apartment" (113). Leading up to this moment, Reza's only interactions with AIDS victims were through a magazine page or television screen, allowing for a degree of separation. Before he never had to interrogate his preconception of what being an AIDS patient would be like, instead assigning horror to the idea and committing to repression. Through his new friendship, Reza begins to question these ideas. He learns to understand that just because Stephen is dying does not mean that he is tragic.

Gabriel Duckels describes Uncle Stephen as the "moral center of the novel" who takes on a "teacher-mentor-fairy-godmother role" ("Melodrama" 318). Stephen welcomes Art, and eventually Reza, into the Queer community, teaching them about canonical cultural history and the importance of icons such as Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, and Marilyn Monroe. Stephen's "Queer 101" note cards "demonstrate the very real need to pass down queer history from generation to generation...particularly true of the 'plague years'" (Duckels, "Popular Music" 14). By sharing his interests, including the artists and films that shaped him, Stephen imparts a wealth of knowledge that would have otherwise been lost. The note cards exemplify the place where the personal becomes the political.

Through Uncle Stephen, Art and Reza further explore the world of AIDS activism, taking the initiative to get involved. Nazemian pulls from real history to depict the New York Stock Exchange protest, which fought against price gouging on pharmaceutical drugs such as AZT. Art throws himself into the project, compelled by his overflowing love for victims and more existential reasons: "I don't want to die before my time [...]. I don't know how I'll ever begin to live while this disease is raging. Who will love me when all they'll see when they look at me is a possibility that I may kill them?" (24). Art's existential anxiety mirrors Reza's, as they both fear the implications of living as a Queer man during the AIDS crisis.

Fittingly, the novel's core romance begins developing after Reza attends the Stock Exchange protest, and Art encounters him in the crowd. Leading up to this moment, Reza demonstrates little interest in politics or activism, opting to conform to the status quo and remain silent: two things Art refuses to do. Reza later reflects on his decision to attend, stating "I was drawn to it because I had

heard him discuss it. I had to be there.... I want to know more, but I am still too scared” (95–96). Art influences him to go and expose himself to the outside world, conveying the immediate impact and the importance of exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences. By attending the protest, Reza confronts his fears head-on and rejects the societal and family expectations that control and repress him. The Stock Exchange protest symbolizes the place where the political and personal overlap.

As the novel progresses, Reza tackles and conquers the fears and anxieties that previously controlled him. He involves himself politically, severs his relationship with Judy by admitting his affection for Art, and promptly comes out to his conservative family. Nazemian foreshadows this transformative shift early on when Reza violently rips out his braces, labeling them as: “mouth invaders, maybe, or teeth terrorists” (1). Through this act, Reza breaks through the constraints that contort his body into an inflexible mold, just like he breaks through the misinformation and societal norms that previously dominated his worldview. The action symbolizes the futility of these constraints, conveying how each person has the agency and power to overcome them.

Reza’s character progression leads to his decision to have sex with Art, an idea that causes him anguish, anxiety, and dread at the beginning of the novel. This is Reza’s biggest hurdle, primarily because of his exposure to and internalization of misinformation and myths about AIDS. Interestingly, Uncle Stephen’s death accelerates Reza’s decision-making, as he promptly declares in the next chapter: “I need supplies” (379), meaning condoms. While Uncle Stephen welcomes Art and Reza into the Queer community, he also underscores the impermanence of life. When attempting to alleviate Reza’s anxiety around sex, Art expresses this idea: “What if AIDS is our warning that life is short?’ What if it’s telling us that we should love when we have the chance?” (307). So, while Reza and Art experience immense grief, Uncle Stephen’s death also brings about the reminder that they must live in the moment.

Nazemian’s novel engages with the politicization of the AIDS epidemic by revisiting and showcasing perspectives that were deemed insignificant and intentionally buried by the Reagan administration and public health officials. While Uncle Stephen, Art, and Reza are fictional characters, they represent diverse experiences now given a voice and immortalized on the page. Further, Nazemian highlights the possibility of self-acceptance through Reza, who goes from fearing coming out and living openly to doing exactly that. Through his relationships and exposure to activism, Reza breaks away from the rigid expectations that constrain

and repress him and begins questioning the misinformation and myths about AIDS that have been spoon-fed to the public. He moves away from repression and towards true acceptance. Queer teen readers today may not suffer from the same kinds of misinformation and silencing that Reza does, but Nazemian offers them a valuable role model of self-examination and self-liberation with regard to their own situations of oppression, fear, and silencing.

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