A premature bookreport part II: Ken

It continues to shock me how France’s prose in \*How to Survive a Plague\* manages to simultaneously delight and ravage. For the second post in this series, I’d like to linger a bit on the story of Ken Ramsauer, an early casualty in the AIDS epidemic. We’ll even get a brief and unexpected appearance of, of all people, Geraldo Rivera.

The time period was 1983, still in the early days of the epidemic. France recalled watching “the first major prime time [television report in AIDS]… Geraldo Rivera, flamboyant and hyperbolic though he was, broke the near-complete media blackout when the first network broadcast” (p. 90).

To no avail, I tried to find a clip from the piece. If you have a link, please do share so I might edit the blog. Instead, we’ll have to satisfy ourselves with France’s account.

> “It is the most frightening medical mystery of our time,” Rivera said, leaning toward the camera. “There is an epidemic loose in the land, a so-far incurable disease which kills its victims in stages.”

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> And then appeared the face of a man in grotesque medical destress—the first plague-sickened man either Brian [a friend of France’s] or I had laid eyes on. He was a freelance lighting designer named Ken Ramsauer, age twenty-seven. In an old photograph, he looked a polished and angular as a shampoo model. The difference between then and now was shocking. His head appeared swollen nearly to the brink of popping; his eyes vanished behind swollen muffins of flesh; oblong purple marks covered his skin. Confined to a wheelchair, he hung his head weakly. A friend handed him a glass of water, which was almost too heavy for his trembling arms.

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> “I thought I was a pretty good looking guy,” he said. “And now I actually see myself fading away.” (pp. 90—91)

[Ken Ramsauer (healthy).JPEG](Here’s a picture of Ramsauer, the “shampoo model”, before his body was disfigured by HIV/AIDS)

[Ken Ramsauer (with AIDS).JPEG](Ramsauer is almost unrecognizable, here. “His head appeared swollen nearly to the brink of popping; his eyes vanished behind swollen muffins of flesh.”)

Anti-gay prejudice was still high during this period. It appears Ramsauer’s pathetic appearance afforded him little reprieve.

> Ramsauer said he had just returned from the hospital where the offered him neither no medicine nor hope, and least of all pity. “One night I heard two, I believe nurse’s aides—not the actual nurses—standing outside my door sort of laughing,” he said.

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> “What did they say exactly?” Rivera asked.

> He blinked his slivered eyes and looked down at the water glass in his scarlet fists, remembering: “I wonder how long the faggot in 208 is going to last.” (p. 91)

Four days after the broadcast, Ramsauer was dead. What happened next was a testament to the impact of that first piece. A public memorial was held in his honor in Central Park. France went.

> That evening was unusually still and hot. As we approached the service from the south, beneath a voted canopy of American elms and a row of towering statuary, a macabre scene confronted us. The plaza was crowded with 1,500 mourners cupping candles against the darkening sky. As our eyes landed on one young man after another, it became obvious that many of them were seriously ill. A dozen men were in wheelchairs, so wasted they looked like caricatures of starvation. I watched one young man twist in pain that was caused, apparently, by the barest gusts of wind around us. In New York there were just 722 cases reported, half the nation’s total. It seemed they were all at the band shell that sweltering evening. (p. 91)

[Ramsauer's memorial.JPEG](Here stand some of those 1,500 mourners.)

Ramsauer did not die in vain. Pieces on the epidemic stated to pick up in the popular press, slanted though they were. And as France tells us, even death offered no reprieve to the indignities of those HIV/AIDs claimed.

> Across New York, the global epicenter of this outbreak, almost every undertaker refused to work with the corpses. Even in the ancient plagues of Europe there were individuals tasked with collecting remains. In \*The Betrothed\*, the novelist Alessandro Manzoni called them \*monatti\*, those inflappable Samaritans who, for profit or otherwise, braved the “rags and corrupted bandages, infected straw, or clothes, or sheets” to convey the lifeless flesh to the ditches. In New York at the dawn of AIDS, only Redden’s Funeral Home, operating continuously since the Spanish Influenza epidemic of 1918—19, would handle the embalming. Yet its owners begged the grateful mourners to keep their kindnesses a secret for fear of boycotts by the aging Catholic community in Greenwich Village and Chelsea, the bulk of their business. (p. 92)