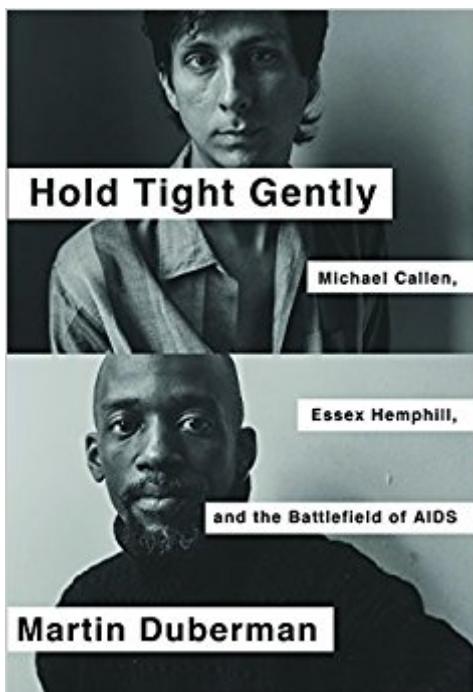


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# Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, And The Battlefield Of AIDS



## Synopsis

In December 1995, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the release of protease inhibitors, the first effective treatment for AIDS. For countless people, the drug offered a reprieve from what had been a death sentence; for others, it was too late. In the United States alone, more than 318,000 people had already died from AIDS-related complications; among them the singer Michael Callen and the poet Essex Hemphill. *Relevant and heartbreaking* (Bay Area Reporter), *incisive, passionate, and poetic* (New York Journal of Books), and *powerful* (Kirkus Reviews), *Hold Tight Gently* is Martin Duberman's poignant memorial to two of the great unsung heroes of the early years of the epidemic. Callen, the author of *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic*, was a leading figure in the fight against AIDS in the face of willful denial under the Reagan administration. Hemphill, a passionate activist and the author of the celebrated *Ceremonies*, was a critically acclaimed openly gay African American poet of searing intensity and introspection. A profound exploration of the intersection of race, sexuality, class, and identity, *Hold Tight Gently* captures both a generation struggling to cope with the deadly disease and the extraordinary refusal of two men to give in to despair.

## Book Information

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: The New Press; Reprint edition (March 1, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1620971925

ISBN-13: 978-1620971925

Product Dimensions: 5.7 x 0.9 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #598,838 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #121 in Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Internal Medicine > Pathology > Diseases > AIDS & HIV #260 in Books > Gay & Lesbian > Nonfiction > Bisexuality #720 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > LGBT

## Customer Reviews

\*Starred Review\* In an unusual way to approach the topic of AIDS, acclaimed author and historian Duberman offers a dual biography of two very different gay men battling a mysterious illness during the early days of the AIDS epidemic. Singer and activist Michael Callen was a white Ohioan who

moved to New York and became a pioneering figure in the movement to increase AIDS awareness during the Reagan years. Essex Hemphill was an African American poet who contributed to the black gay and lesbian cultural scene in Washington, DC. Duberman sees their stories as opposite sides of the same coin; although they never met, they were both “undersung” and inadvertent heroes. The book is being released as public concern in the U.S. about AIDS continues to decline, “even as the disease continues to spread.” One reason for this turn of events, Duberman maintains, is that AIDS has become less a white disease and more a disease associated with people of color, both in the U.S. and globally. (Although black men make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 45 percent of new AIDS diagnoses.) An important and, unfortunately, still timely book. --June Sawyers --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Winner of a Lambda Literary Award Honor Book at the 2015 Stonewall Book Awards Finalist for the Randy Shilts Award for Gay Nonfiction One of NPR’s “Guide to 2014” Great Reads “A meticulously researched, nuanced, empathic and insightful portrait of two important artistic and political figures.”; San Francisco Chronicle “A powerful book that displays both the malice and the nobility of our species.”; Kirkus Reviews “Insightful; A vivid, complex snapshot.”; Publishers Weekly (starred review) “An important and, unfortunately, still timely book.”; Booklist

Hold Me Tightly is absolutely stunning. The book is a riveting and fast paced expose of the horrible and terrifying AIDS plagues that took so many lives leaving behind stunned and bitter survivors. While the gay agenda in recent years has shifted to gay marriage rights the author fairly questions the lack of a gay community response to the ongoing disease and its continual spread into the gay community. This is a book that asks as many questions as answers them. The decision to tell the story through the lives of two victims, each from a different social strata, clearly defines the struggles and the horrific fear that decimated at least two generations of gay men from different races, different regions of the country and different socio-economic brackets. The Reagan presidency, Mayor Koch and Governor Mario Cuomo are not spared. History will judge whether these men could and should have done more to help the victims. I would highly recommend Hold Me Tightly to anyone who lived through the AIDS 1980-95 Nightmare, or who lost someone special to this disease as well as anyone too young to remember the horror but would like to pay homage to the early pioneers who put on the pressure to get the “cocktails” out there which has made the disease “manageable”. However the author Mr. Duberman would rightly correct me in making the

assumption that AIDS is "manageable". His arguments for this belief are just another reason to read this important and honest piece of work.

I have been yearning for the seminal book documenting the AIDS epidemic. This is it. It is all here...for those of us who walked through the fire, this book is aflame. It is not an easy read, it was a horrible time...but it is not over and we should never forget the many too many who died, who fought for care, for understanding, for decency. This book shows what love can do....but we are not done yet....we need to get everyone we know to read and remember and not ever allow this to happen to any group of people again..thank you Martin Duberman for your heart and soul that went into this book. And of course for your exquisite writing. What an exquisite memorial.

In Martin Duberman's latest book *HOLD TIGHT GENTLY* he chronicles the AIDS epidemic in the U. S. from the years 1981 through 1995 by highlighting the lives of two of the gay community's finest artists Michael Callen and Essex Hemphill, both of whom died of AIDS, Michael on December 27, 1993, Essex on November 5, 1995. Both men were thirty-eight years old at the time of their deaths. Mr. Duberman says in his Introduction that he knew both men only slightly but admired them as his highly informative account of their lives bears witness. He laments also in his Introduction the fact that AIDS is no longer anyone's top priority, that we are now concerned with same-sex marriage and the right to serve openly in the military even though "self-identified gay men in the United States do still make up 48 percent of the 1 million people currently living with AIDS." And I wondered, as I read this very moving book, how many in the gay community would read it. Several of my friends tell me they no longer want to read books or see movies about AIDS. Mr. Duberman covers much of the same territory of Sean Strub's just-published *BODY COUNTS* although this is not a criticism of this book. Some overlapping is unavoidable. Many of the heroes and villains remain the same: the Elizabeth Taylors, the Mathilde Kirms, many of the PWA's and members of ACT UP as opposed to the Pat Buchanans, the Ronald Reagans, The Jerry Falwells. (I was pleased to see Atlanta's own Reverend Joseph Lowery get the credit he rightly deserves for saying that the Civil Rights Act should be amended to protect the rights of lesbians and gay men and dismayed to learn that Callen and the Flirtations who had sung "Mr. Sandman" in the movie "Philadelphia" were eliminated when the soundtrack was produced.) The author points out that these two men were very different and never met. Mr. Callen, for example, was much more of the type who had few secrets about any aspect of his life. For example, he tells the world how many sex partners he had. By his best calculation, he believed by the time he was 27 that he had "bottomed" for 2,496 men. Or in Mr.

Duberman's words: "He was outspoken and unashamed about his 'sluthood.'" (Surely this is way too much information.) Mr. Hemphill, on the other hand, would never have made such a statement. And while it does not speak to their differences, Mr. Hemphill had a dual dilemma: he had to deal with homophobia in the black community and rampant racism in the white gay community as well. Mr. Callen of course only had to confront homophobia. Mr. Duberman's book is thorough and extremely well-researched with voluminous footnotes. (To his everlasting credit, he does not do what so many biographers these days insist on doing: telling the reader what their subject was thinking when they have no way of knowing that.) Additionally, he had access to a large amount of material-- letters, speeches, diary notes, music-- of Callen's and less from Hemphill although he conducted interviews with many of his close friends and also gained access to some of his unpublished poems. One of those, expressing Mr. Hemphill's feelings after the death of his friend Joe Beam (whose obit in the PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER said that "he is believed to have died of natural causes") is not one I will soon forget and worth the price of this book: There should have been more letters between us. In later years it will be difficult to ascertain the full meaning of our relations. Most of us will not be here to bear witness. There should have been more letters hastily written or carefully typed, long-winded scripts or short, cryptic messages. Volumes of letters should have gathered over time, but we leave hastily scrawled postcards, outrageous, long-distance phone bills, and in rare instances evidence that some of us were more than brothers, we were intimate, loyal, companions. HOLD TIGHT GENTLY is another sad reminder of all those we have lost, not only the extremely gifted but the rest of us, the ordinary as well. Those of us who remain will never forget them.

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