

# The Culture of AIDS Reviews and Commentary Books

A Journal of the Plague Years,  
Poems 1979-1992 by Walter Holland  
(Magic City Press)

Reviewed by Christopher Purdy

Walter Holland is a physical therapist and doctoral student in English literature at the City University of New York, whose poetry has appeared in the *George Mason Review*, *Christopher Street*, and *Poets For Life: 76 Poets Respond to AIDS*. In *A Journal of the Plague Years*, Holland offers poetry over thirteen years, from the beginning of awareness of the public health holocaust to the present of telling time by symptoms and illnesses. Yet this is far from a despairing volume. Rather, Holland uses a filmmaker's eye to show the sufferings and the joys, the highs and the lows of living daily life. His life and any life. The volume is in six sections: Borders/Crossings, Evenings in the Cenezoic, Wasted Seed, Fire Island and Dementia and Public Access. Illness is not the subject here. Observation is. This from "Madrid":

*From the fountain of Cibeles the water  
sprays—  
the spent silver of Conquistadors, the  
piss of Austrian  
princesses, the waste of reactors.*

The mix of the elegant with earthiness is skillful throughout. But it's not just world journeys and their backdrops to relationships — Holland delves deeply into the AIDS crisis by describing the suffering around him unflinchingly. Yet he balances a certain unrelenting style with pieces of lyricism. This is "Mornings, Room, City," spare in its beauty:

*Venice and a wide canal —  
but it was not Venice, it was the  
morning,  
the West Side and the school's yard.*

*The light had a splendor of its own,  
from Amsterdam to the river.  
In the fenced-in park lay an old note-  
book*

*thrown down on asphalt, its pages  
blank.*

*Do you love me?  
I listen to the noise  
of radios and cars down Broadway.*

*The Spanish church plays its bells  
the peal across the flat roofs  
down to the valley of Harlem.*

*I awoke to see your room,  
the window like some wide mirror  
reflecting convex walls and towers,*

*and the dry park trees (a room from  
Canaletto)  
one broad sketch  
of bridge, of cloud, of city, your arms).*

*I have thought of the dead.  
I have thought of Venice.  
I have lain awake in the white of a  
room  
and studied first light on a face such as  
yours,  
in the shadows of bare walls  
in the frame of the sky.*

*Do you love me  
in this hour of light  
in a city, in a room, in a morning?*

This weaving of beauty with reality culminates in the superb "Good Friday" from Part 2. It's not easily excerpted. (Buy the book).

Part 5, "Journal of the Plague Years" presents a camera's cruelty. That this section is not infinitely tragic is further evidence of Holland's gifts for balance and style. From "The Castro 1989":

*It's a high camp movie of tragic proportions,  
this great distortion we're living to-  
day.*

*In fact, I dreamed all those disco  
queens now dead  
and all those friends we've sent to  
hospitals  
found to have P.C.P., were hovering  
around  
talking to us in high-arch Hollywood  
chic.*

*But then in the Castro diner, I spotted  
the man  
sitting with his cigarette, staring out-  
side,  
his arm thin and depleted and I knew  
the wasting —  
could see it had begun; the wasting  
everywhere around me.*

Further examples of Holland's profound honesty, which embraces rage, frustration, anger, grief and hope, is found in "Stephen's Illness":

*The blue shapes on the skin, elliptical  
like Franz Marc's horses, Expression-  
ist forms,  
beautiful they wander in a forest of  
paleness.  
Like dark ink they seep through  
the tissue that was your body, testing  
all our associations.  
You cover them with powder but their  
stain  
blots through. How fetid is this fruit  
of flesh,  
the harvest nearly over.*

And in Part 6, Public Access, Holland turns to comedy. Read "Warhol's Double Elvis" followed by the drama of "Weightless" and the profound beauty of "Stations of the Cross." Read all of Walter Holland's *A Journal of the Plague Years* and see how one artist works through a cycle of life. ♦

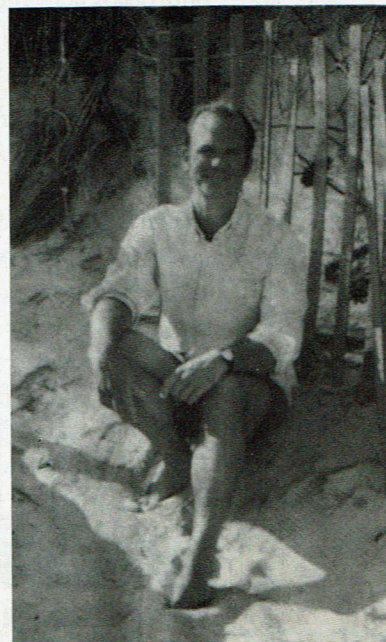


Photo of Walter Holland by Howard Frey



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Art & Understanding is made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.

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