



Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS

Martin Duberman

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In December 1995, the FDA 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, over 318,000 people had already died from AIDS-related complications—among them the singer Michael Callen and the poet Essex Hemphill.

Meticulously researched and evocatively told, *Hold Tight Gently* is the celebrated historian Martin Duberman's poignant memorial to those lost to AIDS and to two of the great unsung heroes of the early years of the epidemic.

Callen, a white gay Midwesterner who had moved to New York, became a leading figure in the movement to increase awareness of AIDS in the face of willful and homophobic denial under the Reagan administration; Hemphill, an African American gay man, contributed to the black gay and lesbian scene in Washington, D.C., with poetry of searing intensity and introspection.

A profound exploration of the intersection of race, sexuality, class, identity, and the politics of AIDS activism beyond ACT UP, *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.



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