

# [The Culture of AIDS]

## [COMICS]

### Our Love Is Real

by Sam Humphries and Steven Sanders  
Gotham Press

Journalist Randy Shilts wrote in his book documenting homosexuality in the military, *Conduct Unbecoming*, that the curse of cowardice within the LGBT community is the ease of secrecy. Unlike skin color or biological sex, sexual orientation can more easily be made less public. And the closet for gays and lesbians is seductively private. But its security was breached by the arrival of HIV/AIDS, the dreaded scarlet letter.

While writer Sam Humphries and artist Steven Sanders' single-issue comic book, *Our Love is Real*, isn't a stomach-twisting story of sexual divergence and the discrimination that follows, its spirit is in the right place. Humphries structures the plot atop a world that's discovered a vaccine to combat HIV, opening the doors to unending sexual exploration and limitless cries for social acceptance.

Our proxy is Jok, a cop who busts up "vegisexuals," which are exactly what they sound like: people who have sex with synthetic dolls grown from plants. It's vulgar, of course—not like the love Jok feels for Chyna, a poodle he happily shares a monogamous sexual relationship with as a "zoosexual." As these futuristic journeys go, Jok's worldview of carnal right and wrong is shaken up when he meets Brin, a "mineralsexual" who achieves total erotic bliss through meditation.

The world of *Our Love is Real* exists in a *Blade Runner*-inspired speculation of what the planet could look like and what its people are up to behind closed doors. Because HIV/AIDS is still the one great boogeyman between the sheets, Humphries and Sanders use raw humor and subtle intelligence to remove that one looming fear from our minds before objectively plunging into a fantasy of

cheeky sexual understanding. And the question left to answer: what won't we do to get off?

—Steven Surman

## [BOOKS]

### Ashamed to Die Silence, Denial, and the AIDS Epidemic in the South

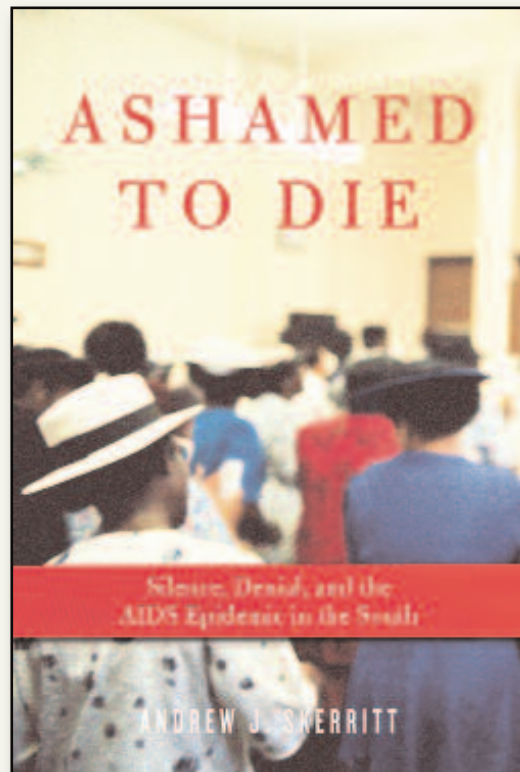
by Andrew J. Skerritt  
Lawrence Hill Books

AIDS has long been identified as a disease of gay men in large cities, particularly New York and San Francisco. These perceptions remain, alongside the knowledge that the disease has become increasingly prevalent among women and minority populations.

*Ashamed to Die* asks us to acknowledge HIV as a rural, Southern disease, particularly among African Americans. Journalist Andrew Skerritt's book profiles people from the small city of Clover, South Carolina, who have died of HIV, a pastor who watches relatives and friends sicken and die, and several of the professionals and activists instrumental in dealing with AIDS in a conservative community.

At the center of the book is the Reverend Tricia Ann Starr. Starr and her late sister Carolyn befriended Skerritt, and he was with them during Carolyn's last illness. Carolyn's story of addiction, temporary incarceration, and illness is a sad one. Throughout these accounts, the denial and hesitancy to involve family members worsens matters. Even the upwardly mobile Girard, an openly gay bank executive, deals with both a deteriorating medical condition and an inability to reveal his illness to his family.

Skerritt has performed an important



service in fleshing out an aspect of the HIV pandemic that is generally off the radar. The main virtue of the book is in its portraits. If you're hungry for more context on the social or religious beliefs particular to this region that exacerbate denial and stigma, you won't find that much here. A chapter on how AIDS funding was secured for the rural areas highlighted the contention between activists across the country, but was ultimately a bit confusing. However, Skerritt is to be applauded for his account of what happens to "AIDS lady" Linda and her maltreatment by a nonprofit board—a rare acknowledgment of the pettiness that can mar the nonprofit sector.

—Nancy Ellegate

Steven Surman is a freelance writer and journalist living in New York City. Visit him on-line at [www.stevensurman.com](http://www.stevensurman.com).

Nancy Ellegate is a sometime book reviewer for A&U.