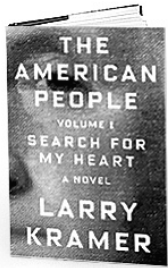


A fractured history of America through the lens of AIDS



FICTION

**The American People Volume 1:
Search for My Heart**
By Larry Kramer
800 pages, \$40

By COLIN DABKOWSKI
NEWS BOOK REVIEWER

Out of insufferable wars emerge great works of literature.

Though no one in a foxhole is likely to be consoled by the distant prospect of another Hemingway or Tim O'Brien or Anthony Shadid to set their suffering down on paper, such voices serve an essential purpose: To project retrospective shape and meaning upon the shapeless and meaningless horrors of war.

In the 1980s, a bloody civil war was being fought in this country over the HIV/AIDS crisis. Its battles played out in private political chambers and on the airwaves, pitting politicians against citizens, sons against parents, sisters against brothers.

A few extraordinary pieces of literature, so far, have emerged from that bruising fight, among them Larry Kramer's heart-wrenching play "The Normal Heart" and Tony Kushner's epic "Angels in America." What it has not yet produced is a novel that captures the unfathomable injustices of that era, one that scrubs away the whitewash of American exceptionalism to reveal the truer and significantly blacker hue of the country's soul.

Hopes were high in some quarters that Larry Kramer's doorstop of a novel, "The American People Volume 1: Search for my Soul," would be that novel. But instead, the first part of Kramer's hoped-for magnum opus – an audacious attempt to push the whole of American history through the grim filter of the HIV/AIDS crisis – is the raving account of an ex-soldier suffering increasingly delusional flashbacks to the defining battle of his life.

"The American People," an 800-page behemoth weighed down by countless neurotic voices and tangled plotlines, is nothing if not ambitious. Across its almost un navigable sprawl, Kramer's book reimagines America as a diseased wasteland whose citizens are preoccupied with their own excrement



Getty Images

Larry Kramer's doorstop of a novel is the raving account of an ex-soldier suffering increasingly delusional flashbacks to the defining battle of his life.

and prone to paroxysms of sexual terror.

Kramer's fictionalized America is a country responsible for inspiring Hitler to launch the Holocaust, for imprisoning African-American lesbians in concentration camps, for conducting secret experiments in secret laboratories as a way to weaponize diseases against its undesirable citizens.

Not to say that there aren't dozens of gems scattered throughout the manifold conspiracy theories or dread-inspiring sex scenes involving America's founding fathers. There's no debate that Kramer, who identifies himself in the book's introduction as "the only person still

here who's been on the front lines since the beginning," is an essential voice capable of dispensing essential knowledge.

And if you can get past the many enervating parts of the book, that knowledge is there. But it's hard to imagine why anyone would willingly wade through so many lengthy passages on the fictionalized history of fecal hematology or excruciatingly detailed accounts of extended death orgies to get there.

Throughout the book, Kramer decries the work of American historians who in his view have elided the central role of gay men in the formation of the country's government and society.

"History is about evil," he writes. "If it isn't, the historian has lied to you. Almost all of them have."

His solution to this problem is to turn nearly every important leader in American history into a gay man. And not just the usual suspects like Abraham Lincoln, either. Few are safe from Kramer's historical queering, which includes George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan and, naturally, Hitler.

Two central themes run through Kramer's fractured narrative like damaged strains of DNA.

The first is a constant and depthless terror of sex, a direct result of the HIV/AIDS crisis, during which the sexual liberation of the previous decade turned into a new kind of sexual oppression driven by politics and a pervasive fear of infection. Even the tenderest sex scenes in "The American People" – and there are dozens – are the stuff of nightmares.

The other central theme is Kramer's unshakable belief that America itself is infected with a terminal and incurable disease, whose symptoms are self-hatred, a disregard for the sanctity of human life and a barely latent fascism lying dormant just below the surface. All of these things may be true, but Kramer's particular brand of cynicism is instantly wearying.

"This has always been a country where we keep trying to tell ourselves that nothing's wrong that can't be fixed, when of course everything's wrong, and it's always been wrong, and no, it can't be fixed," he writes.

One of the more clever conceits in the book is how he has given the HIV/AIDS virus (dubbed "The Underlying Condition") its own voice, which periodically interrupts the narrative with bold-type declarations of its own psychopathic intelligence.

At the very least, Kramer has chosen good influences, many of whom he cites in the 12 epigraphs which precede the first chapter. Especially Joseph Conrad, that dark seeker of dark souls for whom "fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing."

Kramer's pervasive cynicism, everywhere in evidence throughout the book, begs this question: Why go to the trouble of rewriting American history if you don't think it's going to do any good? The answer never presents itself.

To see history through the lens of HIV/AIDS is to see it, naturally, as a distorted mess of nearly incomprehensible malice, madness and violence.

"The American People," for better or worse, is exactly that.

Colin Dabkowski is *The News'* arts critic.