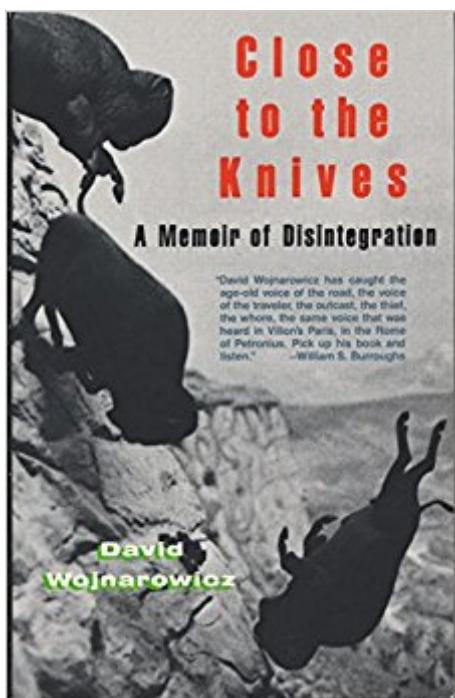


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Close To The Knives: A Memoir Of Disintegration



Synopsis

In *Close to the Knives*, David Wojnarowicz gives us an important and timely document: a collection of creative essays -- a scathing, sexy, sublimely humorous and honest personal testimony to the "Fear of Diversity in America." From the author's violent childhood in suburbia to eventual homelessness on the streets and piers of New York City, to recognition as one of the most provocative artists of his generation -- *Close to the Knives* is his powerful and iconoclastic memoir. Street life, drugs, art and nature, family, AIDS, politics, friendship and acceptance: Wojnarowicz challenges us to examine our lives -- politically, socially, emotionally, and aesthetically.

Book Information

Paperback: 288 pages

Publisher: Vintage; First Edition edition (May 7, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679732276

ISBN-13: 978-0679732273

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 16 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #102,287 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #125 in Books > Gay & Lesbian > Nonfiction > LGBT Studies #129 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > LGBT #515 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Essays & Correspondence > Essays

Customer Reviews

The New York-based visual artist and AIDS activist whose work has been targeted by Jesse Helms and the Rev. Donald Wildmon as obscene debuts here with a collection of writings marked by stunning originality and sharp polemics. The alternation of poetic observations of a desolate, at times dissolute life on the road and in squalid urban settings with indictments of a homophobic "establishment" might at first appear ill-advised; soon, however, it becomes clear that Wojnarowicz's visual and verbal gifts are inextricably bound to his experience as a homosexual in an American underclass. In images, rhythms and verbal textures that often seem like written analogues to his paintings, Wojnarowicz displays an ability to capture the insensate beauty of much of the American landscape, and light it with a burning human hunger: "Down along the service road the prehistoric silhouettes of sixteen-wheel rigs ground their gears in the blackness. . . . As each cab swung by me there was a video blaze of tiny green and red ornamental cab lights framing the darkened windows

containing a momentary fractured bare arm or dim face filled with the stony gaze of road life." In the course of this memoir, the author coolly sketches the outlines of a troubled adolescence--parental kidnapping, drug use, prostitution--making survival alone seem miraculous. What Kerouac was to a generation of alienated youth, what Genet was to the gay demimonde in postwar Europe, Wojnarowicz may well be to a new cadre of artists compelled by circumstance to speak out in behalf of personal freedom. This is a book sublime in poetry, fierce in outrage. Author tour. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Wojnarowicz is a controversial contemporary artist who drew national attention when the NEA withdrew a grant for the artist's gallery, Artist's Space, in response to the lacerating essay he wrote about AIDS to accompany the show. He later sued the Reverend Donald Wildmon for copyright infringement and misrepresentation for using excerpts from his works when testifying before Congress. The book deals with subjects that arouse varied responses but rarely indifference. This very angry young man, the product of a lifetime of abuse inflicted by himself as well as others, is a traveler on the road to emotional and physical disintegration. Neither an autobiography nor essays, the work consists of segments, of incidents and images, some outrageous, some moving. It is an attempt to afford the reader a glimpse into outsider society but does so in a way that seems to aim more at alienation than amity. There is great pain here and a plea for compassion, but the rage and fear of which he accuses the establishment seems as much an echo of his own voice as it is of outside reality.- Paula Frosch, Metropolitan Museum of Art Lib., New YorkCopyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Autobiographical, starts off very personal then becomes increasingly political. I never met him and he was probably inventing his persona, but the voice he's telling his story in just sounds so natural to me. I loved it. It felt like he was in the room. If you're looking for a life story that reads almost like a novel and tells how the artist got from A to B to C, this is not it. It's much more like you're just meeting someone at a party who likes to talk a lot, and you end up listening all night, and you still only know a little bit about them by morning, but that's okay.

Incredible book of amazing depth and heart-wrenching power. I love this book. It inspired me to make a comic about him.

Enter the young male prostitute, performance artist, author, street monger, and angry prophet. He

was all of these things and more until AIDS finally claimed him. But with *Close to the Knives*, he has left us all a very precious legacy--a frame of reference that begs us to truly witness the politics of suffering in American society and become more compassionate in the process. His omnivorous approach to our culture is dizzying, enraging, mysterious, beautiful, dangerous, heartbreakin, and very very necessary. When I finished reading it, I turned it over and started again. I will never be the same.....I have been galvanized.

David Wojnarowicz had the microscopic observations of a child. His descriptions were extraordinarily finely detailed and nuanced. But they were direct and stark too. His insights were fascinating. His narrative didn't so much flow, as roll like a boulder. This is sharp, even piercing writing from a totally off kilter perspective. Most of us do not see life this way. His world was peopled with damaged friends. He said everyone he knew came from a family of abusive parents, not least his own. His friends were all on the edge, leading fringe lives in which they all psychoanalyzed each other and the country at large from painful perspectives. They lived bizarrely. There was a lot of violence, a lot suicide, and a lot of AIDS. There is constant sex, sometimes romantic, usually brutal, often filthy, always craved. He was never truly happy, but he was happiest outside his nonexistent comfort zone. *“Transition is always a relief. Destination means death to me. If I could figure out a way to be forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom.*” That's the best definition he could admit to, and it's more than most could own up to. His thoughts and dreams were populated with hallways, often long, often dark. I've never seen the word hallway so many times in a book. Uncertainty played an outsized role in his short life. The second half of the book is less enthralling, because it is transcripts of interviews he taped of his friends. It is their words, not his. The interviews serve to bring them closer, before they die off in rapid succession. The hunger for more of Wojnarowicz's own writing has to wait to the end, where he intersperses the description of a bullfight in Mexico with thoughts and reminiscences it inspires. And almost every paragraph admonishes us to smell the flowers while we can. He did not. Unfortunately for all of us, the last years of his life were consumed with caring for friends with AIDS, followed by his own case. His fury at the hypocrisy of the dominating government agencies and officials, and especially at the self contradictory and insufferable Church, enraged and changed him. We can't even imagine what kind of writer he might have become without that ugly diversion. That is possibly an even greater tragedy. This will have to be eloquent enough. David Wineberg

I liked the writing style but much of the content was too graphic for my taste. It was assigned reading for a memoir writing class. I would not have chosen to read it otherwise.

David Wojnarowicz reveals his backstory in layers, throughout the course of this essay collection. Eventually a complete picture is conjured, of Wojnarowicz' dysfunctional family, his youth on the streets, prostitution, and same-sex lust. His writing is very natural; alternating at first between his sexual and suicidal fantasies, before unleashing his wrath for the American politicians who are deliberately withholding information about AIDS from the public (a condition which Wojnarowicz himself is battling.) The information imparted here is shocking; the insidious influence of the church in American government is uncovered here lucidly, and David gets personal -- introducing one of his dearest friends who eventually dies from AIDS. His grief takes on a political significance, as he has lost many friends to the disease, and is aware that this suffering is unnecessary, and could have been prevented. This book is very intense, and David Wojnarowicz' prose is potent and often original, but towards the end it starts to unravel. He begins using more experimental techniques, such as dream sequences, interviews, and motifs ("Smell the flowers while you can"), as well as alternating between two separate narratives, which I found self-indulgent and wearisome. Maybe it was cathartic for him as a writer, but from the reader's point of view, tying together these seemingly (and perhaps actually) unrelated threads just ultimately wasn't worth the effort. After being seduced by Wojnarowicz' prose initially, the final impression left on me wasn't particularly positive, as the message had been hammered home quite well enough by then, and I had to force myself to get to the end.

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