

The Culture of AIDS

BOOKS

Code of Conduct

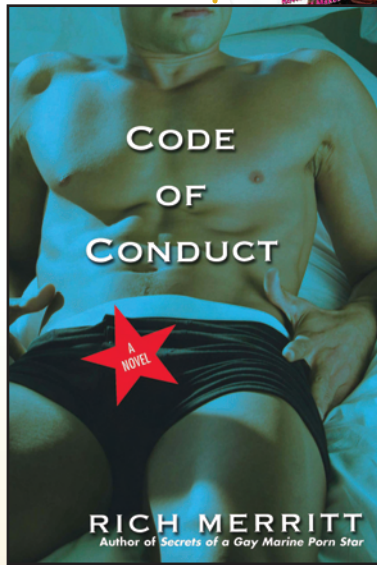
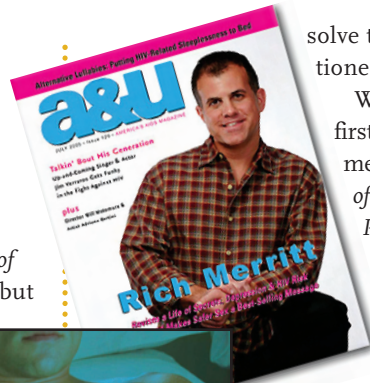
by Rich Merritt
Kensington Publishing Corporation

Rich Merritt's second book, *Code of Conduct*, includes an HIV character, but does not overwhelm with that storyline. Instead, life with HIV is a theme woven among others, including gay life, the military, life during the early 1990s—when the book is set—and others, including a military crime.

In this way, HIV is normalized—for lack of a better word, unlike it is in many works of fiction. That is to say it is both more realistic and less melodramatic. Merritt's book reflects both the blessing and the curse that HIV has become a normalized part of our culture.

Because the book draws on the author's military background (thirteen years in the U.S. Marines), it is infused with military jargon and customs. At first it may seem to the reader that, without a thorough understanding of military life, you cannot digest or enjoy the book, but this is not the case. In fact, the authenticity of the military milieu goes a long way toward establishing a background against which the book is set.

There have been too few tellings of everyday gay life in and around the U.S. military. It's good to see this one and good to see it includes aspects of day-to-day life for someone HIV-positive and in the military. That which is at first daunting becomes compelling. In fact, the appreciation of military culture that will grow on a reader also will help them



solve the aforementioned crime.

Whereas his first book, a memoir, *Secrets of a Gay Marine Porn Star* (profiled in *A&U* in July 2005, along with its author), was one man's

story of life in the Marines, here we see the lives of a number of gay and lesbian service men and women in several branches of military service.

This realism is again apparent as the reader begins to gain a sense of how much—and how little—things have changed for the U.S. military between 1993 and present day. Fortunately, readers of Merritt's *Code of Conduct* will

have a special perspective on that continuum of change.

—B. Andrew Plant

Dangerous Surrender

by Kay Warren
Zondervan Books

Dangerous Surrender by Kay Warren is a dangerous text. Kay, wife of Rick Warren, the pastor of a mega-church in California, asserts that the intention of the book is to bring the worldwide AIDS crisis to the fore of Christian awareness. However, the book hardly spends any time on AIDS in America. Furthermore, the crisis within the gay community is blatantly skimmed over. According to the consciousness of *Dangerous Surrender*, AIDS is an affliction of poor mothers and babies in African nations and India.

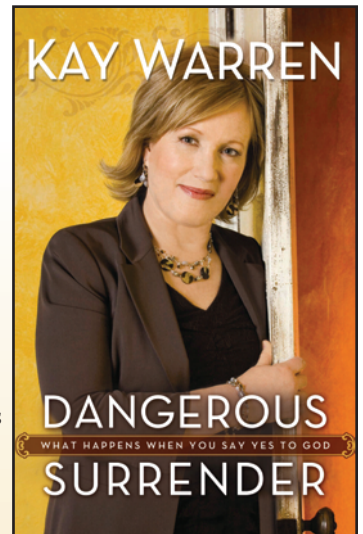
Furthermore, the book often digresses away from the issue of AIDS and

reads more like a memoir about Kay's life. She spends entire chapters on her battle with breast cancer and the sexual molestation that she experienced as a young girl. Furthermore, she posits that "only the church can stop AIDS" but says precious little about preventative methods like sexual education and free prophylaxis. While AIDS is certainly a major problem in Africa, there are many Americans suffering from the physical effects of the syndrome, not to mention the prejudice that is bound up in positive status. In the beginning of the book, Warren

accepts the fact that a great deal of prejudice against people with HIV/AIDS and against the gay community has been perpetuated by the Christian church, but she does not discuss how this might be changed.

All in all, the book provides an underdeveloped and warped view of HIV/AIDS as an affliction of impoverished people who have dark complexions and live in far away, exotic places.

—Diane Goettel



B. Andrew (Drew) Plant is a freelance writer and PR consultant who serves as *A&U*'s Editor at Large. He can be reached in care of www.BAndrewPlant.com.

Diane Goettel is a Brooklyn-based writer and editor of *The Adirondack Review* as well as the managing editor of The Black Lawrence Press. A member of the New York Writers Coalition, she leads weekly creative writing workshops. E-mail: diane@blacklawrencepress.com.