

## **Cheryl Ware review of Dennis Altman, *Unrequited Love: Diary of an Accidental Activist***

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The late twentieth century witnessed significant transformations in the social lives and political statuses of gay men and lesbians. From the late 1960s, the international gay and lesbian liberation movements propelled discussions about sex and sexuality into the public arena as individuals demonstrated against discriminatory legislation and police harassment, and declared pride in their sexualities. It was during this period that 21-year-old Dennis Altman—who had recently left Hobart for New York as a ‘shy and naïve graduate student’ (p. 3)—became an ‘accidental activist’ by writing about the burgeoning gay liberation movement.

I came to Altman’s writings as an oral historian interested in the intimate lives of gay men who lived through the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. While Altman acknowledges that his tendency to write from the first person is a ‘largely unacceptable style within academia’ (p. xii), such a balance between personal reflections and academic argument is one of the major strengths of his work and is a key feature of this memoir. Since the publication of his influential text *Homosexual: Oppression & Liberation* in 1971, Altman has authored 13 books and many more articles and chapters that offer insights into the international fight for gay and lesbian rights, political and community-based responses to HIV and AIDS, and the globalisation of sexuality, among other topics. These texts have solidified his reputation as a pioneering activist, academic and leading political commentator.

*Unrequited Love: Diary of an Accidental Activist* traces Altman’s love affair with the United States, beginning with his enrolment as a Fulbright Scholar at Cornell University in the mid-1960s. Drawing predominantly on his personal memories and a ‘very sketchy’ diary he has kept for almost 50 years, Altman guides readers through several decades of activism, his academic career in Australia, America, Europe and Asia, and his friendships and exchanges with other writers who have been instrumental to shifting understandings of sex and sexuality. *Unrequited Love* is a particular form of memoir that is framed from events that took place between 2016 and 2019. This style enables Altman to discuss both his memories of the past and to engage with contemporary sexual politics and events. These include his commentaries on the international #MeToo movement and the marriage equality campaign. Indeed, the Australian Government’s controversial decision to launch

a non-binding postal survey to garner public opinion on same sex marriage in 2017 forced thousands to 'relive adolescent traumas, to come out again, in the spotlight of national attention' (p. 91).

The book's title not only reflects Altman's personal engagement with the United States over the last 5 decades, but also alludes to Australia's one-sided affinity for the country, evidenced by the strong sense of betrayal some Australians felt with the election of Donald Trump as president in November 2016 (p. x). Altman identifies the responses to HIV and AIDS as particularly explicit examples of the extent to which the United States influences Australia. Specifically, Australian activists took the lead from their American counterparts and established local chapters of the vocal organisation AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) that originated in New York in 1987. Commemorative events such as the annual AIDS Candlelight Memorial and the AIDS Memorial Quilt began in San Francisco, in 1983 and 1985 respectively. Yet Australia's progressive policy responses to the threat of HIV and AIDS has surpassed that of the United States. From the mid-1980s, public health officials in Australia worked alongside communities to establish a collaborative and proactive response to the risk of HIV and AIDS that some historians have identified as one of the best in the world. Nevertheless, just as Altman's enthusiasm for the United States in the 1980s sometimes 'blinded' him to what was happening in Australia, America has shown 'almost zero interest' in Australia's history of HIV and AIDS (p. xiii).

*Unrequited Love* is a particularly moving demonstration of the value of engaging with the voices of those who lived through the critical years of gay liberation in the 1970s and the immediate impact of HIV and AIDS over the following decades. The onset of HIV and AIDS galvanised many members of the LGBTIQ community who campaigned for faster access to medication, provided emotional and economic support for those with the virus and grieved the loss of the countless gay men who died too soon. Altman remembers attending lengthy board meetings as vice president of the Victorian AIDS Council in the early 1990s and the lack of effective medication, yet also the 'moments of real community' (p. 173) that have become one of the lasting legacies of the global epidemic. Writing about the human impact of HIV and AIDS was itself a deeply personal experience for Altman, and 'unlock[ed] the long list of men whose lives touched mine in various ways, and who should now be growing old with me' (p. 85). This included the 'intensely private' activist and author Robert Ariss, alongside whom Altman served on the Australian National Council on AIDS, and whose doctoral thesis *Against Death: The Practice of Living with AIDS* (1997) was published 3 years after his death.

The memoir offers a commentary on the importance of life writing, which provides a 'tangible way' to pass on stories and a means to correct 'contemporary misreadings' of past events. It is especially pressing in the aftermath of HIV and AIDS that 'hollowed out the generation who should now be reaching retirement' (p. xi).

*Unrequited Love* is then, at least in part, a response to concerns that individuals' personal memories and stories of those critical years will be lost. Altman identifies the increasing emphasis on oral history and authenticity as reasons for the greater demands for the stories of those who lived through these movements. Oral history is certainly an important means of engaging with individuals' intimate lives and personal reflections. Altman previously shared his experiences during an oral history interview with women's studies scholar and now Emeritus Professor Jill Matthews in 1991 and during an interview for the Australian Response to AIDS Oral History Project in 1993. The rich collections of oral history interviews across Australia are a testament to the public interest in the lives and memories of those who lived through and, in many ways, pioneered social transformations in the lives of LGBTIQ individuals. The National Library of Australia hosts extensive collections of interviews including the Australian Lesbian and Gay Life Stories, the LGBTIQ Pioneers, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and the HIV/AIDS Volunteers oral history projects. Regional groups including the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Melbourne and the Pride History Group in Sydney host valuable collections that feature in-depth interviews with prominent and less publicly known LGBTIQ individuals.

*Unrequited Love* guides readers through Altman's career, especially after he moved from Sydney to New York in 1981 to 'live out the fantasy of becoming a real writer' (p. 107). He spent the following months completing the final edits of *The Homosexualization of America* (1982) and frequented seminars dominated by the presence of Susan Sontag at New York University's Institute for the Humanities. He shares his enjoyment of writing *Global Sex* (2001) and the subsequent promotion events in Manhattan and Mexico City, and his more recent collaboration with friend and colleague Jonathan Symons, with whom he co-authored *Queer Wars: The New Global Polarization Over Gay Rights* (2016).

In this regard, the book delves into Altman's personal connections with friends and colleagues, many of whom will be familiar names among readers. He recounts attending New Year's Eve parties in Balmain hosted by Australian historian and activist Lex Watson, and discussing the sacrifices of activism with fellow writer Danny Vadasz, the co-founder of the Melbourne-based periodical *Gay Community News*. Altman reflects on the 'surprisingly kind' and generous Gore Vidal, who became the focus of his book *Gore Vidal's America* (2005), and Michel Foucault's ambivalence to the gay movement, which he identified as a shared sentiment among intellectuals of Foucault's generation.

Yet the book offers more. It extends beyond Altman's professional academic career and public involvement in activism to reflect on his personal life as the son of Jewish refugee parents in postwar Australia. He draws on his May 2017 visit to the German town of Charlottenburg, where both of his parents had lived at different times, as a starting point to discuss his heritage. This section of the memoir offers a moving

account of his parents' journeys through Europe to Australia. His mother's family had escaped to Berlin via Poland, and then to Melbourne shortly before Hitler's rise to power, while his father had fled Vienna and arrived in Sydney—with his stamp collection in tow—in 1938. Stamp collecting became a shared experience between Altman and his father, and the role of stamps as political symbols became the focus of his coffee table book *Paper Ambassadors: The Politics of Stamps* (1991).

The memoir sheds light on the grief Altman experienced following the loss of Anthony Smith, his partner of 22 years. Anthony served as president of the Northern Territory AIDS Council and later became one of the founding staff members of what is now the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University in Melbourne. He collaborated with Anne Mitchell to develop some of the first surveys of high school students' knowledge and behaviours regarding sexual health. The project revealed the high number of students who feared for their safety and felt unable to speak openly about their genders and sexualities, and formed the foundation for the Safe Schools Program. Anthony's presence as an accomplished researcher and life partner is felt throughout the book. Altman recounted the 'lifelong grief and longing' and the awareness that 'each day the dead are further lost to us' (pp. 14–15). The 2014 International AIDS Conference in Melbourne was an important turning point. It not only meant he felt ready to shift away from 3 decades of AIDS activism, but he also identified the conference as the time when grief 'cease[d] to be the dominant theme in [his] life' (p. 47).

The book celebrates some of the key achievements of gay liberation. This is illustrated in Altman's comparison between himself and Benjamin Law, author of the *Quarterly Essay* on the controversy surrounding the Safe Schools Program. Specifically, Altman's experience of coming out at a time when homosexuality was deemed a medical condition and sex between men was criminalised across Australia marks a clear departure from the world Law and his generation encountered. Nevertheless, the 'vicious campaign' targeted at those responsible for delivering the Safe Schools Program, which the federal government ceased funding at the end of 2016, is a particularly explicit example of a 'subterranean backlash' (p. 45).

In this vein, the book offers a caution against the 'triumphalism' that surrounded the 40th anniversary of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 2018. He argues that such celebrations tend to focus on progress with less acknowledgement of the ongoing issues that LGBTIQ individuals and others face in Australia and elsewhere. These include concerns about protecting queer students in schools, especially with the end of the Safe Schools Program, and the Australian Government's treatment of asylum seekers—some of whom fled persecution because of their sexualities—who were then detained in offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru. He also articulated concerns about Australians' 'remarkable lack of interest' in the decline of democratic freedoms in the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia, despite political rhetoric about Australia's closeness to these nations (p. 70), and

the return of oppressive governments in various countries including Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Venezuela. The immediate impact of the Trump administration, which reversed decades of progress and is making it more acceptable for people to express prejudices in public platforms, is a further example of such backlash.

This engaging memoir guides readers through some of the key events in Altman's adult life. It introduces readers to fleeting and lifelong friendships, the triumphs and limitations in gay liberation and his reflections on recent political issues. By framing the book from the present, Altman offers thoughtful and insightful observations on current political crises and cautions readers against overlooking current deprivations of human rights in favour of celebrating progress. *Unrequited Love* strikes the careful balance between personal experience and academic commentary and this is a true strength of Altman's work.

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