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Larry Kramer , Reynolds Price (Foreword by)

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Larry Kramer's Faggots has been in print since its original publication in 1978 and has become one of the best-selling novels about gay life ever written. The book is a fierce satire of the gay ghetto and a touching story of one man's desperate search for love there, and reading it today is a fascinating look at how much, and how little, has changed.

Faggots Details

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From Reader Review *Faggots* for online ebook

Nathan says

As I read *Faggots*, I imagined each character at some point laying in a chaise lounge and talking about their awful childhoods. And I imagined Larry Kramer sitting right beside them with a little notepad where he wrote in big letters and underlined multiple times one of two diagnoses: "mommy issues" or "daddy issues". This is a book filled with outdated psychoanalysis and characters straight out of Freud with mothers straight out of Roth. This is the second least erotic book about sex I've ever read. This is a book so chock full of cliches that it's impossible to read and not feel a little agitated. And yet I still enjoyed a good deal of it. Yes, Kramer has some nasty internalized homophobia going on here, and yes he makes the case that deep inside every queer man is a desire to meet a nice Jewish boy and settle down in the suburbs, but on the odd occurrences where he knows where he's talking about he's very funny and right on the money. So I'm giving this 3 stars to indicate my love hate relationship with it.

Brian says

Typical Larry Kramer. Bring your own iconic "cachet" to the table, mix in plenty of defiant f-you attitude, and adopt the posture of creating "a brutally frank document of a unique time and circumstance" and presto, you are free to verbally fetishize all the astounding self-indulgence and destruction of your past, and have it called literature.

Get off the pedestal you put yourself on Larry, and remove your homemade hero medals. You're not a rebel. You're a grouchy old bipedal hard-on with a good vocabulary.

Pure crap.

Corinne E. Blackmer says

However lost on critics, not to mention members of the gay establishment at the time, "*Faggots*" is a brilliant Mephinnean satire that takes as the object of its satire the intellectual conceit of gay sexual liberation, and the notion that gay culture would occupy a leadership position in showing America how to overcome its sexual prudery and commitment to values such as fidelity, monogamy, and true love. In fact, Kramer explores a subculture in which nothing is taboo except for the concept of monogamous love between men, which everyone says they want and no one does anything positive to achieve.

The central protagonist in this epic sexual-cultural-historical novel is the screenwriter Ned Lemish, who is a stand in for Larry Kramer. He descends into an underground sex world in New York City, as in *Fire Island*, in which no position, combination of positions, times and places for sex, or sexual behaviors are off limits. The grand scene occurs when a drop dead gorgeous young man who wants to be a model comes to New York, is given drugs, and is gradually swooped upon by an army of vulturous men, who gang rape him and others until the point of unconsciousness. There is a scene, in *Fire Island*, of the ultimate sexual masochism, in which a man who refuses to love Fred submits himself to anal fist sex administered by a horde of men who participate in and watch this spectacle as if it has the sacred meaning of a transformational ritual.

Kramer deplores the taboo on faithful love, as he deplores the situation where the only way gay men can communicate is through sex and more sex.

Paul Bryant says

I wonder why I never reviewed Faggots before? Oh, that's right, I was scared to! Because if I recommend it very strongly, which I would very much like to do, and people here actually give it a go, I might end up with swathes of people defriending me on the spot and writing rude comments on my profile. So : don't read this if you have a nervous disposition. Please! Because Larry Kramer will discombobulate your psychosexual equilibrium. He will make you boggle, along the lines of *do guys really do that?* followed swiftly by **can guys really do that?? oh my - pass the smelling salts, Ethel.**

This is a pre-Aids novel which hilariously satirised fast-track New York gay life in the 70s. You laugh, you cringe, you may barf, and you end up really liking most of these guys. I mean - the fun they had! The drugs they took! But Larry actually wanted them to STOP! RIGHT NOW! or at least SLOOOOW DOWWWWN. He was the lone voice saying to gay men - this hectic crazy unlimited drugs&sex&discoballs lifestyle is gonna hit a brick wall soon. Larry didn't know what the brick wall would be, he just felt it in his bones. All his pals though he was just mean old party pooper Larry. Only a few short years after Faggots was published, along came Aids, and Larry was like *hate to say this guys but I told you so* and they were all *aw shit Larry, you so did, you jerk*. So Larry became a big Aids campaigner and wrote a play called The Normal Heart which was not that good but got a lot of attention and he became a polemicist, fighting several good fights. And he's still alive!

Back to Faggots. Here's a quote from the author:

"The straight world thought I was repulsive, and the gay world treated me like a traitor. People would literally turn their back when I walked by. You know what my real crime was? I put the truth in writing. That's what I do: I have told the fucking truth to everyone I have ever met."

If you read this novel, which as you know I'm not sure you should, it depends, you will see why it produced such an uproar. It's merciless. It's excruciating. Gay men are not shown in a good light. They are shown to be shallow, vain, and like a lot of well-dressed bunny-rabbits who've been reading too much Marquis de Sade for their own good. I didn't know any of this stuff when I read it, and I can see why they might want straight people not to know this stuff. These days, thirty years on from the late 70s, maybe people do know this stuff, but maybe not as well. So it still might shock.

But it's funny. It made me howl. And shudder. And howl. So, give it fifty pages. Page 47 might be the deal-breaker.

Keith says

So far this book as been true to form on what transpires in the gay community. Whether its was back in the 70's or present day. We have all experienced or been privy to the ramped drugs scene at all the clubs as well as those circuit parties. What I still to this day don't understand is when gay men who spend hours and hours

in the gym to develop the supposed perfect body to attract only the same type of guy (if they are lucky). But then some of those same men that only work on their outer-shells then head to these club and/or circuit parties and continually pump their chiseled & well defined body with all sort of drugs. WTF????

Ahhhh male to male relationships, Larry hits this topic out of the park for me. I think any gay man who reads this book can relate to any one of these characters who is looking for LOVE - L' Amour-L'Amour.... You could be looking for THE ONE for LIFE, or THE ONE for THAT NIGHT, or for THE ONE THAT HOUR. Again my opinion, but I am thankful that we have the ability to have these type of experiences-relationships. So when you reach a point in your life and are done with 'THAT GAY SCENE' you are able to ascertain almost exactly what you want in a guy and in a long-term relationship. What works, what doesn't and how to perceive together as a couple to make a lasting and loving match (hopefully for life).

Jason Keller says

"Yes, sex and love were different items when he wanted them in one, and yes, having so much sex made having love impossible, and yes, sadism was only a way to keep people away from us and masochism only a way to clutch them close, and yes, we are sadists with some guys and masochists with other guys and sometimes both with both, and yes, we're all out of the closet but we're still in the ghetto and all I see is guys hurting each other and themselves. But how to get out! And yes, the world is giving us a bad name and we're giving us a bad name and one of us has got to stop and it's not going to be the world." (31-32)

"...every faggot, though I shall not use this word, considers his homosexuality as very special to him, in the sense of sacrosanct, like a pain which he has lived with a very long time. Thus it becomes a sacred pain, and one which is difficult to challenge on the one hand, or to share with another faggot on the other, whose comprehension of exactly the same pain would seem to make him the obvious choice of sharer, helpmate, lover, but which, in fact, makes him just the opposite: makes him a combatant in the same arena, fighting to see who is the victor over the same spoils - these spoils being the same Pandora's Box of pain." (63)

Konrad says

I thought I was actually going to like *Faggots*. The mythos behind the book is irresistible for a start: shrewd lone wolf foresees impending destruction of his community and writes fiery polemic as a clarion call to action, only to be cruelly shunned by hedonists unwilling for the good times to end. Who doesn't want to stand alongside Kramer, maligned and outcast, screaming his famous line - 'We're fucking ourselves to death!' - into the forthcoming abyss?

Having read it, however, I now understand the hate. The gay community didn't turn on this novel because it spat out a few caustic home truths. *Faggots* was rejected because it was, and remains, a bad novel. The writing is garrulous and bombastic, relentlessly - Kramer seems to be shooting for 'manic brilliance' but comes across as lazy and unfocused instead. His characters are a litany of overcooked stereotypes - the young, dumb twink; the predatory older men - and his morality has all the subtlety of an Anita Bryant.

The obvious defense against all these charges - 'It's just satire, and you didn't get it' - doesn't really hold

water. Perhaps Kramer thought satire was simply a case of imitate, exaggerate and regurgitate, but to be truly effective satire needs to go a step further, actively sympathising with and developing an affinity for its source matter. The satirist needs to get into the minds of his or her subjects and explore their serious hopes and dreams in order to finally play up the absurdity and frailty of them. Some people can do this well - Andrew Holleran is one (although I dislike *Dancer from the Dance* for other reasons.) But Kramer never thinks to scratch away at the surface of his characters, as Holleran does, to see what's really driving them. Ultimately he misses every punch he throws.

The only other defense of the novel - that Kramer foresaw what others couldn't - is, well, insufficient. As Reed Woodhouse puts it in his own critique of *Faggots*: 'I cannot like this book for that reason alone: a novel is not a prediction.' If only Kramer had stepped down from his pedestal, reeled in his pious moralising and tried to unpick what was *really* going on in the minds of those he lambasts, perhaps then his message would have resonated.

Aitziber says

Faggots was a difficult read that really shouldn't have taken me three months to complete. Like many others on Goodreads, I came to this book by way of Randy Shilts' *The Band Played On*.

It's hard to pinpoint what in this book is satire, and what is accurate portrayal. The man Dinky was based on, and Larry Kramer's now husband, said *Faggots* was a complete assault on his privacy, with Kramer digging trash out of his wastebasket, like Fred does to Dinky at one point. Certainly, the almost compulsory forays into BDSM, the powerful men all trying to get at the new hot piece, the Patty Hearst wannabe who dreams of a great life if only he carries out his own kidnapping . . . all sound plausible enough for the time. I would like to think that the Freudian "we're all looking for daddy's approval!" motives assigned to the characters are where the satire comes in, but I can't say for certain.

This book is a look into a subculture of days past. While some still have unsafe sex, the New York City portrayed in *Faggots* is no longer, simply because we can't afford to these days. Celebrities come out more often too, and have relationships in the public eye, something Winnie Heinz in the book would've never dared to do.

I fought to finish this book, which is why I've only given it three stars, but I was surprised to realize, once I was done, that I wanted to know what happened to the characters afterwards. I guess we know what became of Fred and Dinky! And come on, how many books will I read with a climax that involves fisting?

Allan says

I first heard of this book when I read Randy Shilts' history of the AIDS crisis, 'And the Band Played On' about 10 years ago, and was aware of its controversial nature in both the straight and gay world. It came to my attention again recently when watching a PBS special on the author, so I bought a second hand copy. On

reading it's easy to see what all the furore was about.

The book was published in 1978, a couple of years before the first AIDS deaths, at the height of the hedonistic lifestyle that many gay men, having found the liberation they craved, had carved out for themselves. From a 21st century perspective, even having read historical accounts and memoirs about the era, reading this novel and realising that it was written from within and isn't considered to be exaggerated, it's pretty shocking - the desire for that next high, in whatever form, driving people who in the outside world are the same as anyone else, to greater and greater extremities.

Fred, Kramer's fictional embodiment, desires something different - the love of one person, rather than the physical pleasure freely available from casual hookups, and has his eyes opened to the whole scene by the behaviour of Dinky, the object of his affection, who plays him as well as a string of others along, and is fully embroiled in the hedonism. As well as documenting the physical embodiment of the scene, through Fred, Kramer manages to lay bare the emotional wasteland that the desire for pleasure created at the time.

This is a difficult read, that to be honest became tedious about 250 pages in, due to its disagreeable characters and repetitive action, but as a social document I feel it's definitely worthwhile. Given Kramer's later work in AIDS activism, the prophetic nature of the dangers of such behaviours of the author would be ironic if it wasn't so sad.

I didn't enjoy the book but I'm glad that I read it.

mark monday says

larry kramer sure had problems with his fellow queers! a depressing and desperately unfunny read, written by someone who needed to let the love in a little. but hey, he went on to found act-up, so maybe this was a useful exorcism of sorts.

Dusty Myers says

Right from his choice of a title, Larry Kramer—one of the founders of AIDS activist group ACT-UP and still today a vocal, vehement critic of both AIDS policy and queer promiscuity—positions himself and his novel as a harsh critique. This won't be a glowing portrait of gay men in New York City nearly a decade after the Stonewall Riots. It probably won't even be a fair one. Instead, the book is a mix of loathing—of the self, of other gay men—and celebration, an attempt at gathering strength. Or, as Kramer attributes to his stand-in, Fred Lemish, "[D]id he not hate that word 'gay'? He thought it a strange categorizer of a life style with many elements far from zippy. No, he would de-kike the word 'faggot,' which had punch, bite, a no-nonsense, chin-out assertiveness, and which, at present, was no more self-depricatory than, say, 'American'" (31).

The novel takes place over Memorial Day weekend 1977, when the historic Everard Baths burned down, killing nine men. This event concludes the book's opening act, continuing through the death of Winnie Heinz, the Marlboro Man, during the opening of a new disco the next night, and the start of the summer season on Fire Island that culminates in the novel's climax: the public, orgiastic double-fisting of Fred's paramour, Dinky Adams, in the "Meat Rack"—an off-the-beaten-path area of the Fire Island Pines.

The amount of sex in this novel could rival all of Edmund White's autobiographical trilogy, but for Kramer, sex isn't always (actually, it's rarely) the self-affirming experience many gay men of his generation paint it to be. Instead, it's reckless, drawn here in his novel so often as a caricature. This is part of my attraction to the book; the way it quite smartly makes fun of the idea that rampant fucking is somehow intrinsic to gay identity. Here's how Richie Bronstein, the closeted son of a wealthy film executive, puts it: "[H]e knew there was a pit of sexuality out there and that he longed to throw himself into it.

I have to! I have to! he would torture himself before several hours napping in his lofted bed. Because it's part of the faggot life style—to find abandonment and freedom through ecstasy—fucking and being fucked and light s & m and shitting and pissing and Oh I want to be abandoned! and where's my copy of the Avocado" (60-61).

In watching the man he's been for years obsessed with get fisted by two strangers while dozens of leering men watch, Fred is finally able to see Dinky's inherent sadness and emptiness, and that night they amicably "break up" (quotes because Dinky can never be said to be with any one man). The final pages of the novel show gay men simply together, not fucking or fighting or both, but just sitting together on the sand as the sun rises over Fire Island, and passing from lips to ears and lips to ears is one repeated phrase: "I love you."

It's a sentimental ending to an otherwise angry novel, and it comes a little out of nowhere, but what's important about it is that it pushes Kramer's argument toward a kind of solution: less fucking, more loving. That this book was written four years before AIDS broke in the newspaper makes it all the more important.

João says

Na "capital homossexual do mundo" (Nova Iorque) dos loucos anos pré-SIDA, seja nos bairros gay de Greenwich, em Washington Sq ou Christopher Street, numa das saunas gay da cidade, na inauguração da super-discoteca gay mais incrível de sempre ou no paraíso homossexual à beira-mar que era Fire Island, ninguém se importa com nada que não seja o prazer físico e sensual, sexo desenfreado, em grupo, anónimo, leather, s-m, fisting, muito... mas Fred compreende que procura apenas amor!

Talvez o livro mais realista e profundamente conhecedor da cena gay novaiorquina dos anos 1970. E enredo é muito solto, os personagens multiplicam-se de tal forma que lhes perdemos o rasto, mas no final da leitura ficamos com a sensação de que estivemos a apreciar um quadro complexo, uma obra-prima de um mestre. Jerónimo Bosch, por exemplo.

Jason says

This book presents a satire of 1970s gay life. Through its overly complicated writing style, confusingly large cast of characters, and melodramatic and unrealistic dialog, it boils down to one impotent criticism: gay men make poor life decisions because they have daddy issues.

The book is poor quality literature even if your view of books falls into the Wilde/Nabokov school that what determines the quality of the book is the quality of the writing and not the content of its message. "Message" aside, Kramer's phrase structure is circuitously hard to follow, not a crime in itself if it weren't so flat. As a result, his attempts to shock with raunchy scenarios fail, mere strings of "bad words" attached to inadequately described locations and interchangeable characters.

He attempts to satire then-modern gay life but makes only outdated criticism--criticism you'd expect to hear from a pastor or psychologist in 1950, not from a gay man in nearly 10 years after Stonewall. But, consider the source, Larry Kramer, and the novel's place as merely the first of many of Kramer's obnoxious and artless complaints thrust at a gay culture that would not bend to his Stepford values or validate his vitriol and victim complex, and the novel's shortcomings appear inevitable. Written in response to being jilted by an ex-lover, it's another overreaction by an abrasive and vengeful Kramer.

Portraying gay men as devil-may-care sexual and pharmacological hedonists, this pulpy tragedia views gay culture with a moralistic, judeo-christian lens that cannot move beyond its own biases when confronting sexually liberated characters, pigeonholing them into a single facile typecast stock photocopied from character to character: the self-hating fag. How could gay men have so much crazy sex while seeking love? "They must dislike themselves" just doesn't cut it as cultural or literary analysis.

Gerhard says

Larry Kramer's eponymous 1978 novel is one whose reputation precedes it. Apparently condemned upon its publication due to its singular (and single-minded) focus on drugs-and-fucking in the New York gay scene in the 1970s, the truth is always both more. And less.

Reading the book today, especially given the international brouhaha over gay marriage, and the manifestation of strange forms of agit-prop like the Kim Davis case in the US, what I found most surprising about *Faggots* is how unpolitical it seems.

A good example of this is the infamous Everhard fire, with Kramer noting that "seven brothers perished". But this becomes more of a footnote than a warning to the general refrain that "We have to disco and drug and fuck if we want to live fantastic!"

Also, and this is probably one of the side-effects of the novel that Kramer could not possibly have foreseen: *Faggots* today reads like an elegy to a lost age, rather than a dire warning of a pending gay apocalypse in the form of the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s.

Many gay people today come from cultures, families and countries where being gay is an exceedingly complex negotiation between societal and religious expectations and personal convictions. Many gay people have never, ever experienced the kind of totally open and life-affirming community that Kramer describes in *Faggots*, and which one could argue was both its artistic and personal peak.

Those detractors who argue that the book focuses on drugs-and-fucking to the total exclusion of any sense of these characters' ordinary lives ignore Kramer's savviness as a writer. There is an astonishing set piece early on, where Garfield's doorman clocks in a record 80 'single gentlemen' before 21:30 to his apartment. The vast range of occupations and class status gives a tantalising glimpse into the depth that the gay community had achieved in what is an incredibly short period. Kramer lists these with a kind of journalistic fervour:

...five attorneys, three art directors, seven models, ten would-be models, twelve said-they-were models, one journalist, three hairdressers (one specialising in colour), two antique dealers, one typewriter repairman, one manager of a Holiday Inn, one garbage collector, two construction workers, one toll collector from the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, three policemen, two firemen (one out of state), seven hustlers (three full-time),

one elevator operator (Garfield's landlord's son), one bass player, five doctors, twelve students, one ethnic dancer, two restaurateurs (one fancy, one shit food), one judge (rather old, but Garfield had to remember business), one newscaster, one weather man, one football player, one folk singer, four truck drivers, twenty-nine on unemployment, eleven unidentified, and the new assistant Orthodox rabbi for a congregation in Seattle.

(The latter is part of a very funny Jewish riff running throughout the book about the *fagolim* and their weird proclivities, such as 'tinkling' on each other).

I suppose another wholly unintentional aspect of Kramer's book is how much ammunition it gives to anti-gay detractors and protestors to decry the 'gay lifestyle' as utterly immoral and devoid of any meaningful social relevance or human contact.

A good example of Kramer's refreshingly direct, and therefore scandalously provocative, approach to this issue is the following comment: "Sex and love are different and any faggot given half a choice will take the former. And probably fucked with Adolf Hitler if he'd been cute!" The implication here is that sex is the be-all and end-all of gay life, and that gay men are completely indiscriminate in service of their cocks. Kramer points out that:

...whatever prodigies the male *genitals* can perform, the human *mind* is incapable of emotional focus when it's asked to experience so much emotional intensity with so many different objects. And when orgasmic sex ceases to constitute emotional intensity for its participants, then what remains in the realm of sensory possibility for the deadened veteran – human torture, murder, the consumption of children?

Drugs-and-fucking are still very much a mainstay of the gay lifestyle even today, post-AIDS, especially in countries where the simple act of being gay can be punished by death (simply think of vast swathes of Africa and the entire Middle East, while general intolerance and bigotry continues to simmer in countries like Russia).

This is much more an act of defiance, I think, whereas Kramer's point is that the energy and vitality expended on drugs-and-fucking would result in a Trojan horse type of situation within the gay community itself.

Well, of course that particular dark horse was AIDS, and not even Kramer could have foreseen the subsequent decimation of the gay community that he loved, as much as its excesses and shortcomings exasperated and upset him.

Of course, detractors have drawn an arrow-straight line between the excesses that Kramer depicts and the pandemic that followed. There is no doubt that the rampant promiscuity and drug use added to the death toll (and continues to do so).

However, there is equally no doubt that the energy and vitality that found expression in such promiscuity and drug use also resulted in one of the brightest artistic and cultural renaissances we have ever experienced, and one whose light we still look to today, in tantalising wonder at both its fierceness and its warmth. And Kramer himself is a product of this renaissance.

Another very real point to be made is that the book can be read as a general reflection of Kramer's own prudishness, despite its explicitness. There is as much laughter as there is vulgarity, but it is a gallows humour that gives the novel a frenetic energy and pace.

The fact it is also written without any chapter breaks, with short sections and short sentences almost akin to dialogue in a play, inevitably means that the characters themselves get the short end of the stick (so to speak). The names and types do tend to blur after a while, but I think this is a deliberate narrative strategy on the part of Kramer, given his subject matter.

People unfamiliar with gay history (which sadly includes many gay people themselves) tend to see *Faggots* in isolation, but one has to bear in mind that the equally extraordinary *Dancer from the Dance* by Andrew Holleran was published in the same year, another indication of the gay renaissance that Kramer seems so curiously dismissive of.

Is *Faggots* as negative and bile-ridden as it has been made out to be? I certainly do not think so. While Kramer has a keen eye for the absurd, he also has a deep and abiding love for his characters, and the community they define and inhabit. The fact that the book ends so prosaically, with one of the protagonists turning 40, is an abiding affirmation of this enduring love.

Caitlin says

So, I couldn't keep an interest for more than 30 or so pages. I decided to read this book because Randy Shilts praised Larry Kramer as a revolutionary gay (and later AIDS) activist who broke through all of these boundaries and really garnered a lot of heat from all angles with the publication of this work of fiction.

However, I was ultimately disappointed. The writing was not entirely easy to follow, the prose was poorly written, and the characters were either flat or just plain un-memorable.

Perhaps in a few more years I'll give this book another try. For now I'm returning it to the library and focusing on books that can grab me in the first 50 or so pages.
