

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **DAYS OF GRACE: A MEMOIR**

**Arthur Ashe and Arnold Rampersad**

*New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, \$24.00 hard cover, 315 pp.*

The Americans with Disabilities Act details the rights of a diverse number of individuals. Perhaps no greater discrimination or handicap exists in this country than for people afflicted with the wide range of manifestations resulting from being HIV positive. Arthur Ashe provides a haunting and profound look into the personal side of AIDS and its effect on family, friends, self, and society. Personal anecdotes and carefully constructed thoughts are provided for the reader to gain a better understanding of the unification necessary to combat AIDS on a global front.

#### **General Highlights**

- The reader is introduced to the events and relationships in the life of Arthur Ashe before he was diagnosed as HIV Positive (1988) and the events and circumstances preceding his death on February 6, 1993.
- Ashe shares a first person account of interactions with medical specialists, well-meaning members of the public with "miracle" cures, the uninformed, as well as the strength he gained from a closely knit group of personal friends and family.
- Foremost among Ashe's coping mechanisms was the constant reminder of the love and support from both his wife, Jeanne, and daughter, Camera.
- The biography allows the reader to follow a personalized tract through a specific period of time in which the author reveals the strategies to counter both physical and social set-backs.
- Arthur Ashe writes with a conviction, candor, and clarity rarely found among individuals who experience day-to-day activities with a life-threatening condition.

- A large portion of the beginning of the book deals with the events leading up to his public disclosure that he was afflicted with AIDS. He debates the struggle between maintaining a private life and using his visibility and notoriety to bring the pandemic AIDS issue to the forefront through education, medical research, and personal example in hopes of defeating the virus.

#### **Specific Areas of Excellence**

- "Being black is the greatest burden I have had to bear" (p. 126). This statement took the *Newsweek* interviewer by surprise. She had expected that having AIDS would be Ashe's immediate response to her question of what he felt was his biggest burden. Ashe clarified his statement by informing the reader that he had acquired AIDS through a biological process resulting from tainted blood that was administered following heart surgery. Even though racism was entirely preventable, it is found in abundance throughout the world.
- The most poignant part in the book is the final chapter titled "My Dear Camera." Ashe writes a letter to his daughter, Camera, describing the values that governed his life and the rich heritage on both sides of his daughter's extended family. He spells out some expectations he has for her, including learning at least two foreign languages, developing acuity in two sports, and fostering a continuing spiritual dimension in her life.
- "My only true regret, however, is that now that I see the world more clearly than ever, as I believe I do, I don't seem to have the time left to try to translate my vision into action as I would like" (p. 124). I believe this statement also has wide application to those of us who are entering the second half of our professional careers working with people who have disabilities. We have witnessed many changes in supports thought to be "in the best interest" of children and adults with labels of varying diversity. It is ironic that as we gain a clearer vision of what life can be like for people with disabilities, we too try to influence the younger generation of professionals who have yet to gain from our experiences. My statement is made in a humble

manner and not one of arrogance. The experience of making mistakes and learning what not to repeat contains valuable lessons, but they limit the time and energy we have left to make an impact on the individuals we have chosen to support.

- Because of Ashe's professional talents and skills in tennis, sports analogies abound throughout the book. He frequently makes reference to playing a close match with an equally adept opponent in regard to his fight with AIDS. "Still, I resolutely do battle with this opponent, as I boldly did battle with my opponents on the tennis court. True, this fight is different. The biggest difference is that I now fight not so much to win, as not to lose. The enemy is different, too — dark and mysterious, springing on civilization just when civilization was sure that it had almost rid itself of mysterious beasts forever (p. 221). I have always been a firm believer in the therapeutic value of adversity. Of all people, athletes must reach an accommodation with losing, and learn to make the best of it" (p. 37).
- Ashe draws many parallels, both overtly and through juxtapositions, especially when he relates his experiences on growing up black in mostly segregated settings (Richmond, VA), his later experiences while being diagnosed as HIV positive, and during his final year of life with AIDS.
- Biographies can be a powerful medium for the general public to learn about the human and emotional side of the often remote experiences of people with disabilities. The specific insights and general observations by Ashe shed ample light on the "people" side of the Americans with Disabilities Act. His life-style, actions, and words have enriched us all.
- "Life, I believe, is a succession of often suddenly realized stages, of fresh beginnings for which one has constantly to be prepared" (p. 252).

#### **Areas in which this Publication Could be Enhanced**

- A companion book, the interested reader may want to review, is *Daddy and Me: A Photo Story*

*of Arthur Ashe and His Daughter Camera*, photographed and written by Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe. She begins her book, "This is a story about two very special people — my husband, Arthur, and my daughter, Camera. I created this book because of what I learned from both of them."

- I have several newspaper clippings from the *New York Times* discussing both Ashe's memoir and the children's book developed by his wife Jeanne. They enhance my enjoyment of both books.
- The range of disabling conditions protected under ADA has expanded the scope of many of our professional responsibilities. Readers of this journal need to be knowledgeable in far more areas than was previously necessary. One avenue for our continued expansion of knowledge is through first-person accounts exemplified by the memoir currently under review.

#### **Common Threads**

- There is a genuine lack of bitterness and remorse by Arthur Ashe as he deals with his daily activities. He dedicated his energies to be as publicly visible as his health allowed in participating in joint ventures to promote several causes including the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health at the Health Science Center of the State University of New York, African American Athletic Association (AAAA), and the Arthur Ashe Foundation for the Defeat of AIDS, to name but a few.
- The relationships with both immediate and extended families are a constant source of support. Ashe makes frequent reference to the joys of watching his daughter develop new skills and experience life's challenges from a preschooler's perspective.
- Ashe used his "star" status to bring the message of the need to defeat AIDS to colleges, civic groups, the United Nations, the media, and through his several connections with corporate sponsors including his role on the Board of Directors of Aetna Insurance Company.

**Recommended Usefulness for  
Rehabilitation Professionals**

- Readers will perceive the worth of this book differently as they relate its content to current work responsibilities. It is worthwhile to occasionally stop and read first person accounts of
- disabling conditions and learn from our best teachers: individuals experiencing disabilities.
- You do not need to agree with Ashe's political or spiritual views to truly benefit from his wisdom and insights that can be obtained in no other way from no other person. Your work will be enhanced by reading this book.