



My Pet Virus: The True Story of a Rebel Without a Cure

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I was destined for a life of medical drama from day one," begins this comic memoir with a mission. "I was born in the month of July, and my horoscope sign is a disease (Cancer). The symbol for Cancer? A crab (the sexually transmitted critter). Not only that, my parents named me Shawn Timothy Decker, which makes my initials S.T.D.

Shawn Decker isn't quite the all-American boy. Sure, he gets caught shoplifting copies of *Penthouse*, is crazy about pro wrestling, especially "The Nature Boy" Ric Flair, and never has a problem getting dates. But he's also a hemophiliac who discovers, at age eleven, that he has contracted HIV from tainted blood products.

Instead of becoming self-pitying and dying (as first predicted), Shawn develops a twisted sense of humor, meets Depeche Mode through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and writes on blogs and in *Poz* magazine about what it's like being hetero and HIV-positive in rural Virginia. He also turns to gay men for advice on dating women and, almost twenty years after getting HIV, marries Gwenn Barringer, who is HIV-negative and a former competitor for the title of Miss Virginia. Together Shawn and Gwenn travel the country, speaking to high school and college kids about how to live and love with HIV (and how to avoid getting it).

My Pet Virus: The True Story of a Rebel Without a Cure Details

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Sarah Sammis says

I associate books with places and events. My Pet Virus by Shawn Decker will always remind me of horses. Decker never mentions horses but I read the first half of his memoir while parked at the start of Bort Meadow Staging Area while three horses were being saddled up for a ride.

My Pet Virus is the memoir inspired by the blog of Shawn and later, his wife, Gwen. Take away the virus, HIV, and it's an up beat memoir. For its humor and tone, it reminds me of Alan Alda's first memoir, Never Have Your Dog Stuffed if Alda had written the book when he was forty years younger.

Decker's memoir is also about hemophilia. His life as a "thin blood" as his calls it an his dependency on blood derived products is how at the age of 11 he was infected with HIV. His infection came at a time when HIV was still a new disease with all the paranoia and prejudice that goes along with something unknown. My Pet Virus addresses that prejudice: both Decker's and how he has been judged by others for being infected by the virus.

Blog to book seems to be a popular subgenre now of memoirs. It's the second one I've read and in both cases, I read the book without having heard of the blog. The other one was Blood, Sweat and Tea by Tom Reynolds.

Amy says

I feel badly saying "meh" to a memoir because it feels like saying "meh" to someone's life but, meh. At times I was interested but mostly I was bored. At times, I was offended. For someone whose made the sincere effort to make friends/connect with gay men with HIV/AIDS, I was surprised to see the author write that an aggressive woman is "too bull dykish" (i.e. use bull-dyke as an insult). There's also one chapter that reads like, "I'm not racist but ..."

I was at times bothered by the casually lazy writing style which I imagine is supposed to come off as friendly/breezy/informal but it doesn't when one does things like write "heels" as "heals." Then it just looks like either you don't know what you're doing or you haven't taken the time to carefully edit your work.

My thought is that there are so many other really good memoirs on this topic (living and/or dying with HIV/AIDS) that I can't imagine recommending this one to anyone.

Mike Van Campen says

This is a touching book about one person's struggle with hemophilia and HIV. Decker and his wife use their experiences to educate others--a valuable service. However, Decker--like many folks who move from blog (or Web sites) to books--is just not a good writer--at least in long form. His metaphors are strained, his attempts at humor mostly fall flat, and much of his prose is rather forced. One wishes he had a good editor or

a competent ghost writer to help him share his important life story.

Sarah says

I will freely acknowledge that I probably liked this at least partly for "six degrees" reasons: the author contracted HIV as a child from infected blood products he needs to treat hemophilia (just like my stepdad!) and he did so in a small town (20 minutes from where I now live!) and then moved to a nearby small city (where I now live!) to become a sexuality educator (like me!) But it was also funny and frank and uplifting, so I'm pretty sure people not me will like it too.

Danny says

So totally intended on reading My Pet Virus by Shawn Decker today, but I didn't actually think I would enjoy it so much. I volunteer at AIDS Niagara and my mom works there. I've been volunteering there since I was 17 and have now run a small aid for pets for the clients where I make sure that the clients' pets are taken care of and have everything they need in emergent situations. I have learned a lot of about HIV/AIDS in these years and it's been a great way for me to get involved, despite that I don't really get too involved with events (being a student, my volunteering was sporadic due to schoolwork, work and also my disability). For my true story type books I liked to typically read stuff about trauma, abuse and that kind of thing as it relates more to my life. So when I bought My Pet Virus last year or the year before box sale, it was one of those "hey I bet my mom would like this and it looks really interesting" books that has been sitting on my bookshelf for too long. I loaned it to my mom and she had liked it a lot and said it was a refreshing and upbeat take to living with HIV/AIDS. Since this year I'm determined to read more than just fiction, I've added this book to the list of books to read. I'm glad I finally got around to it. I'm not sure what exactly I was expecting, but I sure as hell wasn't expecting what I got. It was like reading Jenny Lawson's book but from a male point of view and instead of social awkwardness, it was about HIV/AIDS. It was incredibly funny, witty and interesting. I was expecting some kind of long, horribly sad story that wasn't very up beat and overall depressing. Instead, I got a good laugh from his jokes and got totally lost in the book that I started reading at noon and it is now almost 6 and I have barely moved and my ass is so incredibly numb. The style of his writing is like he's carrying on a conversation with you and so it's very easy to read. Also this book is short, so it wasn't totally overwhelming to read either. It was really great. I definitely recommend this book to anyone who works with HIV/AIDS in any field (doctors, nurses, case workers, etc), anyone who has or is living with someone with HIV/AIDS and I also recommend it to the assholes are sooooo freaked out about HIV/AIDS that they're convinced they're going to contract it by shaking your hand. It's a really wonderful book.

For more reviews visit: <http://atrampledrose.blog.com/>

Abby says

An interesting enough story of a man with AIDS and how he met his wife and how their relationship works. The problem is the writing was sub-par and his sense of humor was incredibly basic.

Annie says

really nice memoir--very funny and thought-provoking. two memorable highlights: how Decker calls his girl his "wife partner" and how he describes and attempts to break the tension between the gay hiv+ community and the hemophiliac hiv+ community. super cute all around. 'specially all the awkward and hilarious middle and high school chapters. finally, i love how his family fights for him throughout all his stages of development/ the whole book, with school officials, doctors, nurses, friends' parents, pageant officials, the today show staff, basically anyone. i identified with his mom. she sounds hardcore/fantastic.

recommended (thanks sarah)!

Cheryl says

An educational and amusing book that I zoomed through and quite enjoyed. I did struggle a bit to relate to Shawn, not because of his virus but because of a sort-of side effect: his lack of ambition. I can understand to some extent how being expected to die before age 18 might interfere with your ability to dream about what you want to be when you grow up. But he seemed to flounder for a lot longer than someone with his obvious talents rightly should have done. I suppose that if he had taken another path, he would not have met his wife, though, so I can see why he would not regret it.

Laurie says

It's an interesting book about a guy who was infected with HIV through a blood transfusion back in the 80s before the government decided to actually check people's blood for things like hep C, hep B, and HIV. There were parts of the book (like the guy's obsession with sex during adolescence) that made me go "Uhm, why do I care how he learned about porn movies?" It just seemed irrelevant. I also had a hard time reading the parts where he talked about dating girls but not telling them he was HIV positive and then fooling around with them. I don't like reading about people being irresponsible, especially when it has to do with such a serious topic. The author finally gets over not wanting to talk about AIDs and now he and his wife (they have sex but always use condoms - I wish more teenagers and pre-teens did that these days...sad) travel around and speak about being in their relationship and what's it's like to have HIV.

Perryville Library says

Diagnosed with hemophilia at eighteen months of age, Shawn Decker's life was always a little different than most. Tonka toys were replaced by giant foam cars, and nose bleeds were the cause of many trips to the hospital. When your blood can't clot properly, a good deal of your time is spent trying not to bleed. One very unfortunate aspect of having hemophilia is the need for blood transfusions. Shawn has received hundreds of transfusions, and because they mix many different blood samples for each transfusion, he has literally been exposed to thousands of blood donors. Because of lax blood screening, he contracted hepatitis and HIV as a result of the transfusions. His story, *My Pet Virus*, chronicles his journey of trying to continue a normal life,

fighting the viruses that attempt to thwart that life, deciding whether or not to take dozens of medications, working, falling in love and getting married to someone who is HIV negative, and ultimately becoming an icon of HIV/AIDS awareness.

“You probably don’t know this, but most hemophiliacs hate to be referred to as hemophiliacs. It has to do with not wanting to be defined by an illness. You don’t call someone with cancer a ‘cancerite,’ or someone with multiple sclerosis a ‘multisclerosisist,’ do you? Also, the word ‘hemophiliac’ means ‘one who loves blood.’ Ask any person with a bleeding disorder whether or not they love blood and you’ll probably be served a knuckle sandwich.”

The above paragraph is the opening to Shawn Decker’s memoir, *My Pet Virus*, and it serves as a terrific example of how the author deals with serious subject matter using a not so serious style. Decker’s use of comedic wit creates an ease for his readers, which is important, because he has to unfortunately cover many grim issues in his life, including hemophilia, hepatitis B and C, HIV and AIDS. Throughout this work, the author delivers sobering descriptions of his life as these conditions worsen over time. One sentence will nearly bring you to tears, but the next will purposely evoke laughter to drive them away. Decker’s writing style of alarm and then disarm provides a great balance between serious subject matter and a joking young man who never takes himself too seriously, and at points in this book it’s easy to forget for a minute that he is sick at all. Not only is Shawn Decker a great role model for those trying to overcome the odds, *My Pet Virus* shows that he is one heck of an author as well.

If you enjoy *My Pet Virus*, you may also like:

Running with Scissors, by Augusten Burroughs

Dog Years: A Memoir, by Mark Doty

When You Are Engulfed In Flames, by David Sedaris

Beth says

I LOVED the beginning of this book, when at it's pure memoir-heart Decker recounted growing up with hemophilia and HIV in a small town in VA. Unfortunately, I quickly lost interest once he broke out of childhood. The book went from revelatory ("this is how it felt") to expository-didactic ("I got over my reluctance to speak out and this is what I did as a result"). The challenge of that transition is absent from Decker's retelling. The *PW* review sums it up well: "Decker's bravery is inarguably admirable, but it distances him; by book's end—when he has married a beauty queen, with whom he tours the country speaking about sex and HIV—we respect him but hardly feel as though we know him."

Kate says

Loved this book! I devoured it in one day, it was that good. An easy (and surprisingly light) story about a hemophiliac man who gets infected with HIV when he’s young. This is his story about growing up with the virus and how it forms his life. He keeps it light and even inspirational at times. He seems like the kind of guy you’d like to hang out with.

Eva Leger says

This was a great book for someone like me who could use some teaching on the subjects of HIV/AIDS and the things that come with it. Shawn Decker's sense of humor is OUTSTANDING and I found myself completely enthralled many times that someone who has had so many horrible things thrown into his life is so full of life and full of love.

The book itself is a memoir which I love so if you like memoirs definitely give it a shot. Decker is down to earth and his family members bring their own unique qualities to the story, along with friends and people he met along the way.

Just for clarification purposes- Decker never writes that he "went around" sleeping with unknowing women. He mentioned when he was a child (he contracted HIV at age 11) and his first two girlfriends were unaware of his disease....AT FIRST. He was not sleeping with these girls, he wasn't even kissing them at first if I remember correctly. That wasn't fair of a reviewer to say that when there is nothing to back that up at all. I wonder how a kid would go about not only dealing with his own immortality but being open about it with a female (or male) that he likes. Adults hide things much more simple everyday but that's neither here nor there.

The book is short which makes it a fast read and his humor makes it even faster because it's hard to put down. His terms like 'thinblood' for hemophiliacs and 'positoid' and 'negatoid' kept me laughing which isn't something I planned on doing when I picked the book up.

Decker lived with his wife Gwenn who is a "negatoid" and they together speak on HIV/AIDS awareness around the country which in itself is admirable. He is also a very friendly person- I messaged him and added him as a friend on MySpace and have since heard from him twice. I got the feeling he actually cares if his message is being picked up.

Jessi says

This is not a classic, but I think other people need to read it! Several people I know have read the book and were not impressed by it. Perhaps I have a "But the grace of God I go" attitude, and I'm not in that pack. Like the main character, I have a bleeding disorder. Unlike him, I am not reliant on human derived products. Mainly, because of technology that wasn't available to Shawn in the 80s and also because unlike some people with bleeding disorders today, I respond to synthetic factor.

Shawn is one of many people, that my generation and generations after me should get down on our knees and thank. His generation learned a lot of hard lessons and they are paying with the most costly thing they have to give; their life. Because of the insidious viruses people were infected with in the 80s, a time when I should have been receiving treatment for my bleeding disorder, regulations on the products we receive in the bleeding disorder community have been made very strict.

If I had been diagnosed sooner, I may be in his shoes. So hats off to Shawn and his wife Gwenn for sharing their story and working to alleviate some of the social stigmas people I personally know face every day.

With all that social commentary out of the way, the book was easy to read. I laughed and found the book enjoyable to read.

HeavyReader says

I enjoyed reading this book. I enjoyed Decker's gently snarky humor. I don't think I laughed aloud while reading this book, but I did chuckle, at least to myself.

I appreciated the author's honesty and upbeat attitude.

At one point before I finished reading this book, I couldn't find it and thought I had lost it. That made me feel very sad. (Let me tell you, some books I've been reading, I wish I would lose.)I was glad when the book turned up in my room, and I was able to read it to the end.

I wish I were Shawn Decker's friend.
