

REVIEW

“The Way We Live Now” (1987)



Susan Sontag

(1933-2004)

“The Way We Live Now” is a topical Gothic allegory of decadence in plague time, a deconstruction of sentimentality about the AIDS epidemic, bright with insights and ironies. Twenty-five characters “more or less than friends” are rallying around one of their number who is infected. That they are represented as scarcely more than names and stock responses is a comment on their own lack of discrimination. The bisexual focus of their sentiment and fear is a “prince of debauchery” who sweetens as he weakens, becoming Death. If he would just hurry up and die. They try to define themselves as “the well,” with a “vulgar jockeying for position around the bedside,” but they have become interchangeable links in a “chain of death.” Certain phrases resonate, such as “everyone was in touch with everyone else several times a week.” Loose relationships are conveyed by comma splices, run-on sentences and vague cross-references. “‘We’re learning how to die,’ said Hilda, ‘I’m not ready to learn,’ said Aileen.”

Michael Hollister
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