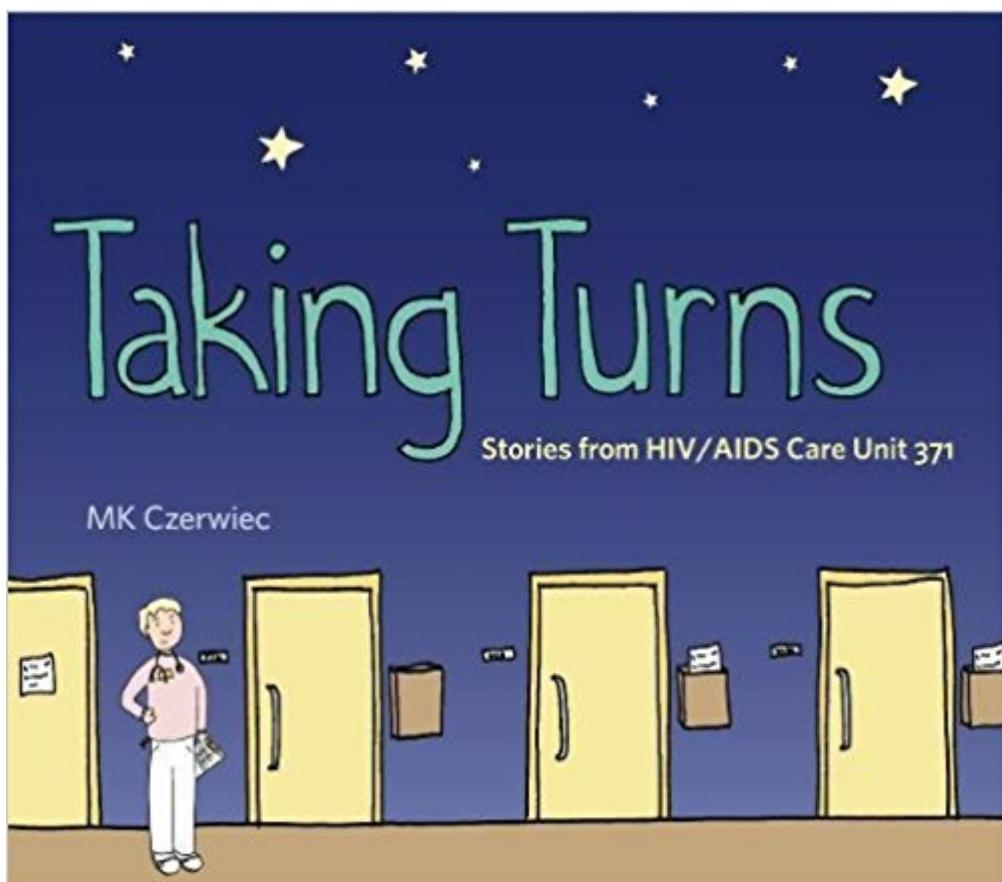


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# Taking Turns: Stories From HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371 (Graphic Medicine)



## Synopsis

In 1994, at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, MK Czerwiec took her first nursing job, at Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago, as part of the caregiving staff of HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371. *Taking Turns* pulls back the curtain on life in the ward. A shining example of excellence in the treatment and care of patients, Unit 371 was a community for thousands of patients and families affected by HIV and AIDS and the people who cared for them. This graphic novel combines Czerwiec's memories with the oral histories of patients, family members, and staff. It depicts life and death in the ward, the ways the unit affected and informed those who passed through it, and how many look back on their time there today. Czerwiec joined Unit 371 at a pivotal time in the history of AIDS: deaths from the syndrome in the Midwest peaked in 1995 and then dropped drastically in the following years, with the release of antiretroviral protease inhibitors. This positive turn of events led to a decline in patient populations and, ultimately, to the closure of Unit 371. Czerwiec's restrained, inviting drawing style and carefully considered narrative examine individual, institutional, and community responses to the AIDS epidemic—as well as the role that art can play in the grieving process. Deeply personal yet made up of many voices, this history of daily life in a unique AIDS care unit is an open, honest look at suffering, grief, and hope among a community of medical professionals and patients at the heart of the epidemic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“MK Czerwiec’s tales of her nursing work on an AIDS unit chart a remarkable episode in the history of medicine. It’s a time of staggering loss but also remarkable change. Through the lives and deaths of individual patients, written and drawn in documentary detail, we see the power dynamic between doctor and patient begin to shift. When cure is not an option, care takes on a new meaning.” Alison Bechdel, author of *Fun Home* “Taking Turns is an important work that takes the field of graphic medicine in new directions, both in terms of its object—the philosophy and practices of a clinical unit dedicated to the care of people with AIDS in a particular place and historical moment—and its approach—drawing on the comic artist’s own experience as a nurse on the unit as well as her interviews with other practitioners and patients.” Lisa Diedrich, author of *Indirect Action: Schizophrenia, Epilepsy, AIDS, and the Course of Health Activism* “Taking Turns bears important witness to a specific moment in the history of HIV/AIDS through the testimony of caregivers, patients, and volunteers. MK Czerwiec’s story also issues a gracious challenge: knowing that we all live in vulnerable bodies, knowing that we will all take turns needing others and being needed, how can we make this one life we have meaningful? This luminous graphic novel models how we can start: through creativity, community, generosity, and vulnerability.” Ann Fox, Davidson College “The emotional honesty of the comic book is quintessential to the visceral experience of *Taking Turns*—funny, terrifying and heartbreaking. As much as it informs the reader about the devastation of HIV/AIDS, the book allows the reader to see the disease through the eyes of a person who is literally on the front lines.” Gretchen Rachel Hammond, *Windy City Times* “[Czerwiec’s] chronicle reminds us that the era was marked as much by courage and compassion as it was by the tragedy of lives lost too soon.” Gordon Flagg, *Booklist* “For health care providers, the years that followed [the first official reporting of what would become the AIDS epidemic] were a time of tremendous loss, requiring a new type of caregiving in the face of a disease with no cure. MK Czerwiec, a nurse and the artist-in-residence at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine, captures this tragic time with great reverence and attention to detail.” Jessica Bylander, *Health Affairs* “Taking Turns chronicles [Czerwiec’s] experiences on the evening shift at Unit 371 with patients and other caregivers, often told through voices other than her own, some of the stories funny, some very touching, especially the stories about patients with whom she became close before they died.” Hank Trout, *AU Magazine: America’s AIDS Magazine*

MK Czerwiec is a nurse who uses comics to contemplate the complexities of illness and caregiving. She is the artist-in-residence at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, co-curator of GraphicMedicine.org, and co-author of Graphic Medicine Manifesto (Penn State, 2015).

"Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit" is a graphic work by MK Czerwiec that describes her time working as a nurse in a dedicated AIDS unit at Illinois Masonic Hospital in Chicago. It is as much a story about the staff members and the volunteers as much as it is about the patients. The ward was most active during the years that an AIDS diagnosis meant certain death to those who contracted it. As the new protease inhibitors were developed in the mid-1990's, that death sentence was lessened and AIDS became for most a treatable disease. The AIDS ward, so busy in the 1980's and 1990's basically closed-up-shop and the patients went to the cancer wards if they needed treatment. What are graphic novels? According to Wikipedia, "A graphic novel is a book made up of comics content. Although the word 'novel' normally refers to long fictional works, the term 'graphic novel' is applied broadly and includes fiction, non-fiction, and anthologized work." I think this definition is important because more books are being published as "graphic" and the difference between a "written" book - particularly a memoir, as Czerwiec's work is considered - and a graphic is the intensity of the ideas being displayed by having both a written and drawn text. What MK Czerwiec writes and illustrates in "Taking Turns" brings the horrors of the illness, as well as the love and hope both given and received to the patient and his care givers. "Taking Turns" is not a great work of art, but it is an honest - and loving - look at a hard period of time for many, many people.

Beautifully written and extremely moving. The story centers on a nurse's experience on an AIDS ward at the height of the AIDS epidemic. But the story reaches beyond these specific circumstances and explores how caregivers, friends, family, confront the death and dying of loved ones with a terminal diagnosis (which HIV was at that time), the different ways we grieve and how such experiences alter us forever.

This is a beautiful graphic novel about a very challenging period in history. It documents the experience of patients, doctors and nurses before the advent of effective retroviral therapy, when HIV/AIDS patients were treated like lepers. The illustrations are amazing, the oral histories documented profound. and the experience of the author - from student nurse to experienced nurse

processing trauma and loss - is moving. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of medicine and nursing, anyone studying or working in medicine and nursing, and anyone interested in pathographies. I just purchased another copy for a nurse in our family, But even if you have no specific interest in the subject matter of this book, it touches on themes that relate to any human being, like loss, compassion, community, discrimination, grief, coping, self-care and hope. And if you've never read a graphic novel before, this is such a great way to learn about huge histories and experiences. It surely must have taken years of work to put together something like this and the author deserves a rest, but I am really looking forward to seeing MK Czerwiec's other work!

This morning between 3:30 AM and 5:30 AM I read the book. I marked pages. I lived those amazing experiences as a volunteer on 371, and am grateful I don't have to live them again. MK tells a painful, sad story with grace and wisdom and even humor. Everyone who will take their turn with death--and that means everyone-- will benefit from the stories of the living and loving that unfolded on Unit 371. They changed my life, too. Thank you, thank you, thank you for saying so much in a few powerful drawings.

Beautiful, efficient writing and drawing tell this surprising inside story of life, yes, LIFE, in an AIDS unit at the height of the epidemic. A rookie nurse experiences the breakdown of barriers between patients and staff that happen when the professionals can't cure, but can offer real connection. Our hero undergoes her own seismic shift in the ensuing tale of love, loss and creativity, which results in this book, and much more.

This book is written in a wonderful style by a most informed author with a medical background. The graphics are terrific and usher you right through the very interesting story of a nurse working in a most sensitive and challenging unit. I highly recommend this book.

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