

Although the major characters in Angels in America are fictional, two historical figures make an appearance: Roy Cohn, Assistant US Attorney General, and Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg. The following essays explain their complex relationship. In addition, the Mormons and the 1980s AIDS crisis figure prominently in Kushner's play; we include background information about both.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE STORY OF TONY KUSHNER'S *ANGELS IN AMERICA*

by Jerry James

THE ROSENBERG CASE

How powerful was the atomic bomb? Imperial Japan—which had fought for eight years and was now preparing for a defense of their home islands that was expected to cost millions of American casualties—surrendered *nine days* after the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. That was power—a power held by the USA alone.

That monopoly couldn't last, of course. But our Heroic Soviet Allies, rapidly transforming into the Communist Menace behind the Iron Curtain (a term first used in 1946 by Winston Churchill), wouldn't get the bomb for decades, thought the War Department. Atomic scientists disagreed, finding it more likely that the Soviets would have the bomb by the early 1950s. They were all wrong.

On August 29, 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb. America was rocked. The secrets of the bomb had been stolen, given up to our implacable Communist enemies by spies, and when those spies were found, they would pay.

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War began, as North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel and invaded the south. Had the U.S. still held a monopoly on the atomic bomb, President Truman would have used it. But the North Koreans were backed by the USSR and their atomic bomb. The first stalemate of the Nuclear Age meant that American troops would go into battle again, only five years after the end of World War II.

U.S. forces would suffer over 300,000 casualties in Korea. Those casualties were to be laid at the feet of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, quiet residents of New York in their mid-thirties. Julius was an engineer; Ethel, who had hoped for a stage career, was a secretary. And they were Communists, which was not against the law.

Julius Rosenberg was arrested on July 17, 1950. He



Ethel and Julius Rosenberg

invoked his right to refuse to answer questions under the Fifth Amendment. On August 11, after testifying before the grand jury, where she, too, refused to answer questions, Ethel was also arrested. Her attorney requested that she be paroled into his custody to make arrangements for her two small boys. The request was denied.

Asserting one's rights under the Fifth Amendment, as the Rosenbergs did, was not a popular postwar stance. It was instead taken as an admission of guilt.

The chain of events that led to the Rosenbergs' arrest began with Klaus Fuchs, who had fled Nazi Germany in 1933, earned two doctoral degrees in England and in 1943, found himself in the New Mexico desert, working as a physicist on the Manhattan Project, whose goal was to build the atomic bomb.

After the war, Fuchs returned to England, where he held a major post in British atomic energy. Tipped off

by American reports, British intelligence suspected something was not quite right with Fuchs, but they had no evidence. Then, in January 1950, Fuchs abruptly confessed to having been an atomic spy. No plausible reason for this confession has ever been given.

As all watchers of crime dramas know, a case is built by convincing the guy you have to give you the next link, in exchange for leniency, and so on and so on. Fuchs gave up his courier, who in turn gave up another of his contacts, David Greenglass, who had been an Army machinist, working in New Mexico on the Manhattan Project. He was also the brother of Ethel Rosenberg. As the next link, Greenglass gave up his brother-in-law Julius.

And there matters came to a halt, because Julius and Ethel Rosenberg refused to give up anyone. Was this because they were innocent, or because they were hardcore Communists?

It was decided that the only way to get to that link above the Rosenbergs was to apply the leverage of the death penalty. Under the threat of the electric chair, one or the other would crack and confess, if not for each other, then surely for their children.

On March 6, 1951, the trial began, under Judge Irving R. Kaufman. The prosecutor was Irving H. Saypol. The third-ranking member of the prosecution staff was a 24-year-old lawyer named Roy Cohn.

It will be noted that these men were all Jews, as were the defendants. In order to avoid charges of anti-Semitism, the government had employed the grim strategy: "Set a Jew to catch a Jew." This, when to be a Jew in postwar America was often not pleasant.

While there was no official anti-Semitism, Jews often found themselves hemmed in by a web of quotas, covenants and gentlemen's agreements. Here is an incident from the life of Bess Myerson, Miss America 1945, the only Jew ever to win that title, as told by her biographer.

"When Bess won, she went on this tour and expected to be loved and applauded. Instead, everywhere she went, she was met with terrible bigotry. People didn't want her at their country clubs. People didn't want her at their hotels.

"There was a horrible incident with the parent of a World War II veteran at a hospital who screamed at Bess that it was because of the Jews that her son was dead. After a couple of months, she had to go home. She had nothing left to do."

This was the climate in which the Rosenberg Case was tried.

The Rosenbergs were not charged with treason, nor with espionage, but with conspiracy to commit

espionage, an offense that places a lesser burden of proof upon the prosecution.

The trial lasted until March 28. David Greenglass' testimony to the grand jury had implicated his wife Ruth, not his sister. But during the trial, he now swore that his notes had been typed up by Ethel Rosenberg. All charges against Ruth Greenglass were dropped. This testimony was given under direct examination by Roy Cohn.

Irving H. Saypol, the chief prosecutor declared, "Just so had [Ethel Rosenberg], on countless other occasions, sat at that typewriter and struck the keys, blow by blow, against her own country in the interests of the Soviets."

The jury deliberated for only a day. On March 29, the eleven men and one woman brought in a verdict of guilty. On April 5, Judge Kaufman imposed the death penalty, saying, "The evidence indicated quite clearly that Julius Rosenberg was the prime mover in this conspiracy. However, let no mistake be made about the role which his wife, Ethel Rosenberg, played in this conspiracy...She was a full-fledged partner in this crime."



There were protests, appeals and stays of execution. Pope Pius XII issued a plea for clemency. President Eisenhower said, in his refusal to grant such clemency, "by immeasurably increasing the chances of atomic war, the Rosenbergs may have condemned to death tens of millions of innocent people all over the world." To his son in Korea, Eisenhower remarked that if Ethel were spared, the Soviets would simply put together an all-female spy corps.

On June 19, 1953, time ran out. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas had granted a stay on June 17, which should have held until the court returned to session on the first Monday in October. But the chief

justice called the Brethren back from vacation to vacate this stay. The vote was 6-2. Hugo Black voted with Douglas. Felix Frankfurter, holder of the court's "Jewish Seat," abstained.

The Rosenbergs were executed at Sing Sing Prison that same day. In order not to profane the Jewish Sabbath, the electrocution was moved up from 11:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

And there matters would rest for years. It is reported that Judge Kaufman's behavior in the case inspired Justice Frankfurter not to retire until Kaufman was too old to be named to the "Jewish Seat."

The Rosenberg sons were adopted by the man who had written the Billie Holiday song, "Strange Fruit."



The Rosenberg Sons

The Rosenberg Case figured in various works of fiction: *The Book of Daniel*, by E. L. Doctorow, *The Public Burning*, by Robert Coover and *Inquest*, a play by Daniel Freed that had a brief run on Broadway in 1970.

Before his death in 1986, Roy Cohn would tell several people that the prosecution and Judge Kaufman all knew that Julius Rosenberg was guilty, courtesy of secret information given them by the FBI, information that couldn't be used in court. All that was necessary was to make the verdict agree with the secret information, as in the change in Greenglass' testimony.

Cohn boasted that he had engaged in numerous (and highly improper) *ex parte* phone conversations with Kaufman, who, while eager to sentence Julius to death, was not so sure about Ethel. The judge appeared less concerned with questions of guilt than with "a possible public opinion backlash if he sentenced a woman to the electric chair, particularly a mother with two young children." Bad PR might harm his chances of being appointed to the Supreme Court. Cohn would also say that he had had Kaufman assigned to the trial.

But Cohn convinced Judge Kaufman that Ethel was

worse than Julius, that she was the mastermind of the conspiracy and should therefore die. And even if she wasn't, it would keep the leverage to confess going on both on them.

Dynamite stuff, but Roy Cohn said many things, not all of which were true.

Then, in 1995, the Venona Transcripts were released by the National Security Agency. American spooks had broken the Soviet code in late 1946, and here, finally, in these transcripts of cables from fifty years before, was evidence of Julius Rosenberg's guilt. He was the agent known as "Liberal," as in this cable from September 21, 1944:

Liberal recommended the wife of his wife's brother, Ruth Greenglass...She is 21 years old, an American Citizen, a member of the Young Communist League since 1942...[Ruth] learned that her husband...is now working at the ENORMOZ [Atomic Energy Program] plant in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

This was the information the FBI had shared with the judge and prosecution during the trial, but to have made use of it then would have tipped off the Russians that their code had been broken. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower would have known all this as well. Thus the insistence on the death penalty as leverage, a leverage that did not work. Why it did not work will probably never be known.

But the Venona Transcripts also revealed a curious thing. While Ethel Rosenberg certainly seemed to know a great deal about what Julius was doing, her code name was "Ethel"—an odd thing for a spy. Indeed, the case against Ethel's being anything more than an accessory had always seemed thin, until her brother's testimony put her at the typewriter.

Then, in 2001, David Greenglass, who had been sentenced to fifteen years, serving nine and a half, admitted he had perjured himself in order to save his wife Ruth. He said, "My wife is more important to me than my sister. Or my mother or my father, O.K.? And she was the mother of my children."

The current consensus among historians is that Klaus Fuchs, as a physicist, gave the Soviets far more valuable information than the Greenglass-Rosenberg group, which might at best have confirmed what they already knew. Fuchs was sentenced to fourteen years in prison, served nine and returned to East Germany, where he may have aided the Chinese nuclear program.

Still, some continue to argue either that both Rosenbergs were guilty or that both were innocent.

The Rosenberg sons are engaged in an ongoing fight to gain exoneration for their mother.

ROY COHN

Roy Cohn was a Jewish anti-Semite and a homosexual homophobe. He represented the Mafia and the Archdiocese of New York. He lived with young men and dated Barbara Walters. When he died, he owed the IRS seven million dollars.

Roy Marcus Cohn was born in the Bronx in 1927, the son of Judge Albert C. Cohn. When he was ten, his father introduced him to FDR; young Roy congratulated the president on his scheme to pack the Supreme Court.



Roy Cohn and Joseph McCarthy

Cohn was a brilliant student, graduating from Columbia Law School at twenty, a year before he was eligible to take the bar exam. The day he was admitted to the bar, his family connections got him a position in the office of the United States Attorney in Manhattan.

Once there, Cohn distinguished himself in anti-Communist trials, beginning with the conviction of eleven members of the American Communist Party's politburo. This made him an obvious choice to join the team prosecuting Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1951.

Cohn's skill in the direct examination of David Greenglass, whose testimony doomed his sister Ethel, caught the eye of J. Edgar Hoover, who recommended Cohn to Senator Joseph McCarthy, head of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, as chief counsel.

That is the official version, and as far as it goes, it is not untrue. However, Cohn's conduct during the trial also involved suborning perjury, using information secretly fed to him by Hoover, among other illegal acts. No matter—the conviction was secured. No one ever heard Roy Cohn regret it. (For details, see *The Rosenberg Case* above.)

Cohn's only problem was that Joseph P. Kennedy had

asked his friend Sen. McCarthy to name his son Robert to that post. McCarthy, another Irish Catholic, had been a guest at Hyannis Port and had even taken out two of the Kennedy sisters.

McCarthy demurred. For one thing, Roy Cohn's style was much more attuned to his own. For another, naming Cohn would blunt the criticism that McCarthy was an anti-Semite. But he did agree to name Robert an assistant counsel. RFK and Cohn would despise each other until Kennedy's death.

Cohn took up his new position in January 1953. Soon, he brought his friend G. David Schine on as chief consultant, an unsalaried position. A Hearst columnist had introduced the two young men, because Schine had written a pamphlet denouncing Communism that had been placed in every room of his father's hotel chain.

Dave Schine was widely assumed to be Roy Cohn's lover, but both men denied this. No other evidence has ever been presented. Rumors also circulated about McCarthy's sexuality, as they did about Hoover's.

Cohn gained a reputation for ruthless questioning of suspected Communists, especially in the private executive sessions so favored by McCarthy. It was Roy Cohn who would ask the infamous question, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"

He was especially effective during the "Lavender Scare," which led to the firing of many gay men from government service, on the grounds that they were more susceptible to blackmail.

In the summer of 1953, Cohn and Schine toured Europe, searching for subversive authors in the libraries of the U. S. Information Agency. Their tactics overseas led to public humiliation. Back home, Schine, who had been classified 4-F during the Korean War, suddenly found himself classified 1-A and drafted.

Roy Cohn took steps to help his friend—big steps. He contacted military officials from the Secretary of the



Ronald Reagan, Rupert Murdoch and Roy Cohn

Army down to Schine's basic training company commander and made demands. Schine was to be commissioned as an officer; was to be given light duties, extra leave and exemption from overseas assignment. Testimony would later state that Cohn had threatened to "wreck the Army" if these demands were not met.

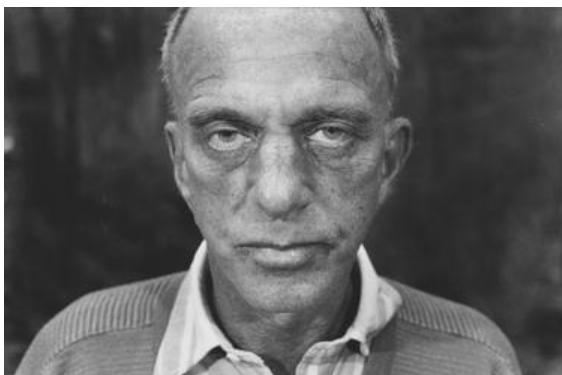
This was especially galling coming from Cohn, as the Army doubtless knew how he had dodged the draft in both World War II and the Korean War:

A congressman was pressured into appointing him to West Point—not once, but three times; each time Cohn failed the West Point exam, but he could not be drafted as long as he was trying to get in, so he managed to delay long enough to see the end of World War II from the safe perch of Columbia Law School. And when the draft was revived in the Korean War, Cohn again successfully avoided service by joining the National Guard.

Cohn and Schine, meanwhile, made the cover of Time magazine (March 22, 1954) as "McCarthy and His Men."

When the Army went public with Cohn's demands, Cohn encouraged McCarthy to hold hearings to ferret out Communism within that selfsame Army. These were the famous Army-McCarthy hearings, the first must-see television event. The hearings lasted from April to June 1954, culminating in Army counsel Joseph Welch's famous question, "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" McCarthy was finished.

Joseph McCarthy was censured by the Senate in December and would die three years later. David Schine served out his two years in the Army, mainly as an MP in Alaska. He was released from active duty a week early to avoid the press and never spoke of these incidents again. Roy Cohn was found to have had engaged in some "unduly persistent or aggressive efforts" for Schine and resigned his post in July 1954.



Roy Cohn, late in life

Cohn went home to his parents' Park Ave. apartment. He lived there until his mother's death in 1967. (His father died in 1959.) She made him breakfast every morning.

Bouncing back from his eighteen months in Washington, Cohn used his family connections to become an attorney at Saxe, Bacon & Bolan, which eventually "became known as the law firm that bought off judges, suborned witnesses and won cases through trickery and political pressure."

Among Roy Cohn's alleged acts were:

...looting enterprises by collecting excessive fees; asking other lawyers around his firm to sign false affidavits (and telling one who would not: "I can't afford your Harvard ethics"); asking clients for money to bribe the judge and then pocketing the bribe money; or not telling clients he was going to bribe judges, and doing it. There were strong suspicions that [Cohn] sometimes defrauded his own law partners.

Roy Cohn had a 68th St. townhouse, a three-and-a-half acre spread in Greenwich, CT, a yacht named *Defiance*, and a black Rolls-Royce with RMC vanity plates. But he owned none of these. It was all in the name of the firm, because of legal judgments against him, including that constantly growing claim from the IRS.

Cohn's persistent accuser, Wayne Barrett of the Village Voice, said, "I got to know him over the years, and it was like having lunch with Satan." Cohn responded, "Wayne, you've written 34 stories on me and never said a good word; you have no idea how many clients you've created for me."

"He was the most disloyal person to clients imaginable," said the editor of *The American Lawyer*. "Loyalty? Dogs have loyalty. He was never loyal to clients."

His attitude toward his fellow Jews? "Not all Jews are Communists," Cohn said during his McCarthy days, "but most Communists are Jews."

A New York Post gossip columnist recalls that, "He could be terribly anti-Semitic...Roy was always calling people kikes—you know, terrible Jewish epithets."

He was never known to mention the Holocaust.

"My idea of real power is not people who hold office," said Roy Cohn. "They're here today and gone tomorrow. Power means the ability to get things done. It stems from friendship in my case."

And he had friends—media figures, elected officials, members of the judiciary: William Safire, Donald Trump, Si Newhouse, Geraldine Ferraro, Alan Dershowitz, Liz Smith, Sidney Zion (the Times reporter

who would later write Cohn's "Autobiography" from notes). On his piano, inherited from his mother, were autographed pictures of Ronald Reagan, Cardinal Spellman, and William F. Buckley.

Of his dinner parties, the comedian Joey Adams once joked, "If you're indicted, you're invited." Cohn himself was indicted four times by the Federal Government—the residue of Bobby Kennedy's grudge?—and walked each time. Did Hoover, whom Cohn was allowed to call "Edgar," protect him?

Even in his last interview, Cohn repeated the story that the great love of his life was Barbara Walters. Ms. Walters' father owned the Latin Quarter. He got in some trouble. Roy Cohn got him out of it. Because of that, Barbara Walters was loyal to Cohn until his death. But even Walters, when asked if Cohn had a nice side, said, "I would not use the word nice."

As for his fellow gays:

Cohn opposed New York City's first gay rights law in the 1970s, declaring that homosexuals would threaten the safety of children if were allowed to work as schoolteachers. Then, in the days leading up to his death in 1986, Cohn launched another lobbying blitz against a proposed New York City gay rights ordinance. This time, he justified his activism on the grounds that the proposed law "defended fags."

And although his penchant for young men seems to have been an open secret, no one ever wrote about the sexual habits of the notoriously litigious Roy Cohn. Still, those in the know would understand what to read into parenthetical remarks like "Roy's handsome young administrative aide... an aspiring actor."

He insisted to the last that behind his five facelifts, he was dying of liver cancer. And it was only when he was dying and helpless, certain never to enter a courtroom again, that the legal establishment finally dared disbar him—for failing to repay a loan, among other peccadilloes. Many thought it was actually for such acts as forcing a pen into the hand of a dying client and forging his signature on a document that gave Cohn control of his \$75-million estate. The signature was later thrown out of court.

Roy Cohn died of AIDS on August 2, 1986, despite using his connections to secure every form of experimental treatment. It is said that the one true love in his life was his spaniel, Charlie Brown.

He would be remembered today only for Tony Kushner's depiction of him in *Angels in America*, if not for one thing: Roy Cohn was the mentor of Donald Trump.

Trump approached Cohn in 1973 at Le Club, in the East Fifties, an ultra-private *boite* frequented by such as Jackie Onassis. Trump and his father were having some trouble with the Feds over segregation in their housing projects. Cohn advised him to attack, attack, attack. The Feds settled on terms favorable to Trump.

For the next thirteen years, until shortly before Cohn's death, they would speak between five (said Trump) and fifteen (said Cohn) times a day. How close were they entangled, personally and professionally?

[Cohn] brokered the gargantuan tax abatements and the mob-tied concrete work that made the Grand Hyatt hotel and Trump Tower projects. He wrote the cold-hearted prenuptial agreement before the first of his three marriages and filed the headline-generating antitrust suit against the National Football League.



Donald Trump, Ed Koch, and Roy Cohn

Cohn told the New York Times in 1980 that he was "not only Donald's lawyer, but also one of his close friends."

But when Donald Trump learned that Roy Cohn was dying of AIDS, he severed their professional connections. "Donald found out about it and just dropped him like a hot potato," Cohn's secretary said.

"I can't believe he's doing this to me," said Roy Cohn. "Donald pisses ice water."

THE MORMONS

As the Mormons informally say, “Either it happened, or it didn’t.”

In the spring of 1820, a fourteen-year-old boy named Joseph Smith went for a walk in the woods near his home outside Palmyra, New York. He wanted seclusion in which to pray for guidance.

It was the time of the Second Great Awakening, a period of Protestant religious fervor that swept over the United States during the first quarter of the 19th century. Nowhere was this fervor greater than in western New York, the “Burned-Over District,” scorched by endless revivals.

But which variety of Protestantism was the right one? Young Joseph prayed, and God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him. Jesus answered Joseph’s question: all Christian denominations had fallen away from the true path, and he shouldn’t join any of them. Joseph didn’t realize it at the time, but he was being called to be a prophet. That would only become clear during his later visions of “angels in America.”

The church that would stem from Joseph Smith’s walk in the woods would be named The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly called the Mormons or LDS. It would be an American denomination—uniquely so. It would be Christian—with a difference. And it would be amazingly successful—but not until long after the death of Joseph Smith.

In 1823 Smith, still a teenager, began receiving regular nocturnal visitations from an angel named Moroni, who told him of a book written on plates of gold that was buried in a hill called Cumorah not far away. It was not until four years later that Moroni, who had been instructing Smith, deemed him worthy to take the book from the hill and translate it into English with the aid of “seeing stones,” a translation device prepared by God. Eleven witnesses signed a statement that they had “seen and hefted” the plates. And although six of them would later leave the church, none ever recanted his testimony.

The golden plates (soon to known as the Book of Mormon) told the story of the ancient Jewish inhabitants of North America:

Circa 600 BC—An Israelite named Lehi journeys with his family from the Middle East to the Americas. Lehi's descendants divide into two tribes, the Nephites and the Lamanites, named after two of Lehi's sons. The Nephites, initially more prosperous and religious, become corrupt over time and are locked into centuries of warfare with the nomadic Lamanites, whom Mormons consider



A young Joseph Smith

the ancestors of Native Americans.

33 AD—After his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus Christ appears in the Americas and preaches to the Nephites. Christ's appearance inaugurates a period of harmony with the Lamanites that lasts 200 years, but eventually the tribes fall into conflict again.

385 AD—A Nephite prophet named Mormon has been writing the story of his people. On the eve of a climatic battle with the Lamanites, Mormon turns over the core of what will become known as the Book of Mormon, transcribed on gold plates, to his son Moroni. Mormon is mortally wounded in the battle at a place called Cumorah, and the Nephites are nearly obliterated, but Moroni survives another 36 years and adds material to the Book of Mormon before sealing up the plates in 421.

The task of translation completed, the plates were returned to the angel Moroni. The Book of Mormon was published in 1830, the same year that Joseph Smith incorporated his church in New York State. He now became known as “prophet.”

It was one thing for Smith to found a Christian denomination on the principals of “primitive” Christianity, the belief that current religious practices had diverged alarmingly from those in the early church. But it was quite another for Smith to say that through the Book of Mormon, the meaning of Jesus’ words in John 10:16 had been made manifest to him. “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I

must bring, and they shall hear my voice.”

If Jesus Christ had appeared in America after his resurrection, Smith realized, the church that embraced that belief would be superior to all others.

That church—Joseph Smith’s church—had been founded by Jesus in America long before anyone else’s church had been founded in Europe. It therefore had the direct authority of Heaven.

And for him to say that he was now a prophet, anointed as such through visitations by John the Baptist; the apostles Peter, James and John; Moses, Elias and Elijah, and by them decreed as heir to the Apostolic Succession—that was something out of the ordinary, even for the Second Great Awakening.

Was Christianity with a “fifth gospel” appended—Christianity without the doctrine of original sin—still Christianity? Many thought it was heresy, and treated the Mormons accordingly. Two months after the church’s founding, Joseph Smith was arrested for preaching and charged with being “a disorderly person.”

He was acquitted, even as the first Mormon missionaries found success in Kirtland, Ohio. Smith moved the Mormon community there in 1831, but moved on later that year to Independence, Missouri, where he intended to establish the “New Jerusalem.” The Mormons now called themselves “Saints.”

Back in Kirtland, where he maintained his headquarters, Smith was tarred and feathered by a mob. In Missouri, there was continual friction between Mormons and non-Mormons, leading to the Mormon War of 1838. Facing extermination, the Mormons fled to Illinois, where Smith, founded Nauvoo. In four years, it would be nearly the size of Chicago. After Smith removed the mayor, it would be as close to a theocracy as one could imagine.

Joseph Smith sought to run for president, announced in a sermon that those who obey God’s commands can become gods themselves and ordered the destruction of

an opposition newspaper. He also proclaimed the doctrines of Baptism of the Dead and Celestial Marriage, the famous Mormon polygamy. Smith would eventually have more than 25 wives.

None of this helped the Mormons’ reputation with their non-Mormon neighbors. The conflicts finally exploded in Nauvoo in 1844. Joseph Smith and his brother were killed by a mob of 200 men. The remaining Mormons split into factions and fled, with most following Brigham Young. They were a despised minority setting out for a place where they could finally be safe—much like young gay men would one day set out for New York or San Francisco. This parallel underlies Kushner’s play.

But in February 1846, the Mormons set out not for a welcoming metropolis, but for the valley of the Great Salt Lake, a thousand miles away and one of the most inhospitable places on the North American continent. The Great Mormon Migration would prove an American Exodus.

Brigham Young reached the Salt Lake basin on July 24, 1847 and proclaimed, “It is enough. This is the right place.” Jim Bridger, the famous mountain man, was not so sure. He said he’d give a thousand dollars for a bushel of corn grown in the basin. Brigham Young said, “Wait a little, and we will show you.”

A train of 1,500 people followed the advance party, and over the next twenty years, more than 60,000 would follow the Mormon Trail, some in wagons, many pulling handcarts. By any measure, it was an astonishing feat. And in this inhospitable spot, their Zion, the Saints prospered.

In 1890, a manifesto by LDS President Wilford Woodruff abolished polygamy. This was universally seen as necessary for Utah to become a state, which it did in 1896.

At present, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the fourth-largest Christian denomination in the US, with a membership of over 15 million.

Two points of church doctrine that touch on *Angels in America*: There are few things more important to the Mormons than family, which ties in with the doctrine of Baptism of the Dead.

Mormons believe that the family is an eternal unit and central to God’s plan. In fact, eternal progression toward Godhood is limited to those who marry for time and eternity (celestial marriage) in a ceremony conducted by a properly ordained member of the LDS priesthood in a Mormon temple.

Hence, the dilemma of the Pitt Family. They are also embroiled in the second point: the LDS attitude toward gay men:



Brigham Young

In 1976, the church issued “To Young Men Only,” a pamphlet reproducing a sermon by apostle Boyd K. Packer, which counseled against immorality and included a section condemning homosexual acts. In the sermon, Packer commended a missionary who was upset after he “floored” his assigned male companion in response to unwanted sexual advances. In 1978, Packer followed this up with “To the One,” which characterized homosexual interaction as a perversion and presented the possibility that it had its roots in selfishness and could be cured with “unselfish thoughts, with unselfish acts.” He states that the church had not previously talked more about homosexuality because “some matters are best handled very privately” and “we can

very foolishly cause things we are trying to prevent by talking too much about them.”

How much has the LDS changed in the thirty years since 1985? When the scabrous musical, *The Book of Mormon*, opened on Broadway in 2011, it provided the perfect opportunity to incite a media storm over its satirical depiction of Mormons.

But instead of issuing a thundering denunciation, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rented a Times Square billboard that proclaimed:

You’ve seen the play...
Now read the book!

The Mormons are now using the musical as a conversion tool.

AIDS

On July 3, 1981, the New York Times published a story headlined, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals.”

Doctors in New York and California have diagnosed among homosexual men 41 cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer. Eight of the victims died less than 24 months after the diagnosis was made.

This was the first mention in a major publication of what would become the global pandemic known as AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). The story called the outbreak “rather devastating.” This would prove to be an understatement.

No one knew what it was, what caused it or how it was spread. It took a year to agree on what to call it. GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) was rejected as both stigmatizing and too limiting. Another contender was 4-H, for the four groups the disease hit first: Haitians, Homosexuals, Hemophiliacs and Heroin users.

In 1982, the Center for Disease Control named it AIDS, linked it to blood and discovered that it was transmitted by the intimate exchange of bodily fluids—in other words, through sex. The CDC would be a beacon during the years when it seemed that no one with political power cared about a disease that was both killing thousands and had no cure.

In that same year, Gay Men’s Health Crisis was founded in New York. Gay men saw they were going to have to help each other, because it certainly looked as if no one else was going to. The first safe sex publication also appeared in 1982.

GMHC was soon seen as not political enough for some, who founded ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To

Unleash Power.)

More than thirty years later, it is difficult to convey the breadth and depth of the visceral panic that hit the American public, no matter one’s sexual orientation. You could get AIDS from tears, from saliva, from a toilet seat! (No, you couldn’t.) William F. Buckley proposed tattoos to mark the unclean.

In the midst of this hysteria, science kept on. The virus that causes AIDS, HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) was discovered in 1983. HIV would weaken the immune system until the patient developed full-blown AIDS, at which point an opportunistic disease like Pneumocystis Pneumonia (PCP) would develop.

AIDS robbed one first of one’s body, then of one’s control over its functions, and finally, of one’s mind. When death finally came, many caregivers were thankful their loved ones had finally been released.

And the Band Played On, by Randy Shilts, chronicles the story of AIDS in America up to 1985, documenting how most of the country’s institutions failed to deal with the pandemic, because of who the people who were dying were—homos and junkies.

In 1985, the diagnosis of AIDS was a death sentence.

Tony Kushner’s play begins in that year, the year President Ronald Reagan finally mentioned the name of the disease in public. By that time, about 13,000 Americans had died from AIDS. One of those who died in 1985 was Rock Hudson.

Hudson was a popular, deeply closeted movie star, and the all too public, Hollywood spectacle of his dying—his publicist was the one who confirmed that he did in fact have AIDS—changed things. Rock Hudson’s death, it was said, gave AIDS a human face. But the deaths kept mounting.



Rock Hudson

The effect of AIDS on the gay communities in New York and San Francisco—communities which had grown more out and proud since the 1969 Stonewall Riots—was like that of the Black Plague. Constant memorial services served as the modern equivalent of the medieval “Bring out your dead!”

Those years in microcosm: there was a cabaret on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Of the gay men who staffed the place, not one survived the plague.

And all the while, some rejoiced.

There has always been a virulent strain of Puritanism *mit schadenfreude* running through American life—and it always appears at its worst at times like these. Neo-Puritans gleefully denounced gays from secular rostra and religious pulpits. At long last, they saw one of their dearest wishes come true—in America, Sex Equals Death. ACT-UP refuted this with its slogan “Silence Equals Death,” but the Neo-Puritans just laughed.

Some of them stopped laughing when their sons came home to die. And some of them changed because of it.

Young men who were “different” had been leaving small towns for the big city since the dawn of recorded time. But not until now had they come home like this. The obituary would read that So-and-So, aged about thirty, had died at home “after a long illness.”

HIV was a retrovirus (a virus that reproduces DNA from its RNA, the reverse of the usual process) and could only be fought by drugs called antiretrovirals. The first of these was the failed cancer drug AZT, rushed into use in 1987 by a process too fraught to be gone into here. Roy Cohn had used his connections to get to the head of the line as early as November 1985.

AZT had to be taken every four hours, around the clock, but even with this strict regimen, it soon became clear that the drug was not the magic bullet that had been hoped for. Still, it did increase the lifespan of most of those who took it by about a year.

And although the gain of even one year was precious, it would take almost ten years more for AIDS to be stabilized, through the use of what was commonly called the Drug Cocktail:

1996 is usually regarded as the year HIV changed. With the development and approval of the regimen of antiretroviral drugs known as HAART (Highly-Active Antiretroviral Therapy), an HIV infection no longer meant a lingering, painful death of colluding opportunistic infections. HAART offers at least the possibility of a reasonably normal and healthy life and lifespan. And more often than not it delivers. So: a brutal, invariably terminal condition became a chronic manageable condition, like diabetes. That in itself is one of the greater conquests of modern medicine.

Currently, most new cases worldwide are from sub-Saharan Africa. In the U.S., the latest outbreak of the pandemic centers around rural heroin abuse.

An August 2016 mailing from the American Foundation for AIDS Research states that 34 million people have died worldwide from AIDS, including a million in the last year.

Scientists once believed that an HIV vaccine would be discovered by the end of the Eighties.

That vaccine remains to be found.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director. Being possessed of an intense curiosity, he found writing these essays immensely satisfying.