



## A Burst of Light

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Black freedom fighter's strength and signifying words. Essays. 1989 Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award.

## **A Burst of Light Details**

Date : Published May 1st 1988 by Firebrand Books (first published April 1988)

ISBN : 9780932379399

Author : Audre Lorde

Format : Paperback 134 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Feminism, Lgbt, Poetry, Glbt, Queer

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### H says

I want to write down everything I know about being afraid, but I'd probably never have enough time to write anything else. Afraid is a country where they issue us passports at birth and hope we never seek citizenship in any other country. The face of afraid keeps changing constantly, and I can count on that change. I need to travel light and fast, and there's a lot of baggage I'm going to have to leave behind me. Jettison cargo. (55, 2/18/1984)

I am excited by these women, by their blossoming sense of identity as they're beginning to say in one way or another, "Let us be ourselves now as we define us. We are not a figment of your imagination or an exotic answer to your desires. We are not some button on the pocket of your longing." (57, 3/23/1984)

I am saving my life by using my life in the service of what must be done. (59, 6/7/1984)

We all have to die at least once. Making that death useful would be winning for me. I wasn't supposed to exist anyway, not in any meaningful way in this fucked-up whiteboys' world. (61, 6/10/1984)

(Of course, all poets learn about feeling as children in our native tongue, and the psycho-social strictures and emotional biases of that language pass over into how we think about feeling for the rest of our lives.) (66, 10/10/1984)

As an African-American woman, I feel the tragedy of being an oppressed hyphenated person in America, of having no land to be our primary teacher. And this distorts us in so many ways. (66, 10/10/1984)

It is a matter of learning languages, or of learning to use them with precision to do what needs to be done with them, and it is the Blanchie in myself to whom I need to speak with such urgency. It's one of the great things friends are for each other when you've been very close for a long time.

And of course cancer is political--look at how many of our comrades have died of it during the last ten years! As warriors, our job is to actively and consciously survive it for as long as possible, remembering that in order to win, the aggressor must conquer, but the resisters need only survive. Our battle is to define survival in ways that are acceptable and nourishing to us, meaning (98) with substance and style. (99, 4/20/1986)

When I write my own Book of the Dead, my own Book of Life, I want to celebrate being alive to do it even while I acknowledge the painful savor uncertainty lends to my living. I use the energy of dreams that are now impossible, not totally believing in them nor their power to become real, but recognizing them as templates for a future within which my labors can play a part. I am freer to choose what I will devote my energies toward and what I will leave for another lifetime, thanking the goddess for the strength to perceive that I can choose, despite obstacles. (119, 11/12/1986)

I do not find it useful any long to speculate upon cancer as a political weapon. But I'm not being paranoid when I say my cancer is as political as if some CIA agent brushed past me in the A train on march 15, 1965 and air-injected me with a long-fused cancer virus. Or even if it is only that I stood in their wind to do my work and the billows flayed me What possible choices do most of us have in the air we breathe and the water we must drink?

Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time and the arena and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle wherever we are standing. It does not matter too much if it is in the

radiation lab or a doctor's office or the telephone company, the streets, the welfare department, or the classroom. The real blessing is to be able to use whoever I am wherever I am, in concert with as many others as possible, or alone if needs be. (120, 11/13/1986)

Five million people in the U.S.--or two percent of the population of this country--are actively living with cancer. If you apply that percentage to the Black community--where it is probably higher because of the rising incidence of cancers without a corresponding rise in the cure rate--if we take that percentage into the Black population of 22 million, then every single day there are at least half a million Black people in the U.S. shopping in supermarkets, catching subways, grooming mules, objecting in PTA meetings, standing in a welfare line, teaching Sunday school, walking in the streets at noon looking for work, scrubbing a kitchen floor, all carrying within our bodies the seeds of a destruction not of our own choosing. It is a destruction we can keep from defining our living for as long as possible, if not our dying. Each one of us must define for ourselves what substance and shape we wish to give the life we have left. (126, 11/18/1986)

I do not think about my death as being imminent, but I live my days against a background noise of mortality and constant uncertainty. Learning not to crumple before these uncertainties fuels my resolve to print myself upon the texture of each day fully rather than forever. (127, 11/19/1986)

To acknowledge privilege is the first step in making it available for wider use. Each of us is blessed in some particular way, whether we recognize our blessings or not. And each one of us, somewhere in our lives, must clear a space within that blessing where she can call upon whatever resources are available to her in the name of something that must be done. (130, 12/15/1986)

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### **Gabriela Caballero says**

I feel so humbled and grateful that Audre Lorde shared some of her writing while battling cancer. This was an emotional and powerful read.

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### **Mary Clare says**

Full review!

Format: eBook ARC from NetGalley

In this collection of essays and journal entries, originally published in 1988, Audre Lorde writes frankly, clearly, and with full humanity about her experience as a Black Lesbian woman and her second experience with cancer.

My initial impulse is to call this collection something like "transcendent" but honestly, that would not be accurate. Because while it has the insight, power, and clarity of a work that someone might describe as transcendent, that word would really mis-categorize this work. This is not a work meant to go beyond or transcend anything, but rather to shed an unflinching light on the reality of Lorde's experience. If this book is anything, it is very clearly grounded in reality and Lorde's ability to describe that reality in such beautiful

and sometimes harsh terms illuminates the truths that she wants to highlight.

There is no hiding from the truths in this collection because the truths are not masked by any kind of metaphor and they are not softened by language. Lorde is demanding that readers understand what she is trying to say, she demands that readers recognize the truth of her experience (and the experience of other Black and Lesbian women in the USA and across the world) and that readers recognize the ways that they may be complicit in that social structure. She stands in front of you (and audiences within the stories of this book) and demands to know where exactly the consideration of her and other women like her is. Where are the black women? Have you considered how people of color have been made to suffer for you to stand where you are standing? How have you benefitted from racism, ableism, sexism, and heterosexism and are your current actions helping prop up those systems and tear them down?

Lorde demands that readers consider these questions, demands that I consider these questions.

I will also say what should really go unsaid, that Lorde is a truly spectacular writer with the ability to manipulate readers' emotions with razor-like precision. Though this is a skill she must have fine-tuned in her poetry, it also shines clearly through in this collection.

Although I received this book as an advanced copy for the new edition coming out this September, I will be purchasing a hard copy of the new edition when it becomes available. I gave this book a 5 out of 5 stars and I am excited to continue to explore Lorde's work.

Note: some of my reviews contain spoilers!

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### **Andre says**

This is a updated and reissued version of her 1988 collection of essays. What's new here is an introduction by Sonia Sanchez, an interview about sadomasochism and three essays along with the original *Burst of Light: Living with Cancer* journal entries. This book illuminates her struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia and the liver cancer afflicting her body. And she put all of these struggles on the same plain, seeing them as equal. "Battling racism and battling heterosexism and battling apartheid share the same urgency inside me as battling cancer. None of these struggles are ever easy, and even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted. Each victory must be applauded, because it is so easy not to battle at all, to just accept and call that acceptance inevitable."

Her essay writing is, forgive the cliché, poetic. Even the journal entries concerning her cancer battle and resistance, which takes up most of the book are sometimes sad but profoundly written. One of her most enduring quotes comes from this collection, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Through her writing you can sense and feel her struggle, almost as if she is thinking out loud but always representing for a fierce self-determination and self-identity that is empowering. Her words here are inspirational, loving, passionate and forever optimistic. An essay collection that belongs on your book shelf. Thanks to Netgalley and Dover Press for providing an advanced ebook in exchange for a fair and honest review. Book publishes Sept. 13, 2017

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### **Jen says**

I found this book completely infuriating. Audre Lorde has no problem identifying herself with the plight of "colored women everywhere" from Africa to Australia, but then calls someone a racist when he assumes that she is an aborigine while on a bus in Australia. She writes about her identification with the plight of oppressed and isolated women everywhere from the beaches of St Croix, from her private hospital in Switzerland, from conferences to which she was invited in France and Germany. Then, at the very end of the book, she has the audacity to point out the way the class status allowed the protagonist's story to be told in the movie *Terms of Endearment*.

She had cancer. She struggled with the label, with her body, and with the communities around her at great length. It had to be heart breaking. This is a deeply personal and heartwrenching story that is riddled with hypocrisies and double standards all the way through. I don't care what trauma Audre Lorde went through. Shame on her for being such an arrogant shit.

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### **Juli Rahel says**

The title for this collection of essays is from Audre Lorde's poem 'Never To Dream of Spiders', of which 'a burst of light' is the last line. This has always been one of my favourite poems by Lorde, despite the fact it partially makes me sad. I always feel like there is a sense of foreboding doom, of misery and death there. And yet the poem also holds beautiful memories of love and togetherness and a sense of perseverance and strength. The reason I want to explain my thought on the poem is because I think they reflect on *A Burst of Light* itself as well. The poem's 'condemnation within my blood' refers to Lorde's battle with cancer, which plays a big role in the essays in this book. However, Lorde's life was also one marked both by struggle as well as achievement, condemnation and recognition, rejection and acceptance.

Her whole life Audre Lorde fought, and the essays collected in *A Burst of Light* are a testimony to that. 'Sadomasocism: Not About Condemnation' shows Lorde addressing female sexuality, as well as the power play between the sexes both within and without the bedroom. In 'I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities' she discusses her identity as both a black woman and a lesbian and the conflict between those two identities. 'Apartheid U.S.A' shows both Lorde's deep care for women and oppressed people around the world as well as the anger that kept her going. Her comparisons between her America and the South African Apartheid regime she sees on the TV are sharp but true. In 'Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986' she discusses the pitfalls of parenting, especially those that appear in your way if society looks sideways at you. The largest part of *A Burst of Light* is made up of the eponymous 'A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer'. This is truly where I started understanding the drive that helped Lorde to write and fight so. Her desire to own her own body and to be herself, to be able to live and love freely, it all comes out in these journal entries as we follow Lorde from her diagnosis through different treatments and different moods.

Lorde's writing is inspiring, especially when she writes about the civil rights movement and feminism. It is fascinating to read the constant work she does, the effort she puts into considering and debating everything, assessing the world we live in and trying to change it for the better. But reading her work has a very different effect on me than, for example, reading Gloria Steinem's work. Although I like her poetry I have always

struggled a little bit with Audre Lorde, and that is also true of A Burst of Light. When I read Steinem's On the Road there were a lot of things that I could relate to. That is not the case with Audre Lorde. Living as a black, gay woman in America, Lorde had experiences that I will never have to face, that I can only appreciate from a remove but not really identify with. To pretend I could would almost be an affront to Lorde's work, and so reading A Burst of Light was very much a learning opportunity. I don't understand all of her anger because it is rooted in how the world was fundamentally different for her than it is for me, but by learning about her I also learn about the experiences of countless women across the world right now. Feminism still has a long road to go to becoming truly intersectional, but by reading A Burst of Light I have found myself moving further down that road.

For full review: [http://universeinwords.blogspot.com/2...](http://universeinwords.blogspot.com/2014/05/a-burst-of-light-by-audre-lorde.html)

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### **Monika says**

This was my first time reading Audre Lorde (finally!) and now I can't wait to devour everything she ever wrote. This was the kind of book that you end up highlighting so many great quotes, words you want to memorize, remember, apply, breathe. Lorde shines a light on white feminism and shows us how to persist when the struggle never seems to end - not only as an intersectional feminist, an activist, but also as a person fighting cancer. Empowering read.

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### **Krystal says**

This book was a revelation of timeless brilliance from an intersectional feminist I can only strive to take lessons from! Highly recommended for anyone committed to social justice efforts!

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### **Nadav David says**

I had previously read bits and pieces of Audre Lorde, or seen her work referenced in other places, but this was my first time diving in. These essays were fascinating, beautifully written and inspiring. I found myself re-reading and marking down dozens of paragraphs throughout "Apartheid USA" and "A Burst of Light" (just see my Goodreads quotes page!) - such touching and formative writing for our time and for our movements, many of which continue to be led by powerful Black women.

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### **Misse Jones says**

Phenomenal read! Very relevant to our current political, social, and economic climate even today. The tone feels as if it were written presently. A beautiful forward by Sonia Sanchez.

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### **Hannah says**

(I received a free copy from Net Gallery in exchange for an honest review.)

A beautifully personal and deeply poetic collection of writing that gives you a vastly important perspective on a variety of important subjects, I loved it

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### **Erika W. Smith says**

this is a reissue and it's great! I forgot that I'd actually read this before, in college - I think as individual essays instead of as a collection, though. The one thing I'd suggest is that if you haven't read Lorde before to start with the final essay (really a series of diary entries), "A Burst Of Light," then go back to read the ones at the front of the book.

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### **Jennifer says**

A reissuing of Lorde's essays including journal entries over three years when she found out she had liver cancer. Lorde's words, as ever, are poignant and hit you at the bone. Her words embrace you and enlighten you and is accessible in a way some essayists weren't always at the time. And of course what she says stands true to this day. Required reading.

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### **Kitty Wenham says**

Note: I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. This did not affect my opinions on the book, which remain entirely my own.

'A Burst Of Light' is an updated and reissued version of Audre Lorde's 1988 collection of essays and journal entries of the same name. They address a wide range of issues such as feminism, racism, sadomasochism, and living with cancer.

'A Burst of Light' begins with an interesting interview with Audre Lorde on her views of pornography and sadomasochism, It's a bold place to start and a very telling insight into the mind of one of the best feminists of our time. After reading the whole collection, it also feels a little out of place. Whilst many of the other essays and subjects can be linked together, this one stands out in a very lonely way. It's not a bad interview, but, I would argue, an out of place addition into the rest of the book.

The extracts I found most interesting were the titular essay, A Burt of Light, and Lorde's journal entries about being diagnosed and ultimately living with liver cancer - a condition that would later lead to her early death at just 58 years old.

This is my first introduction to Lorde's writing, though I have been very aware of her contribution to the intersectional feminist movement for a long time, and her other essay collection - 'Sister Outsider', has been waiting to be read on my bookshelf for far too long now. Lorde is very much considered a mother to a branch of feminism I wholly respect and try to follow, and this did not disappoint.

In the end, it is her journal entries about cancer that have stuck with me the most. I'd never really thought

before about the struggle between being terminally ill and retaining full bodily autonomy. Lorde's voice is powerful, vivacious and poignant. I regret not reading her sooner, and very much look forward to exploring more of her work. I believe this book is a wonderful, easier introduction to her writing.

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### **Cathryn says**

Read this for the ONTD 2018 challenge. The theme was to read a book published in 1934 or written by an author born in 1934.

Being interested in intersectional feminism, as soon as I saw that Audre Lorde was born in 1934, I wanted to read one of her essay collections. Unfortunately, I've purchased far too many books recently and I'm trying to be a little more financially responsible: this book was the only work by Audre Lorde available at my public library.

I don't think that this anthology is the best introduction to Lorde's work. There's some great content here, but as a person currently going through cancer treatment, I found the title essay (which makes up about half the book) to be a little disappointing. This has inspired me to read more of her work, however, and as soon as I'm able, I will be picking up at least one of her poetry anthologies and probably one or two of her other books, like *Sister Outsider* or *The Cancer Journals*.

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