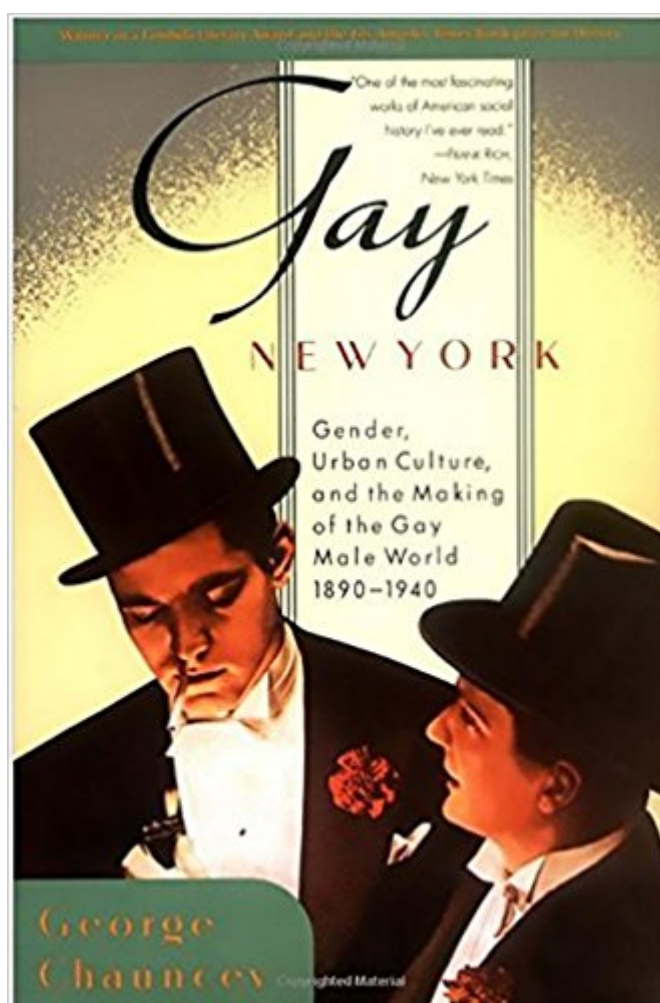


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Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, And The Making Of The Gay Male World, 1890-1940



Synopsis

Gay New York brilliantly shatters the myth that before the 1960s gay life existed only in the closet, where gay men were isolated, invisible, and self-hating. Based on years of research and access to a rich trove of diaries, legal records, and other unpublished documents, this book is a fascinating portrait of a gay world that is not supposed to have existed.

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Customer Reviews

Chauncey reconstructs New York's pre-WWII gay community, revealing a group that was deeply involved in the city's social and cultural scenes. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Historian Chauncey (Univ. of Chicago) brilliantly maps out the complex gay world of turn-of-the-century New York City. This book's publication is timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the uprising at the Stonewall Inn, which is often hailed as the birth of the modern gay and lesbian movement. Yet Chauncey convincingly puts Stonewall in perspective: It hardly marked the beginning of urban gay pride or nightlife. Rather than languishing in obscurity and isolation, as has long been assumed, many gay male New Yorkers thrived in close, often proud communities decades before the famous riots. He argues that before WW II the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual behavior were far looser than they were later, particularly among working-class men. Gay New York reconstructs prewar gay life through police records, newspapers, oral histories, the papers of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, diaries, medical records, and other fascinating primary texts. The material is rich and much of it startlingly revealing about prewar social mores: A

State Liquor Authority investigator in 1939 amiably refers to a drag queen by the feminine pronoun, boasting that ``she liked us very much,” while a musician’s diaries tell of his often successful attempts at picking up uniformed policemen. This was clearly a world of permeable sexual boundaries. Chauncey (co-editor, *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, not reviewed) is a savvy tour guide, leading us through bars, speakeasies, parks, bathhouses, streets, rooming houses, and cafeterias, always providing ample historical context and intriguing interpretive possibilities. He explores not only the mainstream culture’s influence on gay urban life, but vice versa, arguing that homosexuality and heterosexuality are historically specific categories that evolved in the beginning of this century and shaped each other. Chauncey has made a stunning contribution not only to gay history, but to the study of urban life, class, gender--and heterosexuality.

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So many people think gay history, with a few minor exceptions, began only when the Stonewall Riots occurred in 1969, but this is far from the case. In his book *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, George Chauncey puts any such beliefs aside. He sets out to disprove three myths: the myth of invisibility, the myth of isolation, and the myth of internalization. The myth of invisibility holds that the gay world prior to Stonewall was invisible and largely inaccessible. Chauncey shows that this was not the case as a vibrant culture around homosexuality was visible throughout the period he studied. He notes that even though his study is limited to New York City, similar advances were occurring in other major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco. The myth of isolation is similar to the myth of invisibility in that it holds there was no gay culture to speak of, no gay-friendly places to hang out, no places where gay business was welcomed. Chauncey demolishes this myth as handily as he demolishes the myth of invisibility. Finally, the myth of internalization holds that the gay and lesbian populations had internalized the messages of hate and shame promulgated by dominant culture, and therefore no move was made to establish a specifically gay culture. Chauncey blows this myth, too, out of the water. Gay people were subject to constant police harassment, but they nevertheless proudly, even exuberantly expressed their sexuality. Although New York City is the focus of the book, the text is far more wide-ranging. New York is the appropriate place for centering this story as it pertains to the US because it was not until the 1960s that San Francisco came to be known as a gay Mecca. Even today New York is a leading destination for those who wish to come out of the closet, but are unable to do so in their provincial home towns. Nevertheless, New York is not the

entire story, and Chauncey brings in other details as appropriate. The book is full of facts and statistics, and this attention to detail sometimes makes the book a little dry. It is all very interesting and fascinating reading, however, just occasionally overly pedantic. Still, I highly recommend this book especially for the queer person who wishes to learn more about gay history. The text fills in important gaps about understanding of gay history, and superbly corrects commonly held misconceptions.

In "Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940", George Chauncey argues that "that gay life in New York was less tolerated, less visible to outsiders, and more rigidly segregated in the second third of the century than the first, and that the very severity of the postwar reaction has tended to blind us to the relative tolerance of the prewar years." (pg. 9) Further, he argues that "in important respects the hetero-homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation." (pg. 13) Through his work, Chauncey maps both the physical and social topography of gay culture in New York City. Finally, Chauncey argues that "the construction of male homosexual identities can be understood only in the context of the broader social organization and representation of gender, that relations among men were construed in gendered terms, and that the policing of gay men was part of a more general policing of the gender order." (pg. 28) One of the most interesting parts of Chauncey's analysis details the manner in which gay and heterosexual men interacted. Chauncey writes, "The earlier culture [pre-1950s] permitted men to engage in sexual relations with other men, often on a regular basis, without requiring them to regard themselves or to be regarded by others as gay." (pg. 65) Due to this, "many men alternated between male and female sexual partners without believing that interest in one precluded interest in the other, or that their occasional recourse to male sexual partners, in particular, indicated an abnormal, homosexual, or even bisexual disposition, for they neither understood nor organized their sexual practices along a hetero-homosexual axis." (pg. 65) Chauncey adds an element of class to his analysis, specifically when discussing the differences between those groups of gay men that self-identified as queer and those that identified as fairies. Chauncey writes, "The queers' antagonism toward the fairies was in large part a class antagonism. Not all queers were middle class just as not all fairies were of the

working class. But if the fairy as a cultural archetype was rooted in the working-class culture of the Bowery, the queer was rooted in the middle-class culture of the Village and the prosperous sections of Harlem and Times Square. (pg. 106)

His discussion of police power further demonstrates the complex relationships between the queer and normal worlds. Chauncey discusses the anti-vice societies and police focus on sexuality targeting primarily female prostitutes. Chauncey writes, “The campaigns to control assignation hotels illustrate the degree to which the anti-vice societies often neglected homosexuality because of their preoccupation with controlling female prostitution, as well as the ability of normal-looking gay men to manipulate observers’ presumption that they were straight to their own advantage.” (pg. 163)

When the police did charge gay men, they usually did so with disorderly conduct charges. Chauncey writes, “The use of the disorderly conduct law against gay people was consistent with the intent of the law, which effectively criminalized a wide range of non-normative behavior in public spaces, as defined by the dominant culture, be it loitering, gambling, failure to hire oneself out to an employer, failure to remain sober, or behaving in a public space in any other manner perceived as threatening the social order.” (pg. 172)

After the end of Prohibition, the State Liquor Authority controlled both those spaces where patrons could drink and what type of clientele they could host. According to Chauncey, “The genius of the licensing mechanism lay in the way it expanded the state’s ability to survey and regulate public sociability. By threatening proprietors with the revocation of their licenses if its agents discovered that customers were violating the regulations, it forced proprietors to uphold those regulations on behalf of the state.” (pg. 336)

This public role of policing fed into later Cold War fears, in which “the specter of the invisible homosexual, like that of the invisible communist, haunted Cold War America. The new image was invoked to justify a new wave of assaults on gay men in the postwar decade.” (pg. 360)

This effectively ended the broader public realm open to gay New Yorkers while cementing the hetero-homosexual binary.

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