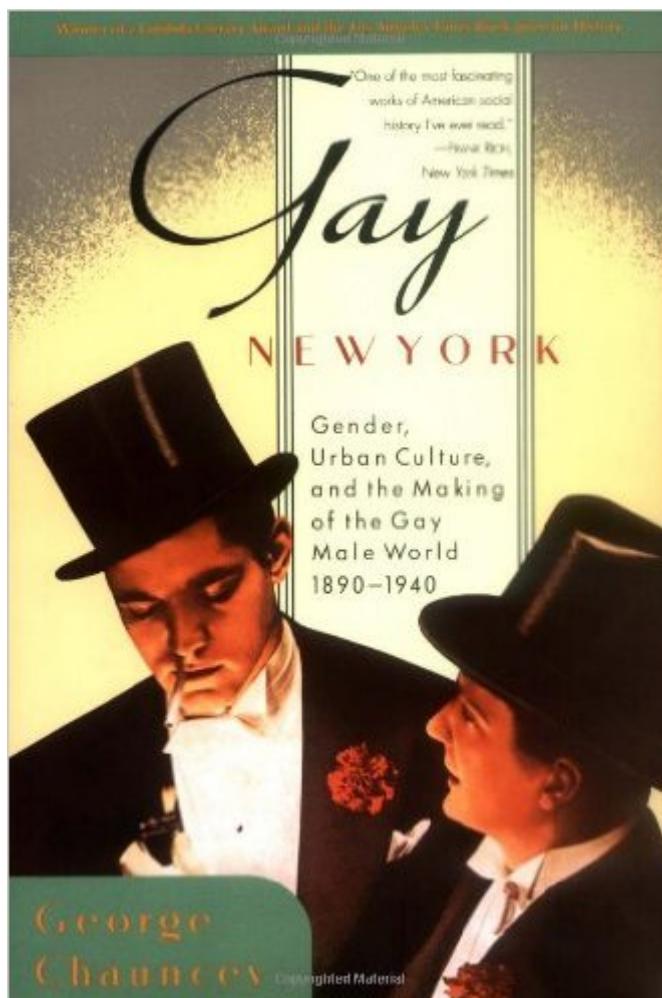


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Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, And The Making Of The Gay Male World, 1890-1940



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 Based on years of research and access to a rich trove of diaries, legal records, and other unpublished documents, this book is a fascinating portrait of a gay world that is not supposed to have existed.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

I read a lot of history, but generally not read social history. Nevertheless, this is one of the best books I have read in recent years. According to Author George Chauncey, who teaches at the University of Chicago, a "myth of isolation" "holds that, even if a gay world existed [in New York between 1890 and 1940], it was kept invisible." Chauncey's main premise is that, not only was there a gay New York beginning in the 1890s, it was not invisible. In the marvelous introduction, Chauncey also makes the profound point that the gay male world of the pre-World War II era "was not a world in which men were divided into 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals.'" Chauncey proceeds to explain: "This book argues that in important respects the hetero-homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation." Later in the introduction, Chauncey writes: "Heterosexuality, no less than homosexuality, is a historically specific social category and identity." Chauncey's study begins in the 1890s, "a time when New York was famous for being a 'wide-open town,' [when] some clubs went so far as to stage live sexual performances." The so-called "Bowery resorts were only the most famous elements of an extensive, organized, highly visible gay world." At the turn of the century, men who were "painted and

powdered,' used women's names, and displayed feminine mannerisms" were called "fairies." According to Chauncey, fairies were tolerated, but not respected, in much of working-class society. During this period "Many men alternated between male and female sexual partners without believing that interest in one precluded interest in the other.

Chauncey's book offers serious and original thinking about queer history and about general urban history as well. Freed from the myths that have persisted about the place of homosexuals in U.S. society, the author paints a new portrait of what transpired just before the turn of the last century and into the early decades of the 20th century. The most important idea he explains is that the concepts of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" as we understand them today didn't exist one hundred years ago. Chauncey's research shows that it was adherence to traditional gender role, rather than choice of sex partner, that labelled a man as either a "fairy" or "normal." The author provides detailed descriptions of the process by which working class men in particular could have sexual relations with other men and persevere a "normal" identity so long as the sex partners were effeminate. He uses extensive supporting materials that undergird his conclusions, including accounts of the "pansies" who were not, in fact, demeaned or ostracized but instead were tolerated, courted, and may even have served a vital purpose to working men who had relocated alone to the city to support families that lived elsewhere or to make their way into adulthood. Chauncey shows how the definition of "invert"-- detour from standard gender role-- shifted gradually to the notion of "degenerate" or "homosexual"-- men who chose other men as sex partners. He makes clear how the emerging definition of homosexuality depended on a similarly new definition of heterosexuality. These subtle but powerful social mores are detailed at length, in convincing prose.

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