States of Desire: Travels In Gay America

by Edmund White

A Book Review by Gary Hankins

States of Desire: Travels in Gay America--Edmund White
E.P. Dutton Co., 1980, 336 pages
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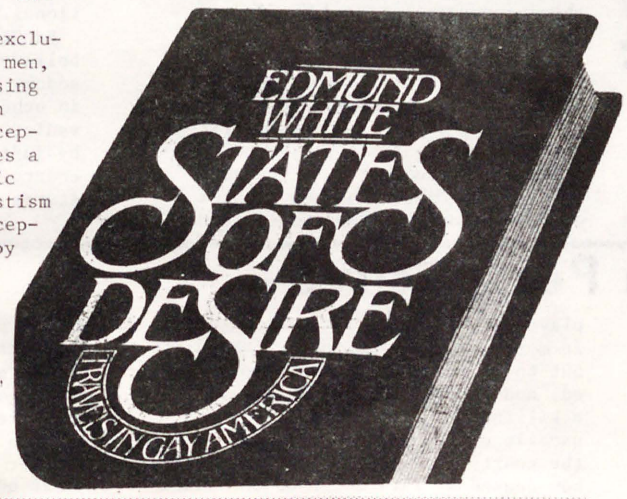
Through his intelligent, empathetic profiles of individual gays, Edmund White deftly records the rich diversity of gay lives. By describing gay lives unique to certain areas, White's travelogue evokes the current desires and changing status of gays across the country. The contrast of his New York sensibilities with those prevalent in areas more like the "Fifties in a deep-freeze" yields a witty yet revealing look at ourselves.

The often startling conflict between moderate and radical gay political thought emerges throughout White's commentary. Although White implores gays to come out, he recognizes the paradox that conspicuous gays, particularly militants and drags, further inflame the right through their visible challenge to traditional concepts of family and fidelity.

Although he depicts almost exclusively the lives of urban gay men, White finds feminism's increasing support of its lesbian faction particularly astute. Their acceptance of lesbianism constitutes a test of oppressive chauvinistic attitudes. White sees transvestism as a similar test case for acceptance of homosexuality, both by straights and by other gays. Gay hostility towards leather queens or Castro clones is equally divisive as it presumes that "the wearer, not the look, is interchangeblle."

White's chagrin at the conservative mentallity and lack of political organization in smaller cities is tempered by the opportunities they afford. Because small-town gays are generally dispersed through the local population, rather than concentrated in gay ghettoes associated with drugs, pornography, and hustling, gay issues focus not on moral decay, but on the two men fixing up the house across the street. White notes that in cities such as Seattle and Minneapolis, where anti-gay initiatives have recently been defeated, gays emphasized everyone's right to privacy instead of demanding endorsement of homosexuality.

White's impressions are amusing as well as accurate, without resorting to traditionally self-deprecating camp humor. He is as attuned to regional nuances of gesture and speech as he is to the larger social structure within which they are observed. White's textured profiles are a compelling look at the consequences of choices already made and of changes to come.



Now That You Know

Now That You Know, What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality
Fairchild, Betty and Hayward, Nancy
Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich,1979
$8.95

Although this book was written for the parents of gay children, it has much to offer lesbians and gay men. Someone who is considering coming out to their parents can find out how others have accomplished this difficult task and how their parents reacted. It answers many of the questions that are likely to arise at such a stressful occasion and gives words of support to everyone involved.

One chapter entitled "What Is Gay?" gives the uninitiated adult a basic idea of sexuality from the clinical Kinsey 1-6 scale to a simple discussion of what happens in bed. Short monologues are included which discuss individuals' first realization of their interest in persons of the same sex. Both women and men often knew of their attractions in elementary school and sometimes years before then. One woman talked of buying her female friends gifts and of behaving in certain ways, such as not wearing her glasses, because she thought her second grade female teacher would like her better.

In the discussion about why homosexuality exists, a university student summed up the thoughts of many people. He said that looking for causes is "a waste of time... I think when you're looking for a cause, then you're viewing it as an illness."

One chapter is devoted to the struggle gay men and lesbians face in the work world and some of the positive steps that have been taken to overcome those problems. This includes the resolution adopted by the American Federation of Teachers denouncing discrimination against homosexuals, the statement by the Council of the American Library Association which "reaffirms its support for equal employment opportunity for gay librarians and library workers", and the creation of other gay groups within the professions such as nursing, psychology and law.

There is an excellent introduction into the role that religion plays directly in the lives of many and indirectly in the lives of all gay people through quotes from the Bible and interpretations of those passages. A logical path is followed to show how certain Hebrew words could be interpreted many different ways depending upon the translator's perspective.

This well-written book concludes with a visit to a typical Parents of Gays meeting where a new member is introduced to the workings of this successful group. This is followed by a bibliography and a check list of activities that parents who wish to form their own POG should use.

Anyone about to reveal their homosexuality to their parents would be well armed by taking this book with them, having read it in advance.

The New Couple: Women & Gay Men

A Book Review by Gary Hankins

The New Couple: Women and Gay Men by Rebecca Nahas and Myra Turley: Seaview: 1979; 291 pp.; $9.95

Marilyn has been divorced by Michael, the husband she depended heavily upon for years, and she is overcoming her suicidal impulses. After a year's celibacy, Eva is now actively seeking casual sexual encounters with a variety of men. Stephanie lives with Lenny in a primary but non-monogamous loving relationship. The constant in these women's lives is that the men they are involved with are all gay; the differences lie in their reactions to the men's gayness. Their differing reactions epitomize the three patterns of women's response to gay men outlined in The New Couple: Women and Gay Men.

Rebecca Nahas and Myra Turley interviewed 110 respondents as well as sex therapists and clinical authorities in their well-researched look at these relationships. Through this process, the authors distilled three major patterns of response by the women and gay men involved, each of which forms the basis for a section of the book.

The first response depicted is that of the traditional couple, where romantic involvement, often including marriage, is unsuccessfully structured on heterosexual models. No mutual acknowledgement or acceptance of the man's homosexuality is reached: the relationship fails not just due to sexual incompatibility, but also to an underlying inability to communicate and to be oneself with one's lover. These couples are unable to integrate the man's gayness into their lives and maintain a workable relationship.

The second response concerns marginal relationships between women and gay men, based upon professional or social contacts which may or may not evolve into romantic ties. The initial attraction emanates from the parallel emergence of feminism and gay liberation, in which straight men are the common oppressor. These women see gay men as particularly sensitive and enjoy the company of men whose lives are "not all Americana and football." Marginal relationships are mutually supportive, providing both with outlets for confiding their desires, needs, and anxieties. Because the relationship is nonsexual, the woman also finds it non-threatening; the gay men enjoy the women's acceptance, which is greater than straight men's.

The authors define an emerging third pattern of response as the "new couple." This label comes from a synthesis of gay liberation and the "new feminism." The correlation between sexual rigidity and homophobia has been dissolving with the growing concern for sexual openness fostered by these movements. The new couple consists of women and self-proclaimed gay men who "experience an intimate, open love relationship." The gay men do not see their relationships with women as a change in sexual orientation, although some do discontinue sex with men during involvement with women. The women do not apply heterosexual roles to the gay men, realizing instead they cannot demand that one person provide them with "completeness."

Although clinically the three categories often seem arbitrary, Nahas and Turley draw from their extensive interviews to portray vividly women's reactions to men's gayness. While Freudian analysis and Kinsey's continuum of male sexual orientation are discussed, the authors approach the interaction of women and gay men along a continuum of acceptance. In doing so, they assume that the man's homosexual orientation is immutable. The bitterest responses from both men and women are those of the traditional couple, where both sought to repress, hide, or cure the man's gayness. In this context, psychoanalysts are scathingly denounced for transmitting their social biases against gay men to their patients, even if they fall short of recommending marriage or aversion therapy as cures. The most comfortable responses come from the "new couples" who expected their relationships to develop outside heterosexual norms. In fact, most men in these relationships did not consider sexual or emotional responses to women until they had come out and were comfortable in their sexual identities as gay men.

The New Couple is one of the first examinations of women's responses and feelings towards gay men. Its authors dispel the myth of the stereotypical "fag-hag," as well as head off traditional gay hostility toward men who proclaim themselves bisexual. The personal profiles of the interviewed respondents provide an interesting, revealing look at how gay men function in relationships with women and how they integrate themselves into heterosexual society.

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