



The Invention of Heterosexuality

By Jonathan Ned Katz

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“Heterosexuality,” assumed to denote a universal sexual and cultural norm, has been largely exempt from critical scrutiny. In this boldly original work, Jonathan Ned Katz challenges the common notion that the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been a timeless one. Building on the history of medical terminology, he reveals that as late as 1923, the term “heterosexuality” referred to a “morbid sexual passion,” and that its current usage emerged to legitimate men and women having sex for pleasure. Drawing on the works of Sigmund Freud, James Baldwin, Betty Friedan, and Michel Foucault, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* considers the effects of heterosexuality’s recently forged primacy on both scientific literature and popular culture.

“Lively and provocative.”—Carol Tavriss, *New York Times Book Review*

“A valuable primer . . . misses no significant twists in sexual politics.”—Gary Indiana, *Village Voice Literary Supplement*

“One of the most important—if not outright subversive—works to emerge from gay and lesbian studies in years.”—Mark Thompson, *The Advocate*

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Katz (*Gay American History*) argues that heterosexuality is a social construct rather than a natural, unambiguous given. He notes that the terms heterosexual and homosexual were coined in 1868 by German sex-law reformer Karl Maria Kertbeny and did not gain wide currency until the early 20th century. Katz contends that heterosexuality as a universal, presumed, normative ideal was invented by men, such as Kertbeny, Sigmund Freud and German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Prior to the late 19th century, he maintains, the social universe was not polarized into "hetero" and "homo." The examples he cites in support of his thesis—ancient Greece, the new England colonies (1607-1740) and the U.S. between 1820 and 1850—do not substantiate Katz's claims. Nevertheless, this often provocative work challenges rigid notions of gender identity, building on the ideas of French historian Michel Foucault and on feminist critiques of heterosexuality by Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich and others.

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From Library Journal

Although we take for granted that heterosexuality is and has always been the sexual norm, historian Katz reexamines the constructions of sexual identity and postulates that heterosexuality has a history that has heretofore never been analyzed and that "such privileging of the norm accedes to its domination." Tracing the first appearance of the terms heterosexual and homosexual in 1868 in Germany, the author of *Gay American History* (LJ 12/15/76) analyzes the changes in usage in dictionaries, medical journals, and a wide variety of other published sources. Carefully building his argument using Richard von Krafft-Ebing's and Sigmund Freud's seminal theories in the creation of heterosexuality, he goes on to challenge such influential figures as Alfred Charles Kinsey, Betty Friedan, and Michel Foucault. This provocatively original research, recalling similar problematizations of race, gender, and other seemingly immutable, ahistorical constructs, is complemented by Gore Vidal's foreword and Lisa Duggan's afterword. For informed readers.

James E. Van Buskirk, San Francisco P.L.

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From [Booklist](#)

Katz's thoughtful, scholarly book examines the words *heterosexual* and *homosexual* both of which are scarcely 100 years old—and presents heterosexuality as a historical social convention rather than as a natural, eternal given. In arguing that these categorical terms are historical and thus changeable, Katz reminds us that until very recently, sex was considered mostly functional, urgently needed for procreation in order to populate fledgling American settlements. He then scrutinizes Freud's influence as a sex theorist who changed the image of woman from her nineteenth-century idealization as the "angel in the house" to one in which lack of erotic response constituted mental illness. Moving beyond Freud, he takes us through the twentieth century, stressing the conservatism of the 1940s and 1950s before coming eventually to the churning 1990s, when a theatrical review titled *Heterosexuals in Crisis* summarizes the "general sense of a different-sex erotic emergency." Along the way, he cites such sex theorists as Kate Millett, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Michel Foucault, weaving them into his controversial, readable discourse. *Whitney Scott*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Samual Larkin:

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Linda Henderson:

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