



A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity Around the World

R.B. Parkinson

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How old is the oldest chat-up line between men? Who was the first 'lesbian'? Were ancient Greek men who had sex together necessarily 'gay'? And what did Shakespeare think about cross-dressing?

A Little Gay History takes objects ranging from Ancient Egyptian papyri and the erotic scenes on the Roman Warren Cup to images by modern artists including David Hockney and Bhupen Khakhar to consider questions such as these. Explored are the issues behind forty artefacts from ancient times to the present, and from cultures across the world, to ask a question that concerns us all: how easily can we recognize love in history?

Concise and beautifully illustrated with objects from the British Museum's far-ranging collection, A Little Gay History provides an intriguing and valuable insight into the range, diversity and complexity of same-sex experiences.

It has been named a Stonewall Book Award-Israel Fishman Non-Fiction Award Honor Book for 2014.

Author

R. B. Parkinson is internationally known as a specialist in Ancient Egyptian texts and a curator of ancient Egyptian culture at the British Museum. His books for the British Museum Press include Voices from Ancient Egypt, The Tomb-Chapel of Nebamun, and (for children) The Pocket Guide to Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs.

A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity Around the World Details

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From Reader Review A Little Gay History: Desire and Diversity Around the World for online ebook

Loyal says

A fantastic read, a journey through the history of LGBT culture. From some of the most ancient artwork we've found, dating several thousand years BC, to the more modern 1990s, this book touches on it all. The book also does a good job of recognizing and explaining its shortcomings- gay representations of women are less frequent, and often could have been made for the pleasures of men, not from a woman's perspective. This book is a great starting point to see how LGBT culture has evolved through the centuries and what role it has taken. I would highly recommend to a fellow LGBTQ+ person, or to a non-LGBTQ+ person who wants to learn more.

Ana says

I wish I could see the exposition, but I'll take second best :D

Helene Fosse says

An interesting coffee-table book for the casually interested, since it's too short (only about 120-130 pages) to actually cover LGBT+ history properly. I like how the author makes very clear at every piece that "This MIGHT mean," instead of claiming that something is a certain sign that something is referring to LGBT, which I feel like a book for the casual reader would maybe do. One thing that I learnt from this book is how big a negative role Britain (especially) and other Christian countries has had for LGBT rights throughout the world, like in India and Japan.

All in all I recommend this book if you want to learn a little bit about LGBT throughout history, but if you're actually properly interested in this subject, then maybe find some other book.

Amanda K says

Cool, interesting book about the history of homosexuality. It brings up many different views from all around the world, and I learned quite a few things that I hadn't known before.

Franka says

A very interesting read. Unfortunately it was very short and while the book touched a lot of topics I would have liked it to have more detailed information. Although many topics were only lightly explained I love that this book shone light on a part of history often forgotten or ignored. And it also inspired me to look deeper into historical periods and how society dealt with LGBT people there.

Leni says

The book is a nice introduction to a queer interpretation of art, but that bothered me as well about it: the niceness. The book works so hard not to offend anyone by almost apologising for the subject matter. Writing about queer art is to take a stand: we queer people have always been here, despite the collective effort to erase us from the history books and museums. A book trying to right this wrong shouldn't be apologetic about it.

David says

Written by a museum curator, this book is like a charming portable exhibit, with really, really good explanatory text. Wonderful illustrations take us through history from the most ancient times down to today (2013 copyright), across cultures as well as through time. I have read as much gay history as I could get my hands on over the years, and still learned new things from this very short book of around 125 pages. For example, until now I did not know that the earliest recorded pick-up line is found in an Egyptian poem from around 1800 B.C., where one male god is trying to seduce another (here's hoping that "what a lovely backside you have!" sounded better in ancient Egyptian). Trust those Brits to discover this sort of vital historical knowledge! Highly recommended.

Mashiara says

As advertised, it's a short book, centered around individual museum objects. It doesn't claim to be a complete history of queer life and it isn't. It only gives us spotlights, very much following the original museum trail concept that was the book's inception.

Michelle says

I think James Joyce sums it up best in Ulysses.... "love loves to love love." This beautifully illustrated little book is a love story that began a long time ago. There are stories from ancient Egypt, Pompey, The Secretum, Shakespearean literature and much more. Did you know the term "homosexual" was first coined in Germany and first used in English in 1891? So much "insight, thought and wit" in this wonderful revelation of the history of human desire. Love unique histories like this!

Stina says

v informative

v gay

v interesting

if you ever want to see images of super-duper ancient imagery of dudes with penises over a meter long, this

is the book for you(!)

I don't know if there's anything else to say about this lol. I was at the British Museum and saw this in the gift shop and I needed to buy it and so I did and while I was not overwhelmed, I was not disappointed because what it promised, it delivered on.

David says

An LGBT equivalent of the History of the World in 100 Objects, showing the ever shifting attitudes to sexuality and gender over time via exhibits in the British Museum. Necessarily often speculative but fascinating nonetheless.

Rebecca says

I didn't like it as much as I might have otherwise because the LGBTQ history tour the British Museum put up for Pride Month cribbed most of its material from here, which was disappointing in a way that they hadn't made more of an effort, and it meant I was re-reading some of the content. But that's not the fault of the book or the author.

Michael Belcher says

A compact but incredibly useful overview of LGBTQ resonances throughout history. Although my taste ranges towards more thorough deep dives, I was educated and moved by this "little" gay history. And, if anything, it has me itching to explore the life of the Roman emperor Hadrian and his lost love, Antinous, who he "publicly commemorated...in huge numbers of statues, figures, portraits and coins across the known Roman world."

Jasmin says

A clear and concise glimpse into diverse history from around the world. A very good basis for further research. Easy to understand and follow. I enjoyed it!

Ben Babcock says

I hate listicles. I've gotten to the point where I just don't click on any post that starts with a number in its title. I know, I know, #notalllisticles, some are well-written and informative.

A Little Gay History is, when you think about it, a listicle; you could retitile it "82 Objects from the British Museum Related to Gay Sexual Desire". Listicles were around before the Internet, and I suppose they will outlive the Internet too. I have a few other books that are like this—*The Math Book* and *The Physics Book*

come to mind. They are much heftier, much longer versions of a similar idea to this book. I always find these types of books difficult to read, let alone review. They aren't really *books* in the narrative sense, not even in the non-fiction sense. They are closer to encyclopedias—they are, essentially, lists. How do you review it. “Good list”?

As R.B. Parkinson explains in the preface, this book exists in other forms, including a web trail you can view online. The intention behind this book, then, is to bring to the forefront historical objects and art that depict same sex desire. Parkinson makes a lot of good points about how prejudices in history and historians influence the way we think about homosexuality and same sex relations in the past. This is a *really* difficult topic to discuss, because even the language is weird and filled with bias! *A Little Gay History* tries to demonstrate that humans have had same sex relations throughout human history, but that the attitudes towards these relations—and the extent to which they were considered “normal” or allowable or on the same level as other types of relations—varied a great deal by geography and period.

Like many books of its ilk, *A Little Gay History* is beautifully designed. I never went to the British Museum while I was in England (I did visit the Natural History Museum, which was awesome), and I don't know if I'll ever get the chance to go. So it was nice to see the photographs of these objects reproduced in such high quality detail and colour. Parkinson's write-ups are informative and interesting. They spark a desire to learn more. I really want to read more Virginia Woolf now....

I don't think I would have picked this up if it weren't a #BangingBookClub book. If I wanted to learn more about historical attitudes towards homosexuality, I'd probably search out a meatier book with more writing and less photography—but that's just how I roll, and you might differ. In this case, I got more out of the brilliant podcast discussion than I did from the book itself. Hannah, Leena, and Lucy do an excellent job talking about the issues this book raises—Hannah in particular is in her wheelhouse here, and the two others ask great questions that made me flip back through this book to give some of the pages a second look.

In the podcast, Leena observes that the book makes some pointed comments about Britain's role in making homosexuality illegal throughout the world. Hannah says that sometimes she thinks of the British Museum as “here are all the things that we [the British] stole” and that gave me a laugh—but it's also a thought I had while reading this book. There is something ironic about a book focuses on objects from the British Museum to discuss history and sexuality around the world, since Britain and its imperialism has been such a problematic actor in those forums.

I was surprised and amused to discover my library had a copy of this (sometimes my library seems to have copies of the most esoteric things). *A Little Gay History* is what it says: little, gay, and a history. It's fine. It didn't blow me away, but it was a nice enough way to spend the afternoon and made me think about things in a way I hadn't thought of before.
