

Book Reviews



Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*, New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Straight white males groping each other's genitals, fingering each other's assholes, being anally penetrated by other straight white males, forced oral sex, seeking physical connection through Craig's List ads with other straight white males and various other straight white male-to-male sexual connections are the guts of this book. The author Jane Ward relates many situations and traditions within the American straight white male culture that encourages and even honors such activities. Activities that are homosexual on the surface but are apparently reinforcements of straight white male heterosexuality, power and dominance.

The book "is based on the premise that homosexual contact is a ubiquitous feature of the culture of straight white men." "...That white-straight identified men manufacture opportunities for sexual contact with other men in a remarkably wide range of settings, and that these activities appear to thrive in hyper-heterosexual environments."

Ward also tries to show, "that white male privilege, rituals, anxieties, and delusions are central to the operation of homosexuality within straight white men's lives. In many cases, violence is a central part of the work of reframing homosexual sex as an act that men do to build on another's strength, thereby inoculating one another against what they imagine are the sincere expressions of gay selfhood."

Ward feels it is important to understand, as I do, the difference between sexual orientation, sexual identity and actual sexual behavior. She discusses these distinctions as well as other terms

and thoughts about modern day sexuality such as “heteroflexibility,” sexual fluidity and the different attitudes towards sexual fluidity in the male and female populations, both gay and straight.

Ward delves into the debate of whether we are born “wired” one way or another but here as elsewhere she delves too much with too many references and other authors that we lose track of her main *raison d’être*, sex between (shouldn’t it be “among?”) straight white males. She takes great pains in talking about what she is not going to discuss and why, such as Black males. The book is about straight white men, not Blacks, gay men or women, gay or straight, yet she goes to great pains to find time to discuss all these issues. Some of the discussions are helpful but much is not and again takes away from the topic.

The book is divided up into a first introductory chapter that is far too long and then five other chapters that point to the main topic, periodically discuss the main topic of the book and the specific chapter but again get off track with other authors’ writings, philosophies, detailed definitions and excessive repetition of points she has made earlier, numbers of times.

Ward looks into man-to-man sex in the past in the second chapter titled, “Bars, Bikers and Bathrooms.” However, each topic is merely a jumping board for her or others’ philosophies and thoughts with little discussion of white males engaging other white males in these three venues. The third chapter is a thirty-five-page discussion, “Here’s How You Know You’re Not Gay.” I thought that had been discussed in the extensive fifty page initial chapter. And what does this really have to do with straight white men engaging other straight white men in homo sex? Chapter 4 explores somewhat the film industry’s dealing with straight white men having or considering having sex with other straight white men and the solicitation of sex by straight white men through Craig’s List ads. Again, there is some useful information but little substance towards the focus of the book. I wish she had talked to the men behind the films and ads instead of totally relying on the comments of others.

Chapter five is a better chapter, which explores the realms of hazing in the US Military, US contractors abroad, fraternities and various websites that promote videos of such sexual activity among straight white men under different scenarios. Here we see that much of the man-to-man sex among straight white males stems from males in positions of power and authority inflicting rites and rituals on subordinate males in order to secure them into whatever community/fraternity of men in question. Ward is strong in pointing out, again far too many times than necessary, that large areas of the American straight white male culture use male-to-male sex and play to reinforce one’s heterosexuality.

The final chapter, “Against Gay Love” is filler as far as I am concerned and has nothing to do with the book’s purpose. It focuses on the author’s life, a lesbian, and her thoughts on gay life, love, etc.

So, the bottom line of this book seems to be that sex among straight white males exists, is prevalent throughout many layers of American life and this straight white male sex with other straight white males exists to reinforce straight white male heterosexuality. Well, that may be true to some extent. After all it is a female writing this book and a gay female to boot and she has to rely completely on the accounts, the writings and thoughts of others for she is NOT a straight white male who has experienced or even witnessed any of the activity she writes about. That is not her fault, but it is probably why so much of the book deals with definitions, theories and thoughts of others, as there is nothing from within the author herself that can speak to the subject.

White males have dominated life and all its aspects since the dawn of Western Civilization.

White males have been sexual with each other since the dawn of time under many different cultures and circumstances. It is nothing new under this sun. We Americans have a passion for labeling things, which Ward addresses very well in one chapter, and because of this labeling we have compartmentalized sexual life/activity in the modern USA. In the past when men were together or in various circumstances sex has occurred. As white males have dominated all aspects of life, until the last decades of the 20th Century, they have inflicted on others, including subordinate/younger white males, their agenda and desires, which have included rituals and rites involving sexual activity.

I am a white male who grew up in privilege and witnessed in my all white, male prep school the sanctioned privilege of Seniors to pick out weaker underclassmen not liked for numerous reasons, strip them to their underwear and smear their bodies with food, sauces, etc. and then run their pants up the flag pole which stood in the middle of the Senior campus. Ward describes this same ritual in the military, the Navy in particular, though the males were stripped naked and their bodies, in addition to being fouled with foodstuffs and excrement, were invaded both orally and anally with various objects including other men's cocks.

Men in power, and white males have been in power for ages, use all that is at hand to dominate, control and penetrate all that they have power over which includes playmates, school mates, fraternity brothers, fellow military comrades, gang members, fraternal organization members, fellow prisoners, spouses, employees and anyone else over which white males have dominance. It is the way of the world. It may not be right, fair, proper, in good taste, etc. but it exists and will continue to do so as long as males have any authority. I am sure if we looked at other areas of the world, the males may not be white but if they are in control, the same rites and rituals would be found.

Sexuality is the primal force, after breath, since the creation of life. Homo Sapien males are first and foremost sexual beings and almost anything they do or think has a sexual component, so it is not surprising so much sexual activity is present in male life and specifically straight white male life.

In summary, this book has a very catchy title, a very intriguing topic and some very good information but in total it needs to be re-written. I am surprised the editor was not stricter in aspects of the book specifically it's rambling, repetitiveness and organization. It is a good read if you are adept at wading through lots of stuff to get to the gems that are there and strewn throughout.

Richard A. Gourley

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