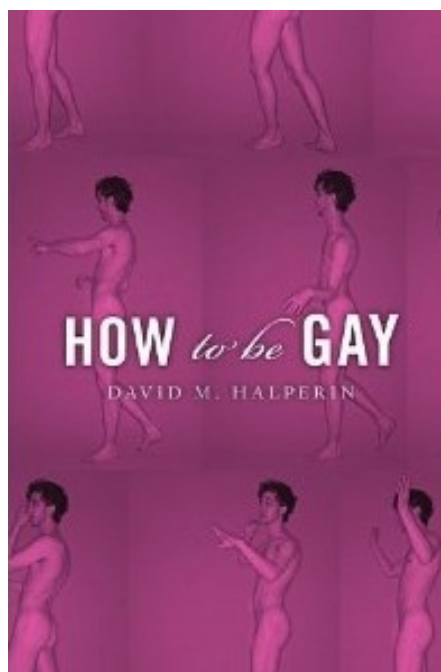




How to Be Gay

David M. Halperin

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No one raises an eyebrow if you suggest that a guy who arranges his furniture just so, rolls his eyes in exaggerated disbelief, likes techno music or show tunes, and knows all of Bette Davis's best lines by heart might, just possibly, be gay. But if you assert that male homosexuality is a cultural practice, expressive of a unique subjectivity and a distinctive relation to mainstream society, people will immediately protest. Such an idea, they will say, is just a stereotype--ridiculously simplistic, politically irresponsible, and morally suspect. The world acknowledges gay male culture as a fact but denies it as a truth.

David Halperin, a pioneer of LGBTQ studies, dares to suggest that gayness is a specific way of being that gay men must learn from one another in order to become who they are. Inspired by the notorious undergraduate course of the same title that Halperin taught at the University of Michigan, provoking cries of outrage from both the right-wing media and the gay press, "How To Be Gay" traces gay men's cultural difference to the social meaning of style.

Far from being deterred by stereotypes, Halperin concludes that the genius of gay culture resides in some of its most despised features: its aestheticism, snobbery, melodrama, adoration of glamour, caricatures of women, and obsession with mothers. The insights, impertinence, and unfazed critical intelligence displayed by gay culture, Halperin argues, have much to offer the heterosexual mainstream.

How to Be Gay Details

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From Reader Review How to Be Gay for online ebook

Kay says

This turned out to be a slog fest. I found myself wondering why so many pages were devoted to carefully weaving a justification for the topic (apparently based on heated feedback from both the 'family right' and gays who don't like being categorized) when the title was so basic and to the point. How to Be Gay addresses the cultural aspects of gayness, and a fairly narrow 'traditional?' one at that. I suppose the study has to start somewhere. I learned several things reading this book (For instance, David Daniels is an amazing singer). I'm not certain I could agree with many of the arguments/conclusions, but I'm not gay so I can't judge. I'm not a Joan Crawford fan but will try to watch the movies used as examples in this book. Some of this seemed overanalyzed but I appreciate the thorough review perhaps more so than easy dismissal of points made. I'm glad I read this--I just wished it had been more concise.

Timothy says

I finally gave up on this, because it was too hard a slog. There are some entertaining parts of the book, but it is a scholarly endeavor with all the scholarly jargon to go with it.

Bruno says

Claro, arrojado, provocador.

Scott says

Let me start by saying that as far as I can see, the statement above, that "gay men must learn from one another in order to become who they are" has nothing to do with the book that I just finished reading. David Halperin seems to me to be saying the exact opposite. He spends many pages explaining exactly how pre-pubescent boys destined to become gay men came to our love of various gay stereotypical activities and obsessions, whether it be Judy Garland, Joan Crawford, grand opera, historic buildings, arranging furniture or flower arranging, and clearly we did not learn these things from one another at such a tender age. So I am mystified by this blurb, which is copied from the Harvard University Press catalogue at <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.ph...> and pasted both here and to Amazon.

I am not only mystified but also disappointed, because this fact (and I accept it as fact) has always confused me. The correlation between certain physical activities involving the dangly bits, and an early interest in grand opera, is not obvious to me. I was hoping for an explanation and found none here. Or almost none, keep reading.

I found the book difficult to read and was beginning to worry about early onset Alzheimer. It is a somewhat difficult book, but I used to be able to read those. Am I losing it? I came to suspect that it's not just about me. I think there are two things going on:

First, the book is backwards. I would have preferred that the author start with the last chapter and tell us

where he is coming from. It was only on reading the last chapters that I understood that Halperin does not actually approve of the subcultures that he spends 300 pages describing. What he approves of is the contemporary out-and-proud consciously gay sensibility. I guess that should have been obvious from the fact that he is a professor of queer studies, but I missed it. More evidence of Alzheimer perhaps. My guess is that it is backwards for a reason, which is that it is actually the beefed-up notes for a university level course, the audience for which is still his students, and he expects his students to think. The problem, Dr. Halperin, is that I am not your student.

Second, he never tells us what he really means. He expects us to work it out for ourselves. In other words, he expects me to write the little essay that I am now writing, and if I really were his student, he would assign it. He is being didactic in the non-pejorative sense and he is using the Socratic method.

OK Dr. Halperin, you win. I am writing. I should be out shopping in preparation for this afternoon's opera performance and tonight's party at my local gay B&B, but instead I am writing a book review, and how gay is that? Touché! Dr. Halperin, I'd love to meet you at a party sometime. You sound like a fun guy.

And so finally, WHAT DOES HE MEAN? I think that the heart of book is contained in one sentence....

In any case, if it is an ironic position that gay men share with women, and if it is our ironic identification with women that enables us to extract lessons in political defiance from Joan Crawford's glamorous performance of maternal martyrdom and abjection, then perhaps those feminine identifications of ours are identifications that, far from attempting to closet, we should be eager to claim for our own—to understand, to appreciate, and to cherish.

Halperin, David M. (2012-08-21). *How To Be Gay* (p. 298). Harvard University Press. Kindle Edition

Yes. The IRONIC identification with women, also known as camp, is the heart of the matter. He says elsewhere that it has nothing to do with biological women (I think he is being a bit defensive at that point, against Lesbians who really, really hate drag etc. because they think we are mocking them). And this is as close as he comes to the explanation I was seeking all along. He hints at it, he states it several times in several throw-away lines like the one above, but he never really comes out and explains it. I guess his students do that in their essays and class discussion.

And finally let me say a word about Joan Crawford and Mildred Pierce. I think that even Joan Crawford's shoulders are not broad enough to bear the intellectual weight that Halperin has thrust upon them. A hundred pages on Mildred? Yes, I also love that movie. I can't, unlike some fans he describes, shout back every line at the screen as if it were Rocky Horror, but I have loved it as long as I can remember. Nonetheless, I think the book could have benefited from less material from more examples.

Stevan Cirkovic says

It's been an eye-opening read from page 1. What I learned as a result of reading this book is to view with irony the perennial generational conflict between younger ('liberated') and older gay men. So often we proclaim the end of history prematurely - so it seems with regards to queer history and subjectivity too. Halperin delivers on his objective to explain why certain subjects continue to draw fascination among gay men and how they are linked to our own emotional subjectivity. This is a rich cultural study of both gay male culture and heteronormativity, thus viewing our society in an all encompassing way. Favourite line? "Sometimes I think homosexuality is a wasted on gay men." Surprising link to current events: In the last chapters, Halperin describes a move of gay culture into the virtual where cherry-picking partners and friends of the same belief system is common, leading to a decline in queer spaces -> is this increasing lack of shared

reality among gay men similar to increasing political divides elsewhere in society? Is it the same mechanism? Is it a cataclysm for figures like Trump as gays are often at the forefront of art, pop, culture, and progressive politics? And what responsibilities have we as gays to reverse this trend?

Tom Morris says

I shall say this. Halperin's book is readable. Plenty of queer theory and gender theory is especially unreadable but Halperin isn't.

As to Halperin's thesis, that I'll have to mull over. I mean, here I was thinking that a predilection for cocksucking was all I needed to be in the gang, but apparently I have to watch Broadway musicals too...

On the few occasions I leaped into the footnotes, I did find the occasional leap that, were I to have made it back when I was still hanging around the corridors of universities, my academic supervisor would have marked with a red pen.

Weston Richey says

I'm honestly oscillating between 4/5 and 5/5 (see the end, that I do have some issues with what Halperin argues in places), but I'm just going for the gold, 5/5. Even today I'm still thinking about it, and Halperin's arguments, and especially my own existence, life, and cultural interactions as a gay man. That certainly warrants it. But let me say more:

One of the reasons why I'm giving it the best rating possible is largely because of just how *impressive* a project the whole thing is. Halperin tries to broadly outline certain gay male (with like thirty qualifications, of course) cultural values through analyses of very particular phenomena, including the middle 250-or-so pages dedicated to analyzing two scenes from two movies either starring or about Joan Crawford (with a good 50-or-so pages qualifying that this is a really preliminary attempt at just scraping the tip of one of the thousands of icebergs that make up gay male culture and subculture). What's more he is presenting what he takes to be (and I by and large agree is) a heterodox view, which he even self-consciously questions as being potentially "reactionary" in Part Six: What Is Gay Culture?.

And although it is heterodox, I don't think this book is polemical at all in terms of tone, except for maybe in the chapters "Judy Garland versus Identity Art" and "Queer Forever" in Part Six, where he does adopt a bit more of a combative tone. Rather, Halperin is a very careful and conscientious writer--for instance, he spends the first 129 pages of the book, Parts One (B+ Could Try Harder) and Two (American Falsettos) simply justifying the book's project and preemptively offering and accounting for all of the qualifiers, restrictions, and problems with it. He does this again briefly after this main analysis of gay culture. If there is any radicalism here, it is simply in Halperin's content, not his form. This might seem like a really small thing that makes this book so good for me, but I think that this attitude, even (and especially) with particularly nonstandard or radical arguments, is vital to good academia and good nonfiction more generally. I think that the short Goodreads and back cover descriptions are a little bit misleading in that regard: Halperin *is* daring, but not in an aggressive way.

With that, this book was also packed with moments of powerful insight and a surprising number of emotionally moving passages. I said in one of my reading updates for this that I felt emotionally uncomfortable reading this, but I never really said why: Halperin makes his personal stake in the study clear.

He tells the impetus for the book by talking about the personal controversy surrounding the class of the same name he taught at the University of Michigan. He admits that throughout his life as a gay man, he's been told that he has been inadequately gay. He includes very oddly literary moments where he describes an aspect of growing up gay that resonated deeply with me on the level of the heart. Just as much as this book is intellectually engaging, it is emotionally compelling. Just as much as it is academic, it is personal.

I do have my misgivings with a fair amount of what Halperin argues, and I think at some point he collapses terms that he previously would make distinct--eg, 'gay culture' and 'gay men'--and at others he makes distinctions between terms that to me don't seem to be sufficiently differentiated--eg, 'romantic love' and 'gay love'--and I suspect that it's this practice that explains some of my problems. To enumerate a bit more explicitly two specific (but in the same category) issues I have: I think that Halperin is mistaken on his criticisms of both romantic love (which I don't see as being different than what he describes as the ostensibly different 'gay love') and authenticity or sincerity, both of which he characterizes as somehow deeply detrimental or bad, which aspects of gay culture (particularly camp) work to correct. I simply don't agree--or maybe I just don't see--his justification for these evaluative judgments.

I bring that up only to be open about the fact that this book is not something I take to be gospel, or a book that I think is unambiguously Perfect in Every Way. I don't. But, as a work of nonfiction, *How to Be Gay* succeeds enormously. Although my date started to date finished span is 5 days, I read the bulk of it--nearly 400 pages--in 5 hours last night. I found the book that engaging, and to me, that is absolutely a sign of a winning book.

G says

Clever, persuasive, somewhat preaching to the choir. It mostly avoids the academic language trap, which makes it more accessible than most literary criticism.

Michael says

An important book for anyone who thinks that sex is all there is to being gay. There are many dimensions that could apply reading and understanding the concepts around gayness. Halperin's focus on understanding the cultural functionings of gay appropriated icons is both intuitive and direct. A fantastic read for anyone who wants to speak intelligibly about sources, discourses, identities, identifications, cultural impacts, and overall relationships of gay men from their long important history. The distinction between identity politics and gay cultural impact is particularly relevant to our core problems in the gay community today. Gayness is not just about sex; it's about redefining how we understand, relate to, and change the society we live in. "We may have become proud of our gay identity, and unabashed about our same-sex desires and relationships. Yet we remain hopelessly ashamed of how queerly we feel and act - ashamed of our instincts, our loves and hates, our attitudes, our non-standard values, our ways of being, our social and cultural practices. Instead of celebrating our distinctive subjectivity, our unique pleasures, and our characteristic culture, we have achieved gay pride at their expense." (Halperin, 'How to Be Gay', 74)

Adam Graubart says

Halperin's book is definitely a recommended read. He offers a great entryway into the world of queer theory,

drawing a distinction between gay culture and gay identity/identity politics. His analysis of cultural forms is accessible, and his argument follows a logical path, making it accessible to the novice in queer studies, such as myself. At times, the theory is a bit circuitous or jargony making for dense moments, but for the most part, he establishes claims with reasonable, comprehensible evidence and rationale. While one may not necessarily agree with Halperin's defiant attitude toward the post-Stonewall gay mindset, he offers a different perspective than what is portrayed in the mainstream, perhaps commercial gay media, making for an engaging, intelligent read that opens the mind, especially for a younger reader (a "baby gay" like myself).

Joseph Crupper says

"I have wanted to discover the source of so much gay discontent."

"Sometimes I think homosexuality is wasted on gay people."

So much to say on 450 pages of text.

I must admit that I bought How to be Gay because I thought it would be funny to read in public and say "thought I needed a brushing up," and then place on my bookshelf for visitors to perhaps spy and comment on.

Halperin's addressing of some trans issues, from grammar to style, is a little dated.

There were definitely things I learned about gay subculture from this book that I did not know before. The strength of this book, however, is not in its in-depth analysis of Joan Crawford, but in its dedication to detaching gay culture from gay identity, and to show how gay culture attempts to take down the patriarchy.

That's all I know how to say at this time. I can't wait to take it off my shelf and find all the quotes I underlined.

Iñaki Tofiño says

A simple premise: is there a gay culture/subculture? If so, is it composed of cultural productions made by gay people or discussing explicit gay topics or is it a gay reading of mainstream cultural productions? Can anyone participate in this gay culture, do you have to be gay, can it be taught/learned?

The idea was fascinating and attractive and I can see how it made some people nervous in the US, but, unlike in his other books, I think that this time Halperin doesn't deliver. Too much Joan Crawford and too little facts. At the end you get the impression that the hint was good but it remained only that, a hint. Further research needed.

Jonathan says

Kinda obsessed with this already... How can Halperin manage to make queer theory engaging-- even breezy?! I don't know, but I love it.

+++

Update: this book is amazing. Halperin provides us with a trenchant, accurate framework to understand gay

male subjectivity, and yes, "gay culture" (whose existence he makes a strong case for). By using a few well-chosen cultural artifacts as examples (Joan Crawford, "Mildred Pierce," and "Mommy Dearest"), he builds a rhetorical structure that is flexible enough to accommodate the many other manifestations of gay sensibility-- other divas and camp classics, as well as entirely different bits of heterosexual culture that gay men appropriate and recode with a queer meaning. Especially strong are his points about the constant generational struggles over "gay culture" (akin to those of feminism), the simultaneously aristocratic and democratizing sensibilities in camp aesthetics, and the persisting relevance of camp for gay men in the post-Stonewall age, where explicit, uncoded images of gays are supposed to have supplanted the shameful identification with melodrama and caricatures of female power (ha!).

But this review wouldn't conform to gay male sensibility without some bitchy asides, right? Though he uses his chosen examples to maximal effect-- and he is right to eschew current cultural artifacts-- it's a bit tiring to read over and over about these old movies that I've never seen. A few of the chapters don't live up to the high intellectual standard he sets, especially the facile/weirdo "family struggles" section (Mommy Queerest). It's odd that he ends the book with a pat recapitulation of Mark Warner's radical queer politics (which are already looking a bit dated, right?). And I would've so loved to see Halperin unleash his intellect on how race plays into this-- for both black and white gay men, the additional power structures and appropriations that exist. But he justified his non-engagement with race, so it's not fair to fault him for a book he didn't write.

Halperin is smart as shit and writes incredibly well. I highly recommend this book.

Tristan Bridges says

Interesting book on the origins and legacy of gay men's culture. It came out of a course "How to Be Gay 101" that garnered a lot of national attention when Halperin first offered it. He asks the tough questions that -- given the psychopathological origins of many stereotypes about gay men -- tread a dangerous line for gender and sexual politics. He asks questions like: Why do so many gay men like Broadway? Or, Why is it so "gay" to like Broadway in the first place? Why do certain movies, images, actresses, and more garner so much attention from gay men? What does it mean? In doing so, Halperin is wise to distinguish between gay men and gay male culture--such that, for instance, while not all gay men like Broadway, it's probably true that most gay men know that liking Broadway is "gay." It's a good book with an interesting argument tracing the historical, psychological, and emotional origins of a gay male aesthetic.

Ruth says

This book about gay male culture might have been a little too long and might have spent too much time introducing/defending itself and might have focused too much on Mildred Pierce and Mommie Dearest, but still, I found it pretty interesting and engagingly written. I was especially interested his discussion of camp vs. hipster irony towards the end.
