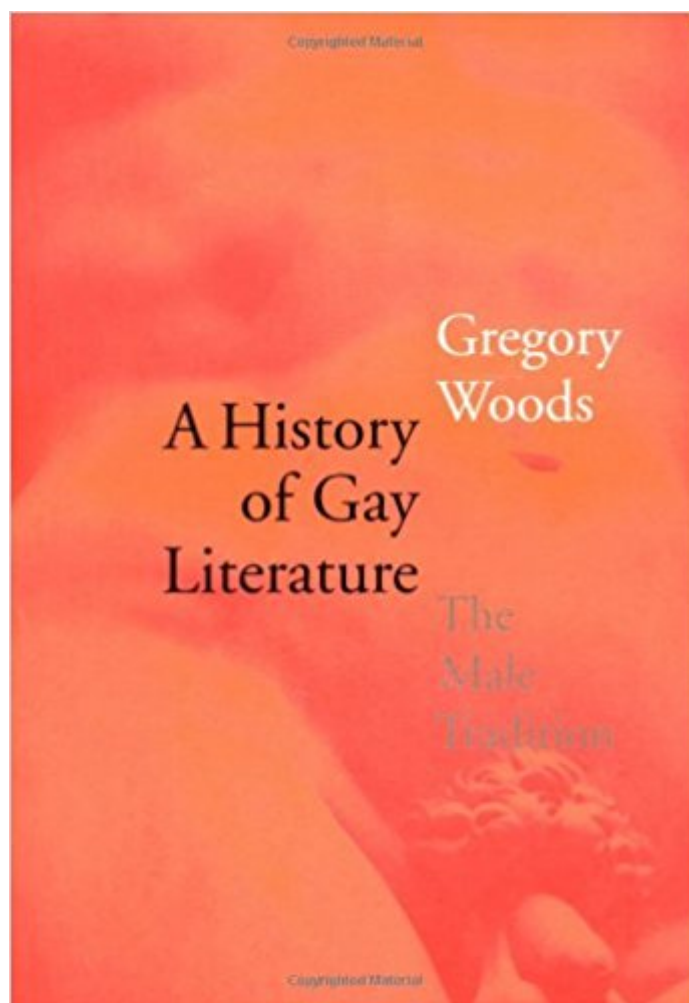


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A History Of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition



Synopsis

This important book is the first full-scale account of male gay literature across cultures, languages, and centuries. A work of reference as well as the definitive history of a tradition, it traces writing by and about homosexual men from ancient Greece and Rome to the twentieth-century gay literary explosion. Woods' own artistry is evident throughout this elegant and startling book. . . . These finely honed gay readings of selected Western (and some Eastern) literary texts richly reward the careful attention they demand. . . . Though grounded in the particulars of gay male identity, this masterpiece of literary (and social) criticism calls across the divides of sex and sexual orientation. • Kirkus Reviews (a starred review) • An encyclopedic mapping of the intersection between male homosexuality and belles lettres . . . [that is] good reading, in part because Woods has foregone strict chronology to link writers across eras and cultures. • Louis Bayard, Washington Post Book World • Encyclopedic and critical, evenhanded and interpretive, Woods has produced a study that stands as a monument to the progress of gay literary criticism. No one to date has attempted such a grand world-wide history. . . . It cannot be recommended highly enough. • Library Journal (a starred review) • A bold, intelligent and gorgeously encyclopedic study. • Philip Gambone, Lambda Book Report • An exemplary piece of work. • Jonathan Bate, The Sunday Telegraph

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Woods' phenomenological journey through literature, in which he examines a plethora of perspectives that are arguable "gay," is far more than a literary survey across epochs of history: It

asks the question philosophers ask: What is gay? For the most part, that question may never be answered, except in the most biological of terms. Same-sex affection and eroticism. Human diversity is truly extraordinary, and all efforts to achieve a definition, identity, and distinction beyond this expansive single feature only limits what "gayness" subverts. But such an indefinite state is difficult to maintain, if only because erotic longings draw us together in concrete ways. In every age, we need more to hold onto something more enduring, if only because our unique sexuality, standing against the grain, finds such indeterminacy intolerable, if not terribly lonely. After all, men who desire men need love, too. Or at least many of us do. Beginning at the beginning, and traversing millennia and cultures, Woods selects representative examples of homo-erotic literature, enormously exhaustive, acknowledging at the outset that his representative samples may not reflect what many today suppose to be "gay." The post-Stonewall moment heralded an intolerance of concealment, an unwillingness to be persecuted, and a new narrative that may occurred (forced or natural) in the Seventies was hardly emblematic in history. The so-called Castro Clone, hairy men in masculine garb with well-defined features and perhaps a little excess of macho bravado, might have been the dominant craze at the time. But what did this species of same-sex orientation have in common with the pederast (boy-crazy) male of antiquity? According to literature, not much. But the Castro Clone has already passed into history, and Queer Theorists are bent on a new narrative. The effect, perhaps, of AIDS. Certainly, a little microbe has changed the same-sex dynamics considerably; a latex sheath now invades our love, and it seems to have changed our narrative and created distance among us. But we're all stronger and more open than all our historical predecessors ever imagine. The "closet" has ever been the refuge of adult gay men, and after millennia of persecution, we're no longer content to dwell in darkness. And perhaps the re-emergence of political homophobia requires a new story. Perhaps the militant subversion of the Other needs to experience what true Others have felt for ages. Whatever the impetus, more gay men are understandably reacting, often with unparalleled defiance, which may be more adaptive, but it seems foreign to me. Whatever excesses occurred in the Seventies, and they are legion, for the first time in recorded history adult male love, however elusive, was boldly believed. Few books on a "gay" theme have touched me as deeply as this one, because none, despite its failings, has been bold enough to admit that our narratives change to fit the situation, and few narratives reflect the same story. In the final chapter of this otherwise non-polemical inquiry, Woods deliberately casts off his "impartial narrator" and engages in the polemics of paradox (a frequent theme among post-modernists), a variable in the deconstructionist "play" of difference, and one of Foucault's subversions of power. As my anger at his apotheosis of paradox grew (another Pope John Paul II, I

thought), he slid home safely. "Paradox," he writes in the final sentences, "may be subversive, but it makes unsound political discourse if ever required to move the very public it defies. Beware of orators bearing paradox: they are unlikely to be democrats" (388). For many, being "gay" is an act of defiance, an act of being ostracized as well as ostracization, and another act of being compromised as well as compromising. In my defense, I lived wherever the margins took me, and disregarded the consequences (and in my case those margins were far and few between). But those days when the love that dared not speak its name (and those days have been interminably long), when paradox and defiance spoke for us as staples of survival (however clandestine), came to an end with Stonewall. However small our numbers, we were liberated by a simple act, not of defiance alone, but of truthful pride. For all the angry contempt heaped on our persecutors, there was a time when we simply did not care to give them any notice. My only hope is that the new wave of persecution does not jade us to love's possibilities, but alas the video record suggests love is a commodity we can consider if we survive. But we've always survived. We're an intrinsic part of nature, for heaven's sake. The Stonewall liberation, however, was truly unique; it allowed us to love openly and passionately, perhaps indiscriminately, and we'll always be open to love, unless the hate of our antagonists prevails. Very, very sadly, I see hate in our own eyes, so virulent, so understandable, and so self-defeating. "They" have already won, because we accepted their binary terms of opposition. In our anger, however justified, we've become one of them. Hate can conquer love, and once again "they" have proved it. What narrative follows next I know not. I only thank Fate for allowing me to experience an extraordinary moment in time. It may never pass again.

Gregory Woods, in *A History of Gay Literature, The Male Tradition*, has written a comprehensive examination of gay male literature through the centuries and around the globe. It looks at text and subtext and context to find the gay meaning or the meaning for gays in the annals of historical literature. Along the way the reader will learn new aspects of literature (such as the chapter on African poetry, to name one example from my own ignorance) and new ways to look at familiar books and poems. For all its breadth, it is wonderfully readable and somewhat addictive. It had me searching out various books to read them for myself. The writing is so good that I was equally fascinated reading about the books I had not read or did not even know about as I was reading about the others. This is a very good survey and a fun read.

If your interest in gay literature is just starting (and there is no need anymore to explain why) this book will give you a head start. You can find here information on a vast variety of books which you

may pick up to expand your knowledge, curiosity, or simply spend your time reading for pleasure. Woods draws an interesting panorama of homosexual themes in literature from the Antiquity to the Present. However, if you are quite far in the subject, you may find this volume a little bit too simplistic and disagree with some of Woods' conclusions - e.g. the use of the word "gay" in the title may be quite disputable in the context. But still you may find many pieces of information you haven't yet heard.

This is a very readable book. However I was extremely astonished at the scantiness of space on Japanese same-sex relations. Since after ancient Greece, only Japanese could have enhanced male-homosexuality to highly ethically valued SHUDO i.e. the way of male love and there is a great number of GAY literature, documents, arts etc. in Japan. I recommend two books for readers: THE LOVE OF THE SAMURAI by Watanabe Tsuneo & Iwata Jun'ichi, and MALE COLORS by Gary P. Leupp. And I hope many people study Japanese culture, history and literature more.

This comes close to being the comprehensive survey that is needed, but it is still somewhat spoiled by an ethnocentrism that concentrates on England, America, France and the 20th century. The author devotes no more than ten pages to China and Japan.

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