



How To Be Gay

By 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.

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Editorial Review

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Halperin is an openly gay University of Michigan professor who achieved notoriety in 2000 when his class "How to Be Gay: Male Homosexuality and Initiation" was included in the school's online-course catalog. Angry e-mails and outrage quickly followed, with the Michigan chapter of the ultraconservative American Family Association launching a crusade against a perceived militant homosexual political agenda. Based on that same controversial college course, *How to Be Gay* posits that "gayness" is not simply the act of two men having sex but a mode of perception that must be learned from—and shared by—other gay men. Halperin homes in on, among many topics, the yin and yang of gay male existence: the beauty and the camp. A pivotal scene from the 1945 Joan Crawford melodrama *Mildred Pierce* is used, repeatedly and somewhat jarringly, throughout the text as a musty yet still potent example of how gay subjectivity is shaped by heteronormative society. If this sounds a bit like reading a dry, sprawling textbook, to some degree it is, but the provocative subject matter ensures a strong niche audience. --Chris Keech

From Bookforum

How to Be Gay works hard to unpack the stereotypical characteristics of gay male culture and succeeds in demonstrating how the taint of pathology and the rise of a post-Stonewall ethos of hypermasculine self-determination conspire to shut down a frank inquiry into the persistence of such "faggy" traits. His claims for the egalitarian effects of gay culture are less convincing, and for all the nuances he brings to his reading of camp, his totalizing language can sound like that of an apologist. —Nathan Lee

Review

Distinguished scholar David Halperin's long-awaited manifesto delivers on its promise. Macho, faggy, queeny, butch diva, opera-swilling, Broadway-loving, gourmet, sex-fascinated, beauty-appreciating, love-desiring, rough trade, high art, race- and class-inflected but not exclusive, generationally situated but not entirely, intellectual, open-hearted, politically minded, leather chaps! Mary! (Sarah Schulman, author of *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*)

How To Be Gay is a sheer pleasure to read and utterly thoughtful too: it is pedagogical in the most provocative sense. David Halperin's acute attention to gay male sensibility provides a great case study in how sexuality takes shape as such, finding anchors for the expression of its pleasures and its dramas. A genuinely profound contribution to the scholarship on kitsch, camp, and melodrama, this book is also its own command performance of a gayness it wants to extend to its readers as a kind of friendly and exciting disturbance. (Lauren Berlant, University of Chicago)

I've always been a big fan of Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, and Doris Day. Though it was a secret, shameful love. David Halperin's wonderful, wildly ambitious masterpiece has given me the courage to come out about it. And even tell the golden daffodils. As Halperin eloquently explains, desire into identity will not go, even with plenty of poppers and lube. What's more, the dignified, proper, and very particular gay identity really doesn't deserve the giddy, gushing, world-grabbing gay sensibility. And vice versa. (Mark Simpson, journalist)

How To Be Gay, with its teasing title, asks whether there might be such a thing as gay culture that resides neither in our genes nor in our psyches. By insisting on gayness as a social form, the book offers an important provocation to contemporary queer criticism that resists the specification of identity. One could ask for no better guide through the complexities of late twentieth-century American gay male culture.

(Heather Love, University of Pennsylvania)

[How To Be Gay is] an attempt to unpack [Halperin's] basic observation that there's far more to gay male American identity than a same-sex preference. Halperin interprets gayness through traditional pop culture preoccupations like golden age Hollywood, opera, and Broadway musicals, focusing on Joan Crawford (in particular her role in *Mildred Pierce*) and Faye Dunaway's notoriously over-the-top portrayal of the star in *Mommie Dearest*. Identifying the source of the camp appeal exerted by these ostensibly serious films, Halperin asks why gay men continue to be drawn to coded representations of their experience. He arrives at an apologia for such clichéd signposts of gayness in an era of domestic partnerships and 'Born This Way.' Halperin persuasively defuses charges of misogyny lobbed against gay male culture. (*Publishers Weekly* 2012-06-08)

[Halperin] provocatively argues that when it comes to defining what it means to be a homosexual man, sex is overrated... Culture matters more... [How To Be Gay] is never a bore... [It] explores a fundamental kind of gay sensibility... Halperin teases an enormous amount out of [a] scene [in *Mildred Pierce*], including the sense of 'glamour and abjection' gay audiences find in [Joan] Crawford, and how the film packages the 'transgressive spectacle of female strength, autonomy, feistiness and power.' ...Halperin works up to an argument (impossible to summarize here) about how the film evokes a 'dissident perspective' on the very idea of romantic love. He is articulate about many other things in this book, including how gay men often find more resonance in straight cultural artifacts than in gay ones. His funny shorthand for this is: 'Why would we want Edmund White, when we still have *The Golden Girls*?' ...He is excellent, too, on how classical tragedy is nearly always about men, or fathers and sons... Dozens of similar arguments are rehearsed in *How To Be Gay*. Halperin even neatly mows down hipster irony in the face of the kind of gay male irony that defines camp. It's a kaleidoscopic book that at its base breaks with what the author calls 'the Brokeback Mountain crowd.' He urges gay men to take their so-called femininity out of 'homosexuality's newly built closet,' to see it plainly and to give it affirmative interpretations. (Dwight Garner *New York Times* 2012-08-07)

Halperin parses the pop culture of movies, music, style, camp, drag, and those totemic figures known as gay icons, to reveal the dirty little secret that many gay people may not wish to hear: there's a hard little kernel of truth behind the stereotypes. (Richard J. Violette *Library Journal* 2012-08-01)

How To Be Gay makes for as fun a viewing companion [to *Mildred Pierce* and *Mommie Dearest*] as it does a rigorously intelligent read... Whether you're well-versed in all things gay or tend to avoid pop divas at all costs, *How To Be Gay* offers a fresh perspective on what we call gay culture, why so many of us love what we love and why we're afraid to talk about it. Thankfully, as Halperin notes in his conclusion, gay male culture isn't going anywhere—as long as there's a straight culture to appropriate for our own ends. (Jameson Fitzpatrick *Next Magazine* 2012-08-10)

What is marvelous is Halperin's rich analysis of many aspects of this gay cultural life, showing the distinctive ways it makes use of straight culture... This is not meant to be a coffee-table book, encyclopedia or 'how-to manual': these already exist. It is rather an erudite meditation by one of the world's leading queer theorists. It provokes, sparkles and bristles with ideas, claims, defenses and the kind of epigrams...that would make for great seminar discussions... This is a great book, it will generate heated debate. (Ken Plummer *Times Higher Education* 2012-08-23)

David M. Halperin has written a monumental work... In detail, the book explores the emotional and personalized subjectivity in describing what is at the core of gay culture and the innermost feelings of what it is to be 'gay.' ...It is Halperin's intent to create a serious dialogue, though there are many smiles to be had at

the same time, while absorbing the process. *How To Be Gay* is both enlightening and refreshing in the personal discovery of self or for lack of a better phrase, the perfect way to understand the how, what, where and why 'to turn your inner-gay on.' (Bill Biss *Edge* 2012-08-23)

David M. Halperin has written what might be called an archaeological study of gay culture. His excavation is a veritable public service to anyone who's ever wondered why a Lady Gaga—or Judy Garland—holds a place in the LGBT community that isn't quite the same among their heterosexual counterparts. Still, the very specter of 'gay identity' in a world where, for many, integration is viewed as the ultimate civil-rights victory, inevitably sparks controversy... His exhaustive exploration of the icons and idiosyncrasies associated with gay identity holds up a floor-length mirror to an entire subculture. (Jim Brosseau *Outlooks* 2012-09-01)

How To Be Gay engages many of the foundational questions—and dogmas—of queer studies... What, Halperin wants to know, is gay culture? ...Halperin is plying his own twist on the familiar idea that by aligning themselves with certain forms—flamboyance, abject glamour, exaggerated femininity—gay men implicitly challenge the uptight codes of a patriarchal culture... Gay culture, for Halperin, isn't really attached to any given person's experience; rather, it's a set of tactics, adopted behaviors, and strategies imbricated in a much larger social field... Frivolity, irony, superficiality, inauthenticity, flamboyance, snobbishness, exquisite taste: *How To Be Gay* works hard to unpack the stereotypical characteristics of gay male culture and succeeds in demonstrating how the taint of pathology and the rise of a post-Stonewall ethos of hypermasculine self-determination conspire to shut down a frank inquiry into the persistence of such 'faggy' traits. (Nathan Lee *Bookforum* 2012-09-01)

How To Be Gay is not an instruction manual, nor is it a 'learning to love yourself' self-help guide. Rather, Halperin's book is an intervention against those who trumpet the 'death of gay culture' (which he argues has been declared for over 40 years now) now that widening tolerance and greater visibility of gays in the media should make Judy Garland, show tunes, and drag queens obsolete... Halperin's fresh re-evaluation of the theory and practice of camp is one of his most fascinating insights... Halperin makes a case for camp as politically subversive and a case study for the complicated structure of gay identification... One gets the sense that Halperin anticipates his greatest detractors to not be social conservatives (though he has been their pariah in the past), but instead to be other gay men who fear the essentialism of acknowledging the role a distinct gay culture plays in shaping gay identity... Halperin narrates the history of this masculine reaction against gay culture, culling from his own memories in the 70s of how newly 'liberated' gay men appropriated the machismo of biker culture, mustaches, and construction worker clothing to combat the stereotype of the pathetic queens and fairies of the previous generation. This is a valuable history lesson to readers from subsequent generations given that these signifiers of '70s gay masculinity are now considered in the campy light of *The Village People*, and thus part of the gay culture from which today's champions of machismo and normality try to distance themselves. *How To Be Gay* deserves a wide audience beyond academia, especially among today's youth generation who come out in a climate more accepting of same-sex coupling, but still very much phobic and censorious of gay culture. (Chase Dimock *Lambda Literary Review* 2012-09-04)

[A] provocatively titled critical cri de coeur...To summarize Halperin's ambitious book is tricky, but think of it as an exploration of the tension between the official Pride Parade, celebrating post-Stonewall gay identity, and the Drag March, celebrating pre-liberation gay culture...Halperin is at his best when critiquing the current assimilationist model of gay-rights activism, with its denial of any cultural interests or aesthetic points-of-view that hint of femininity or campiness or of the "stereotypically gay." His cultural history of how this attitude emerged in the 1970s will be surprising to those who view the gay-rights movement as a consistently positive progression; Halperin argues convincingly that as butch masculine styles became ever more mandatory, both for attracting sexual/romantic partners (no femmes, no fats!) as well as earning political credibility, the push toward conformity lead to the "euthanasia of traditional gay male culture."

...How To Be Gay is intellectually rigorous [and] entertaining...Halperin demonstrates that those gays who do still identify with Bette and Joan, drag and drapes, *Auntie Mame* and Annie Lennox have something important to contribute to our ever more homogenous world. (J. Bryan Lowder *Slate* 2012-09-07)

Filled with thought-provoking ideas and hypotheses. Halperin doesn't shy away from controversy here, nor does he bow to stereotypes. (Terri Schlichenmeyer *Washington Blade* 2012-09-12)

Halperin rejoices in the growing acceptance of homosexuality in mainstream society, although he's quick to point out that homophobia is still potent. He doesn't want gay culture to be lost as assimilation increases. It's a legitimate concern, and he makes his case forcefully. (Tavo Amador *Bay Area Reporter* 2012-09-20)

How To Be Gay posits that 'gayness' is not simply the act of two men having sex but a mode of perception that must be learned from—and shared by—other gay men. Halperin homes in on, among many topics, the yin and yang of gay male existence: the beauty and the camp. (Chris Keech *Booklist* 2012-10-15)

[A] weighty, thought-provoking tome...**Halperin** explores notions of gay male identity and stereotypes, wondering what has shaped gay behavior and whether it's a reaction against the hetero-normative society into which we're born. (*Out in the City* 2012-11-01)

How To Be Gay celebrat[es] the sharp-elbowed camp culture that many now consider obsolete... How can someone be gay without having seen *Mildred Pierce* or *The Wizard of Oz*? To answer that, you first have to know what such movies have to do with being gay. **Halperin** observes, as others have before him, that gay boys often display stereotypical tastes long before sex enters the picture. As he points out, sexuality is the area where gay men differ *least* from straight men...Gay taste is something more singular, probably linked to incipient feelings of dissimilarity from one's peers...Halperin is right to defend the old rituals and the lingo and body language that go with them...So long live camp, and all the other cultural pursuits that gay people have traditionally embraced. Perhaps the historic devotion to theatre, opera, high fashion, and other venerable disciplines will wither away, but it seems likely that many gay kids will still feel the trauma of difference and go on seeking refuge in artier spheres. Halperin speaks of a 'tension between egalitarian ethics and hierarchical aesthetics' in gay taste; he sees it as a snobbery not of class but of knowledge, open to all who can hold their own. It stands in opposition to a society that joins egalitarian aesthetics--the notion that the perfect cultural product appeals to all--to an economic system whose inequalities become more glaring by the day. Gay culture's long memory, its arch sympathy for fading worlds, is a check against the razing of the past. (Alex Ross *New Yorker* 2012-11-12)

How To Be Gay is...written by a gifted thinker and writer who has come to see that there is not just a political and sexual gay culture (its foundational event the rioting outside the Stonewall Inn in 1969), based on gay identity rather than sensibility, but also a nonsexual gay culture, based on modes of feeling and expressive artifacts. (Adam Mars-Jones *London Review of Books* 2012-11-22)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Archie Moriarty:

This How To Be Gay tend to be reliable for you who want to be described as a successful person, why. The reason why of this How To Be Gay can be on the list of great books you must have is actually giving you more than just simple reading through food but feed you actually with information that probably will shock your preceding knowledge. This book is usually handy, you can bring it everywhere and whenever your

conditions in the e-book and printed types. Beside that this How To Be Gay giving you an enormous of experience for instance rich vocabulary, giving you test of critical thinking that we realize it useful in your day exercise. So , let's have it and revel in reading.

James Ponce:

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Alexandra Dickey:

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Miguel Sherman:

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