

Top 10 Things To Do When Buying A Home:

#1. Call Carol Reinard
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Out in print

'Strangers' gay culture of the 1800s

by J.S. Hall

Popular opinion holds that the nineteenth century was a terrible time to be a gay man or lesbian (or an invert or tribade, as they were called back then). After all, the "crime" of sodomy could be punished by death in many countries; its practice was regarded as an unspeakable sin; and most people believed that sodomites would burn in Hell in the afterlife.

Or so we've assumed.

In "Strangers," Graham Robb — celebrated biographer of Balzac, Hugo and Rimbaud — has unearthed evidence that a homosexual culture not only existed but also flourished back then. What's more, he argues, sodomites weren't prosecuted or convicted any more vigorously than other criminals. However since criminal records are some of the best-kept archives from this time, they've formed the basis of many of our perceptions of the Victorian age as "a homophobic bell from which gay people eventually liberated themselves."

Poring through journals, diaries, letters and other ephemera, Robb has assembled considerable evidence of people living happily together as same-sex couples or unhappily as citizens protesting their treatment by society and the law. Many hid their true feelings and meanings in an elaborate doublespeak of references to ancient mythology and/or obscure literature; only those in the know would divine their true message and as time passed these codes' meanings were lost or forgotten.

These eye-opening accounts make for absorbing reading. Who knew, for instance, that "before 1910, almost every American city had a community of 'sexual inverts' with its own cafés, dance-halls, clubs and churches, and 'certain streets where, at night, every fifth man is an invert'?" Or who realized that once medical doctors began examining the "condition" of homosexuality, they would never lack gay patients eager to discuss their true natures? However, because most doctors' theories were rubbish and they weren't

very choosy about their subjects, "by sheer force of circumstances, the typical unisexual, in the eyes of many doctors, was a garrulous transvestite with a hectic sex-life and a history of mental illness," Robb tartly observes.

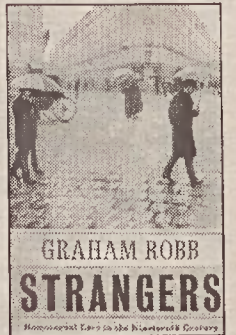
Knowledgeable but not stuffy, Robb's writing style makes a bygone, almost alien age spring back to life in vivid detail, relating triumphs and tragedies in equal measure. Some might argue that he veers into a too-academic tone at times, but his dry wit brings a sparkle to otherwise dreary moments. In his chronicle of Oscar Wilde's legendary trial, he notes that "Wilde may have been 'crucified' on the cross of public morality, but he supplied the hammer and nails" with his antagonistic testimony and steadfast refusal to flee England, despite many opportunities.

Robb illustrates how public ignorance of homosexuality (something seemingly fostered by the government) helped the gay subculture exist without retaliation, as well as how police forces' experience with gay people occasionally led to greater tolerance and clemency. He even explores popular fiction of the time, finding sporadic gay and lesbian characters, most of whom met tragic fates even when their authors shared their sexual orientation.

Well-researched and nicely presented, "Strangers" turns preconceived notions on their head by presenting copious amounts of previously unknown data about the 1800s. By doing so, Robb honors the memories of pioneers like Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, as well as more ordinary folk whose only "crime" was to love (or at least have sex with) a person of the same gender. This book keenly illustrates how far we've progressed in some respects, and how far we still have to go in others.

info:

'Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century'
by Graham Robb
W.W. Norton
\$26.95



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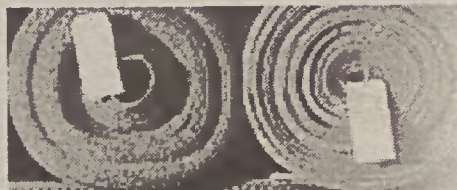
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