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Gay New York; gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940.

George Chauncey

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George Chauncey's innovative and prodigiously researched Gay New York belies the myth of the pre-Stonewall closet and unearths a thriving gay culture in Gotham in the half-decade before World War II, before "the decline of the fairy and the rise of the closet." (23) Contrary to Whiggish notions of severe homosexual repression up until the liberating 1970s, Chauncey argues that "the gay male world of the prewar years was remarkably visible and integrated into the straight world" in the first decades of the twentieth century. (12) In fact, it was not until after the close of Prohibition that new social norms and cultural anxieties forced a restructuring of urban gay life. "To use the modern idiom," Chauncey writes, "the state built a closet in the 1930s and forced gay people to hide in it." (9) Chauncey's book is rife with fascinating insights and conclusions, perhaps none so immediately surprising as the discovery that "in important respects the hetero-homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation." (13) Tracing the rise of the word gay to encompass all homosexual men (be they previously classified as queers, fairies, trade or another term now considered much more perjorative), Chauncey argues that "the ascendancy of gay reflected...a reorganization of sexual categories and the transition from an early twentieth-century culture divided into 'queers' and 'men' on the basis of gender status to a late twentieth-century culture divided into 'homosexuals' and 'heterosexuals' on the basis of sexual object choice."(23) Put another way, Chauncey argues that "homosexual behavior per se became the primary basis for the labeling and self-identification of men as 'queer' only around the middle of the twentieth century; before then, most men were so labeled only if they had displayed a much broader inversion of their ascribed gender status by assuming the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women.

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