

October 2023

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Recommended Citation

Koski, Jacob (2023) "Book Review: Bad Gays: A Homosexual History," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 7, Article 25.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss7/25>

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Book Review: *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History*¹

Reviewed by Jacob Koski²

In light of recent attacks on the transgender community, during Pride Month no less, a review of *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History* feels more fitting than ever. It was in my lifetime (in my junior year of high school, exactly) that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled homosexual marriage to be a right in each of the 50 states. This was a victory for the LGBTQ+ community as a whole, though it more directly benefited the homosexuals within the community. Though such benefits were not always applicable to them, the transgender community actively fought for gay rights, and this victory would not have been possible without their die-hard commitment to activism and freedom. Now with the transgender community facing some of the harshest attacks in decades, there appears to be an absence of outrage from my own gay counterparts in the community. Once again, as a white gay male, I notice mostly white gay males continuing to club through the month of June and treating pride as an extravaganza of flamboyance and diva worship, while the rest of the LGBTQ+ community is excluded as a target audience of the mainstream ideas of pride. While the most vulnerable members of our community helped us achieve legal protections, we abandoned them once we got ours, leaving the BIPOC lesbian, transgender, and queer individuals continuing to fight as they always have. This reality is captured in Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller's book *Bad Gays*.

Though not a comprehensive queer history, the book provides the history your parents didn't learn about various historical figures through the ages. Authors Lemmey and Miller recount a variety of figures across world history, from the Roman emperor Hadrian to Lawrence of Arabia to openly gay Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. They also uncover the alleged affair between J. Edgar Hoover and his assistant director of the FBI, and they document the rise of conservative politics in the Netherlands. Throughout fourteen chapters, the authors discuss the history of each of these characters in a frank and factual manner. Rather than trying to hide the bad from gay readers, Lemmey and Miller make the historical facts and broader implications as clear as hindsight can allow. In place of revisionist history tactics, the authors aim to highlight the complexity of gay (not queer) history and challenge the idea that homosexuality is either a monolithic identity synonymous with LGBTQ+ or a political project.

Given the content of the book, it is quite obvious that these historical figures addressed—mostly men and one woman—had homosexuality in common. The more interesting tie, however, is that they all had vast amounts of power in society. The book opens with Roman Emperor Hadrian, considered one of the five good emperors by Niccolo Machiavelli, but known as “The Evil One” in Hebrew texts for his torturing of the ten rabbis honored by the Yom Kippur

¹ Lemmey, H. & Miller, B. (2022). *Bad gays: a homosexual history*. Verso.

² Jacob (Liam) Koski holds a master's degree in Economics from Northeastern University. His interests are in the insurance sector and welfare economics, particularly in the context of marginalized communities.

Martyrology. Already he was already a controversial figure, but his essay on his life focuses on his various “lavender relationships”³ to hide his sexual pursuit of the youth of the Empire and lands beyond (Lemmey and Miller 32-36). While homosexuality was already frowned upon by the Romans, Hadrian’s own shame came from both the type of men he pursued, as well as maintaining the pride of Rome’s masculinity if he were the penetrated sexual partner, which was considered a feminine position (25-27). Though Hadrian held a pivotal position of unprecedented power in the Roman empire, he placated his senate with the aforementioned coverup marriages and continued to damn acts of homosexuality rather than exonerate them. His ultimate love, the young Greek Antinous, was revered by Hadrian as nothing less than a god amongst his own men, yet he still felt compelled to hide his burning desire due to shame about his own sexual interests and also due to his quest for power (37-38).

The discussion of Hadrian is followed by a review of Lawrence of Arabia, who played a key role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in World War I, popularizing cruel tactics of guerilla warfare and sabotage (132). Originating as a young officer from England, T.E. Lawrence found himself stationed in the Middle East as a part of British intelligence. As he had already pondered homosexual desires with close childhood friends, the Middle East became an opportunity for sexual freedom for Lawrence. During his travels, he met his muse and partner, Dahoum. Lawrence felt so passionate about Dahoum that he wrote poetry for him (133) and brought him home to England (133). His personal devotion eventually ignited his passion for Arab liberation from the Ottoman Empire, even if he claimed other political reasons (138). Over time, as the aims of the British military came into conflict with the love he formed for Dahoum and his people, he disobeyed orders and fought against the pro-Zionist goals of capturing Palestine as a homeland for the Jewish people. Though he led the Arab forces to victory once more, he was ultimately captured by the Ottoman Empire and gang-raped by soldiers. This encounter was one he remembered positively, igniting his interest in the sexual deviancy of bondage, discipline, submission, and masochism (BDSM) (138-140).

Lemmey and Miller then address J. Edgar Hoover, a central figure in U.S. politics in the 1940s and 50s, at the time of significant racial tension in the U.S. along with the politically motivated Red Scare to root out communism (198-199). As FBI director, Hoover cracked down on any leftist movements that he or his agency could detect, focusing in particular on the unrest that eventually grew into the civil rights movement. Under his leadership, the FBI kept a watchlist of many Black activists and culture generators, going as far as to fabricate evidence that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was having several homosexual affairs with other prominent Black activists to squash their efforts (203). Lemmey and Miller then ask the question: how was the FBI able to target civil rights unrest and other phony reports of the spread of communism so actively, but never tackle organized crime or other more pressing matters of security? They offer the simple truth: the Mafia had photographic evidence of Hoover’s homosexual affair with his Associate Director, Clyde Tolson (203-204). The two already had a very publicly questioned relationship together,

³ A marriage between a man and a woman that is entered into in the hope of concealing the non-heterosexual sexual orientation of one or both of the spouses.

spending days, weeks, months, and even holidays with one another in a private residence. This speculation was indirectly confirmed by Hoover's friend and Broadway star Ethel Merman, who said of Hoover after his death in the 1970s, "Some of my best friends are homosexual...Everybody knew about J. Edgar Hoover, but he was the best chief the FBI ever had" (204-205). Hoover's chapter in the book is split with his political peer Roy Cohn.

Instead of championing the radical ideas of liberalization or deconstruction of the inherently religious pillars of society that prevent their true sexual freedom, the highlighted "gays" maintain and even strengthen the rigid authority that continues to pin down the rest of the LGBTQ+ community today. It draws to mind a similar argument made by gay Black writer James Baldwin, who said in a 1984 interview with the *Village Voice*: "I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe. The anomaly of their sexuality puts them in danger, unexpectedly" (qtd. in Goldstein 13-14). This could not be truer for many of the personalities in *Bad Gays*. The self-hatred seen in Hoover's outward persecution and demonization of gays is only a cousin of T.E. Lawrence's homosexuality being driven not by pure desire, but by relishing in his subscription to the belief that he was lesser than his heterosexual counterparts. These examples and others across the book carry a similar message of reveling in homosexuality in darkness while doing everything possible to avoid it in the light. It is a stretch to say that Hadrian setting the tone on homosexuality in a positive light could have dramatically changed the story told by Lemmey and Miller, but Hadrian acts as the root of this cultural belief. It was not until the lesbians, transgender, and BIPOC members of the community began to actively protest for equality (306) that gay men followed suit in allowing themselves to exist as gay men and not fetishes dressed up as heterosexual men.

The authors conclude by noting that their profiles of these men are not meant to be a condemnation of them (not totally, anyway), but to illuminate a broader picture of individuals within history. The authors stress that all readers should not believe the common liberal narrative that gay rights are a cause championed by the West as natural social evolution. Gay rights came from marginalized communities doing their best to build eternal castles out of sand in the wind. Attempts at freedom today are not the same as what they once were, and the value of one's freedom today may not hold the same value it once did or will tomorrow, given the way the social winds blow.

What Lemmey and Miller offer in *Bad Gays* is an incredibly interesting look into our own history with sharp humor and a scalding tongue, leaving no person's moral leanings in question when the chapter finishes. If there were a monolithic gay identity to be taken from history, then it would be one of hypocrisy and appeasing the oppressor. Even then, that applies almost entirely to White gay males. The title *Bad Gay* is a double entendre then, in my view. "Bad gays" because they were bad people, but also "bad gays" because they were bad community members. For this reason, *Bad Gays* is for anyone interested in the not-so-linear path to social liberation that LGBTQ+ people have taken throughout history, and specifically how the most privileged of the community used their time at the helm. It is for anyone who wants to learn more about a past that may not necessarily be theirs in order to help advocate for a future they want. It is for the gay man

who wants to do better than the gay men who came before him, and to not pull the ladder up after him when he takes his turn at the top. With the conclusion of the book, Lemmey and Miller seek to leave the reader with a more critical understanding of how and when sexuality and morality overlap, and historically who has had the privilege of blurring these lines.

Works Cited

Goldstein, Richard. ““Go the Way Your Blood Beats’: An Interview with James Baldwin.” *The Village Voice*, June 26, 1984, pp. 13-14.