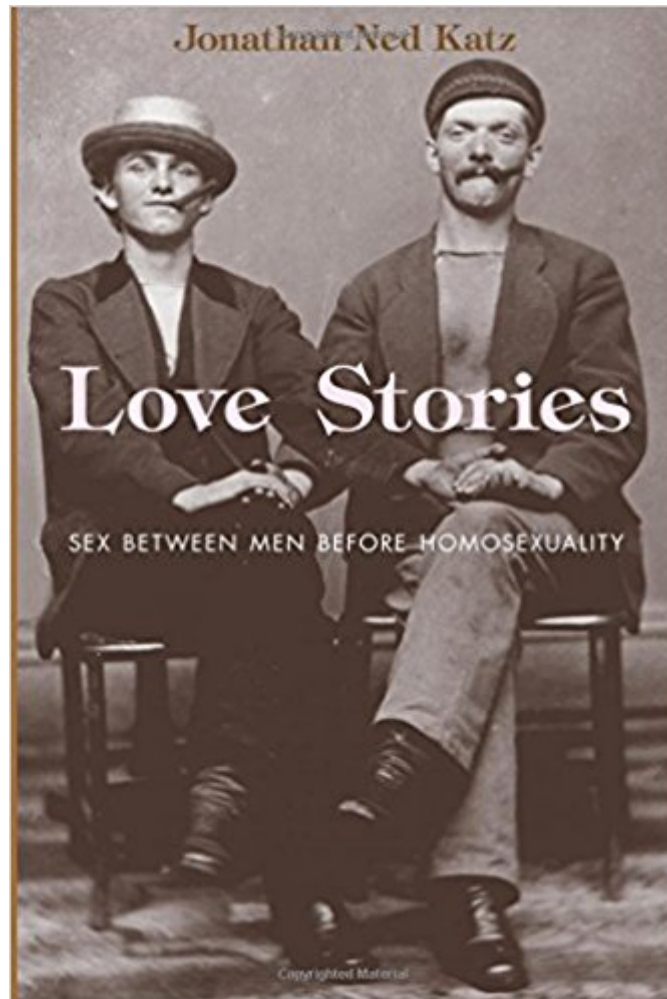


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Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality



Synopsis

In *Love Stories*, Jonathan Ned Katz presents stories of men's intimacies with men during the nineteenth century—including those of Abraham Lincoln—drawing flesh-and-blood portraits of intimate friendships and the ways in which men struggled to name, define, and defend their sexual feelings for one another. In a world before "gay" and "straight" referred to sexuality, men like Walt Whitman and John Addington Symonds created new ways to name and conceive of their erotic relationships with other men. Katz, diving into history through diaries, letters, newspapers, and poems, offers us a clearer picture than ever before of how men navigated the uncharted territory of male-male desire.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Jonathan Katz, who by now is one of the most respected scholars of gay history, has written another telling volume about same-sex love in America. This one centers around the nineteenth century. Well-known names appear in these pages, principally the towering figure of poet Walt Whitman, who not only espoused the ideal of love between men in his own life, but was a mentor and inspirational figure to others struggling with their desires for those of their own gender. Katz's overall point is that one cannot judge the sexual behavior of men of the past by today's standards and attitudes—for much of the nineteenth century, there existed no sharp dichotomy between man-woman (heterosexual) and man-man or woman-woman (homosexual) behavior. Rather, distinctions were made between types of love, spiritual as opposed to carnal, and types of

erotic behavior, procreative as opposed to non-procreative. Even among acts judged early on to be immoral or wrong, some were more wrong than others--oral copulation for a long time was not regarded with the same revulsion as other penetrative acts, for example. Having delineated these basic arguments, Katz then tells the stories of individual men and specific incidents (trials, arrests, news reports, et al.) against this background, bringing a historical perspective of unusual lucidity to all of these disparate tales. Although he does not specifically attempt to tie his history toward attitudes and behavior of the present day, one of the beneficial effects of Katz's study is that the careful reader can discern where the frequently virulent prejudices against gays and lesbians that remain today got their start. The fact that many of these once did NOT exist, moreover, gives hope for the future. This is an unusual, valuable, candid and ultimately very moving chronicle.

..and then was very disappointed in the content. When I bought the book, I assumed it was truly about "sex between men before homosexuality." Instead, I found a thinly veiled biography of Walt Whitman and his writings. Nowhere on the cover does it indicate this. Only way in the back in the acknowledgments, is this "acknowledged." When I started the book, the section on Abraham Lincoln was fascinating and I'm glad Katz advocates ensuring we look at relationships within their own context of society and culture. But he spends too much time on Whitman and hyperanalyzing every word he wrote. I am not interested at all in poetry or Walt Whitman, so it was a shame that I bought this hardcover and had to try and pick out the parts without Whitman. The only time this became interesting was toward the end where the focus was more on Whitman's life. The best part of the book, and I have to agree with another reviewer, are the wonderful vintage photographs. While I believe Katz is an expert and writes fairly well, I would not recommend this book to someone looking for a wide range of subjects.

In addition to being a wonderful collection of most if not all of the known facts about sex between men in the Western world during the nineteenth century, this book is a well-written narrative about how the mystery and the cultural taboo surrounding gay sex was gradually, sometimes awkwardly, unravelled and revealed and finally relaxed. The story of gay liberation in America and England begins here, with Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman and John Addington Symonds and the dozens of unknown but courageous men who were unwilling to let themselves be crushed by the social pressure to be less like themselves and more like the heterosexual, morally acceptable "norm." We should all be grateful to these early freedom-fighters and non-conformists, and grateful, too, to Jonathan Ned Katz for telling these stories with such passionate and admirable accuracy and

feeling.

"Love Stories" is about a struggle for men who love men to find a place for themselves within their own imaginations. Katz examines the 19th century intellectual nexus where same-sex male lust, emotional intimacy between men and, to a lesser extent, male femininity meet and from which the origins of contemporary gay male identity are found. This book gives context to those who believe the "gay community" as it is popularly thought of today is not a point of arrival, but a temporary and, in the history of same-sex attraction, relatively short-lived form. In a time when being gay is a commodified identity analogous to rooting for a sports team, Love Stories gives substance, history and meaning to those seeking to understand where we come from. Love Letters reads easy, in parts like a Vanity Fair-style social history, with famous names and well-known historical circumstances. I hope Jonathan Ned Katz lives, researches and writes forever.

Katz (I keep wanting to call him Ned) pretty much covers all that's known about gay men in the 1800's, primarily in the US but also some in Europe too (mostly England). He stresses that it's important to understand the historical context of the words used to describe feelings that we, today, would call "gay". I knew quite a bit about the subjects of many of the chapters, but Katz wove them together into a more coherent look at the time that we call the Nineteenth Century (plus a helpful foray into the Twentieth Century in certain chapters). I was afraid that his writing would be a bit too scholarly for my taste, but even though it is a bit scholarly here and there, it's for good reason---he's making a point and doesn't want his readers to miss it. I appreciate that, and I appreciate that he didn't do too much of it. Katz is a careful, but obviously gay writer---and I mean gay in the MOST complementary sense. Oh, and did I mention the pictures? I love great old gay pictures, and these are full page and excellent quality---it's obvious that Katz went to a lot of trouble assembling these pictures. They really make the stories come alive. FYI---three other books that cover some of this same territory (but fill in background) are: Gay Berlin, Rebel Souls, and Edward Carpenter by Rowbotham.

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