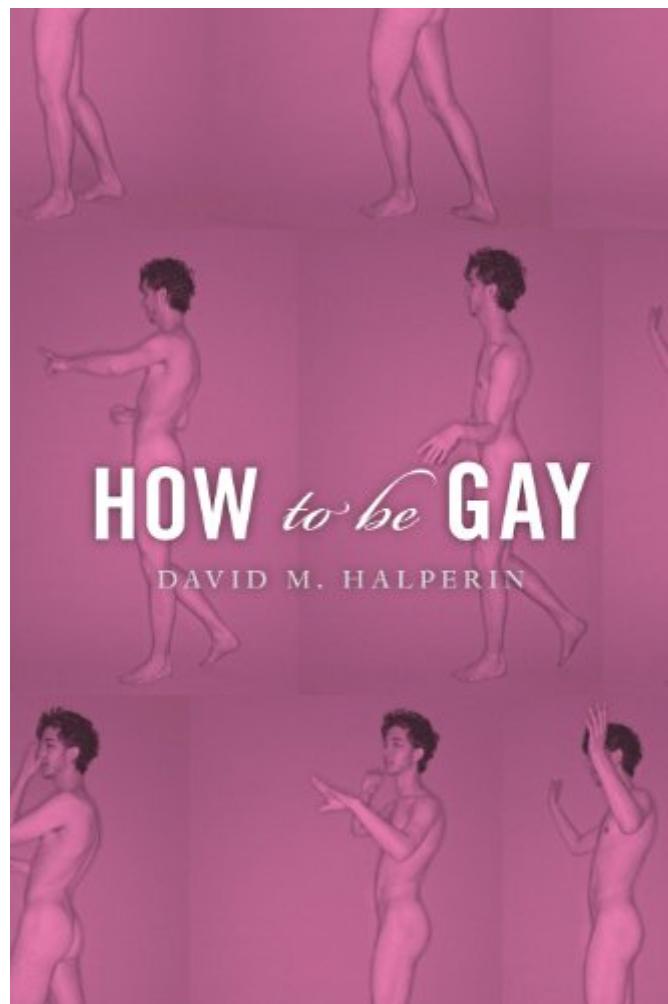


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How To Be Gay



Synopsis

A pioneer of LGBTQ studies dares to suggest that gayness is a way of being that gay men must learn from one another to become who they are. The genius of gay culture resides in some of its most despised stereotypes—“aestheticism, snobbery, melodrama, glamour, caricatures of women, and obsession with mothers—and in the social meaning of style.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Halperin's book is a tour de force. He's making an important contribution to new ways of thinking about what it means to be gay in America. In this book, Halperin works from the premise that there is a recognizable gay male culture (e.g., Broadway, drag, camp, love of certain female icons, architectural restoration) that was created initially to provide a means of self-expression when no explicit representations, at least no stigmatizing ones, were available. Although the details change over time, and post-Stonewall liberation has afforded a bevy of positive gay male cultural objects, Halperin argues this practice of appropriating straight cultural objects still continues. His question is: if this practice continues, then why? What might it say about the experience of being gay in a

society that is still culturally straight (i.e., heteronormative), no matter what political or legislative inroads have been made? He also wants to know how we can describe and account for the way it feels to be gay without resorting to psychology or essentialist ideas (i.e., that we are "born this way."). Halperin isn't interested in whether or not people are born this way, or how they get gay, but how they engage with gay culture (which may be to not engage it) and why. Some gays aren't very gay, to say it differently. Halperin is clear that the gay culture he describes in this book is American, white gay male culture. Beyond the scope of this book, he encourages others to pick up this project, if they are so inclined, and use it for other aspects of gay culture (e.g., while he uses a scene from *Mildred Pierce*, and discusses the cult of Joan Crawford, he acknowledges that examining the interest gay men have of Bette Davis may produce different insights) and with other gay populations (e.g.

I was tempted to give this book 3 stars because of the strength of much of its beginning and end, and because those parts might be a useful point of departure for someone else. However, the long march through the midsection of the book and its recycled nature made me think 2 stars was about right. The very beginning of the book sets a rather problematic tone--Halperin recounts the stir caused when he taught a course called "How to Be Gay". I dimly remembered the controversy, but Halperin writes as though his readers would recall all of the details. There seems to be an assumption that the reader knows all the details. There also is a lecturing tone where one is forced to read the same points reiterated in often tedious prose. The strength of the book is Halperin's effort to locate elements of a gay culture that is largely independent of sexual desire and that has continuity over time, although some of the specific outward manifestations of it may change. He puts this out as a challenge to those who say "gay culture" is dying but really mean that their own generation's cultural references are not being adopted or fully appreciated by the next generation. These are points that make sense to me and are fairly easy to illustrate. Unfortunately, the follow-up to this is an analysis of gay culture where examples that are mostly located in Halperin's generation (people who came of age in the early 70s) and the generation before, often drawn from the films, "Mildred Pierce" and "Mommie Dearest" which have Joan Crawford (as well as camp and melodrama) in common. He later suggests that these two films provided what he thought was an enormous base of material for thinking about gay culture, which simplified the process of presenting his ideas.

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