

# Straight

The Surprisingly Short History  
of Heterosexuality



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## **Straight: The Surprisingly Short History Of Heterosexuality** Hanne Blank

Like the typewriter and the light bulb, the heterosexual was invented in the 1860s and swiftly transformed Western culture. The idea of “the heterosexual” was unprecedented. After all, men and women had been having sex, marrying, building families, and sometimes even falling in love for millennia without having any special name for their emotions or acts. Yet, within half a century, “heterosexual” had become a byword for “normal,” enshrined in law, medicine, psychiatry, and the media as a new gold standard for human experience. With an eclectic scope and fascinating detail, *Straight* tells the eye-opening story of a complex and often contradictory man-made creation that turns out to be anything but straight or narrow.

## **Straight: The Surprisingly Short History Of Heterosexuality Details**

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# From Reader Review Straight: The Surprisingly Short History Of Heterosexuality for online ebook

## dehorsmaisedans says

Il titolo circuisce e mente. Mi aspettavo una lamigna decostruzione dell'eterosessualità (meglio: delle eterosessualità) con una metodologia storicizzante, ho trovato uno sproloquio evenemenziale sciorinato in un linguaggio troppo ridanciano e basato sul presupposto - erroneo - che basti distinguersi dalla "normalità" per un mero particolare per poter condividere il destino dei/le reiette del sesso e del genere. A dir poco patetico, e offensivo.

Chiudo a pagina 70, come da rito. Forse che l'elogio di VanityFair avrebbe dovuto insospettirmi? Temo di sì.

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## Nore says

A topic near and dear to my heart, as an asexual woman who is nominally without any interest in people but is dating a woman comfortable with my aromantic affection, and thus doubly confused when people attempt to label me 'straight,' as if my lack of attraction is somehow given the rubber stamp of approval by people who identify as heterosexual, and as if the label "straight" is so clear-cut as that.

I really wanted to give this four stars - it's a topic I enjoy, so I want to be kind to it, but it was not a very exciting read even though I enjoyed and mostly agreed with what Blank was saying. It took me about two and a half months to drag my way through it, and I found a lot of excuses to set it aside and read something else (like fluffy queer romances). I was surprised to find out how *short* this book is; it looks thick, but almost a quarter of it is notes and citations. Not unusual for nonfiction, but surprising given that this is still a short book at under 250 pages, with pretty big text.

And as others have said, Blank also sort of skims over trans people in this book - I understand that's an whole other can of worms and that a history of transgender people would make this book explode in size, but considering how heavily she hits on the fact that her partner is intersex, I'd assumed she'd give it more than the lip service it turned out to be. She also spends a fair amount of time musing over whether or not her relationship with her partner is "straight" or not, and whether or not her attraction to him is heterosexual - it almost seemed like the entire basis for the book, which felt... inappropriate. A winding road leading to "we're not straight," when a more accurate answer would be, "we're mostly straight depending on the context."

It's an okay starting point for anyone interested in heterosexuality and how it came to be as a concrete concept, separate from homosexuality, but there's definitely more to it than Blank covers in this book, and the way she presents it feels a bit self-centered and offputting.

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## Christoph says

It's a good, short history of a concept most of us take for granted: Heterosexuality. It is at times oddly paced, giving a lot of attention to some historic phases, and for people who have read, thought (or lived) more on the construction of gender/sexual identity the book might be a bit too 101 introduction-level. Overall I can recommend it.

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## Jean Roberta says

This new look at sexual orientation by the erudite and versatile Hanne Blank is not the first of its kind. Blank acknowledges her debt to Jonathan Katz' *The Invention of Heterosexuality* as a forerunner of this study. However, the evidence that "heterosexuality" was invented, not discovered—and quite recently at that—bears repeating. As Blank points out, if "the attribute we now call 'heterosexuality' were a prerequisite for people to engage in sex acts or to procreate, chances are excellent that we would not have waited until the late nineteenth century to figure out that it was there."

It is Blank's contention that the parallel terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" were coined, not in a scientific or medical context, as is generally assumed today, but in a quasi-legal context. To be "homosexual" was to have a particular sexual identity. When used by opponents of a drastic German law that criminalized sexual "deviance" in 1851, the term implied that legally persecuting "homosexuals" was irrational, since they were not sinners (as under earlier canon law) but were simply expressing unusual desires that were natural for them. Although Blank is not the first historian to discuss the development of the concept of sexual orientation, her explanation of the social context is intriguing. As she shows, medieval Christian definitions of sexual sin (non-reproductive or non-marital sex) had a great influence on later conceptions of "abnormal" erotic attraction, which could only be understood in contrast with the "normal" kind.

Richard von Kraft-Ebbing's 1890 book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, aimed to be a scientific study of abnormal expressions of sexual behavior, ones that generally appeared in cities, where they were harder to control than in insular villages. He used the terms "normal-sexual" and "heterosexual" (attracted to those who are different from oneself) almost interchangeably, in contrast to the various types of sexual deviance he sought to define. However, the concept of a "heterosexual" as a person who wants to mate exclusively with a member of the opposite sex didn't solidify until the 1920's.

In a series of chronological chapters, Blank explores the rise of psychology and its influence on changing models of "normal" personal development, and the emergence of heterosexual marriage as the sole expression of sexual maturity. While traditional marriage—in medieval times, for example -- was an economic arrangement controlled by the husband and sanctioned by religious vows, the 19th century discovered "romantic" marriage with its symbiotic gender roles and notions of personal compatibility as prerequisites for a healthy marriage—one that could properly nurture the next generation.

Blank's study is bracketed by a personal plea for a recognition of more sexual complexity than Kraft-Ebbing could have imagined: "My partner was diagnosed male at birth because he was born with, and indeed still has, a fully functioning penis." She goes on to explain: "Indeed, of the two sex chromosomes—XY—which would be found in the genes of a typical male, and XX, which is the hallmark of the genetically typical female—my partner's DNA has all three: XXY, a pattern that is simultaneously male, female and neither." Given her partner's ambiguous gender identity, it follows that Blank's own sexual orientation is ambiguous. While they seem to enjoy an enviably close and long-lasting relationship, the question arises whether they are a "straight" couple in some sense and, if not, how their sexuality should be defined.

Hanne Blank is an engaging writer, and her personal stake in the subject makes her analysis both interesting and immediate. This book is a useful addition to a general opening up of binary conceptions of sex and gender that seems to be happening in our society.

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## Ana Rînceanu says

This is a goldmine of a book! It's so short and yet it has vital information that helps combat the idea that people's sexuality fit nicely in either box A or B. Biology and psychology have been telling us for years that human sexuality is more of a spectrum, but it's important to know just how and why our ancestors felt the need to start policing it.

I really like Hanne Blank's writing because it is accessible and doesn't talk down to the reader, so there's no need to be shy, just give it a go.

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## Nina says

The fact that it took me four fucking *months* to finish this says a lot. Okay, there were only three days of actual reading, but still - four months. That's unprecedented.

It's not that there are any glaring flaws, or inaccuracies, or an unlikeable writing style. It's more of a pamphlet than a book, at 180 pages of writing plus 60 of bibliography and notes (*I know*), but it's informative and eye-opening, even though some of the information was incomplete. (Kinsey scale, anyone? Is nobody gonna mention that? Or the fact that Ulrichs himself was not only homosexual but also possibly transgender?)

The main factor that led to my lack of investment is that the whole book feels a little scattered, not quite tight and cohesive enough to allow the reader to drink in the information and instead leading him along a meandering path of excursions and notes until the very end.

It's all good and fun, but tbh I'm just relieved to be done with it.

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## Laura says

really 2.5....only white cis western focus. maybe not a terrible first primer but eh.

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## Luke Strzegowski says

Not what I was hoping for. While I think a discussion of how something as fluid as sexuality became binary, with one of the options being labeled as "abnormal" would be useful, Hanne seems more interested in devoting pages to wondering how penis in vagina sex became the standard. Her flawed arguments and poor technique just got to be too much for me. Sure, maybe she's right that Viagra targets hetero couples because we've all been trained to think of erect cocks and their insertion into vaginas as the very symbol of male virility and power. Of course, it could also be because Pfizer isn't stupid and has done the basic math to figure out that a multi million dollar ad campaign is best targeted to 90% of the population rather than 10%.

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## Cissa says

This excellently written book looks into the history of "heterosexuality" as a Thing in and of itself. In so doing, Blank touches on many related issues, such as theories of male and female sexuality, the history of marriage, and many more. While I suppose these could be considered tangential, they also enrich and inform the overall points, and for me have put many things into a context of which I was previously unaware.

It is not exclusively about "straight"; in exploring how this concept came to be, and to be accepted, Blank touches on many other sexual realms; none would be possible without the others.

Do read the footnotes; while some are just cites, others have additional enriching commentary.

Very recommended, for anyone interested in how our cultural narrative of sex came to be, and how it can impact us.

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## Marie-Therese says

This isn't a "bad" book per se, but it's curiously pointless. While Blank sets out to limn the history of heterosexuality as a concept, what she really ends up doing at great length and to little new effect, is to write about the legal and social concepts of marriage (companionate and otherwise) and the cultural history of dating. None of this is fresh, none of this has not been done dozens of times before decades before, most more thoroughly and from a more deeply informed historical and/or philosophical perspective. None of this illuminates our current understanding of what's "heterosexual" and what's "homosexual". In fact, beyond the brief personal revelations that open and close the volume, there's virtually nothing here I haven't read many, many times over.

I guess I just can't imagine who's the audience for this book. Anyone seriously interested in the subject of sexuality, sexual/gender identity, and the history of how society and individuals assign labels is not going to find anything fresh, interesting, or particularly useful here. And those who aren't especially interested or knowledgeable are probably not going to read or seek out this book. Sooo?

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## Joanna says

Dla osób, które zajmują się badaniami nad kulturą i seksualnością, książka nie będzie wielką nowością. Ponieważ nie czytam wszystkiego i coś nadrabiam zaległości w tej dziedzinie, to ta książka była dla mnie w jakiś sposób ważna.

Książka pozostawiła u mnie wiele mieszanych uczuć. Z jednej i w ciekawości na to, że musiałam ujawnić swoją orientację, żeby poczuć się w swoim domu bezpiecznie, chociaż nikt inny nie musiał tego robić. Ale z powodu poczucia winy, które przeżyłam przez ostatnich 13 lat. Ulgę, że tak naprawdę nigdy nie miałam powodu do wstydu i zrozumienie dla samej siebie. Mam nadzieję, że będzie mogła po nią jeszcze raz sięgnąć w przyszłości.

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## Meep says

*“We don’t just want what we want because we want it; we want what we want because that’s what we’ve learned to want.”*

## The Good

I like books that teach me more about what I think I already know. Take the blunt force “common knowledge” (doxa) and pull it apart until you have a finer, more nuanced understanding of the world. This was one of those kinds of books. It brought together a lot of information (some familiar to me, some new) and traced the history of heterosexuality.

I’m a queer (lesbian asexual) and it was refreshing to have the centered position taken apart, for a change. I don’t subscribe to an innate, biological “born this way” approach to sexuality. If people were born straight and all that implies in 2016, then there would’ve been a word for it a long time ago. Way longer than the 1800s.

While none of this information was brand new to me (with one exception, which I’ll get to momentarily), the book pulled information together in a coherent way, including some information I knew, but had not thought of as necessarily related to sexuality. (The process of ethnically diverse European immigrants “becoming white” in the States, in part through dating (and then, intermarriage), was an angle I had never considered.)

Now the surprise: Blank mentions, almost offhandedly, that in cultures without a concept of “romantic love,” people generally don’t experience it. I know it’s outside of her thesis, but I wish she had devoted a little more to this truth bomb, or at least footnoted it with where to read more. I’ve tweeted her to ask; I’ll let you know if she gets back.

## The Bad

Blank really wants her relationship to be “queer.” I’m not here to police other people’s sexual identities, but as a queer woman without the option to “shelter under the sturdy roof of straightness,” it just made me uncomfortable. Her partner is assigned male at birth, identifies and lives as a man, and has functional “male” genitals. Blank, as far as I know, is likewise assigned female, lives as a woman, and explicitly identifies herself as femme. But her partner is XXY intersex, which she claims makes them a queer couple. They might be two queer people in a couple, but that coupling is straight.

They weren’t, at publication, married, but in 2012, they could’ve if they wanted, anywhere in the country. I know her partner looks androgynous and sometimes is mistaken for a woman, but for social and legal reasons, they’re straight.

I had the same problem with this as with Blank’s other history of sexuality, Virgin: There was just not enough inclusion of queer issues and what was there was awkwardly worded and badly researched. I know her focus is on heterosexuality, but there was almost nothing about trans issues. I think the existence of trans people in opposite gender relationships (with cis or other trans people) is hugely relevant to a shifting understanding of what it means to be “heterosexual,” but the only two mentions were somewhat tragic.

For all Blank is an academic, she doesn't have a good grasp of LGBT+ terminology: Billy Tipton was not "a woman." Billy Tipton was a man. Blank's assertion that he was discovered to be "a woman" is not a direct quote; a responsible researcher/reporter should have quoted that incorrect understanding and then corrected it. She also uses "transsexual," which is definitely not standard trans terminology these days.

I knocked an entire star off of my rating for all of that.

### **Judging a Book by Its Cover**

This isn't really the kind of book that sells by its cover. It's not quite as academic as I'd expect from a textbook, but it's not as clever or funny as, say, Mary Roach's *Bonk*. (It's priced like a popular science book, not a textbook.) The cover design is completely unremarkable, but I imagine you'd have to have an interest in the topic before you picked it up, and not the other way around.

**tl;dr**

This book wasn't a bad review of heterosexuality, pulling together a lot of background information in an illuminating way. This falls in an uncomfortable space between academic and popular; it's too shallow to be an academic text, but too dry to be much fun as a popular text.

I'd recommend it to a certain type of person on an infamous blue website before they start spouting off about what they don't fully understand.

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### **Wei Ming says**

The history of sexual orientation has nearly always focussed on LGBT - the 'others', the ones outside of the mainstream and 'normal' - but as this book suggests, to have a fuller understanding of why and/or how attitudes have developed as they have today, the dominant sexuality - what is considered 'normal' - should be investigated too. Hanne Blank does so in a brilliant piece of writing - an anthropological study of heterosexuality that takes in etymology, history, psychology, social studies and economics could so easily have been far too sprawling and academic. She writes accessibly without losing any intellectual rigour, a quality which also shows in the book's judiciously selected, precise structure. She's not, however, boring - on the contrary, there are plenty of elegantly entertaining and thoughtful musings, plus a lot of hilariously dry comments when looking over past laws or the opinions of public figures. A truly excellent book, really can't recommend it enough.

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### **Lindz says**

I loved this book. It was fascinating and very well-researched. She begins by pointing out that terms like "heterosexuality" weren't coined until the late 1800's. Obviously, people were living "straight" lives before that, but they didn't "identify" themselves as heterosexual - it was just "normal" for them. What does the changing term mean in terms of our assumptions and stereotypes? What does it mean for women's rights?

Overall it's a great history of marriage, feminism, and queer activism, but it's also a fantastic dissection of



our underlying beliefs about life and love. This would make a terrific book group book.

Also - it's definitely an academic book, but it's incredibly engaging. I breezed through it and enjoyed the story.

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### Lisa Feld says

With all the stunning variety of human brains and bodies, is it really possible to tell a gay one from a straight one? Why do we tell a cancer survivor that her double mastectomy or hysterectomy doesn't make her any less of a woman, but tell a trans man that these surgeries absolutely *do* change his legal and social status? Why is there no term opposite of "slut" that means a woman with a socially acceptable and praiseworthy level of sexual activity? (Hint: it's not "prude.")

Blank begins with the term "heterosexual," a fairly recent word, and shows how wildly our understanding and expectations of "normal" sexual activity have shifted over time, along with our notions of what it means to be outside the norm. She questions whether biology can give us the answers we seek when so many of the questions are tangled with cultural norms.

While the middle chapter meanders a little, and I wish she'd also explored how non-Western cultures understand these categories, this book was an eye-opener that made me realize how many hidden biases and assumptions I carried despite thinking myself a liberal and thoroughly modern thinker.

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### Nataliya says

Whaaat? This 228-page book of nonfiction thought-provoking accessibly-written goodness ends on page 166? With the remaining pages all being annotations and bibliography and index?

*Ok, that gets the obligatory Darth Vader 'nooooooooo' out of the way, and we can safely continue without the danger of the world imploding.*

I loved this book. I've bookmarked roughly a billion of quotes, and I enjoyed the discussions some of them led to in the comments to me posting them.

This book is written in a very accessible way, and is a lovely overview of the subject that Hanne Blank wants to introduce the reader to - **the challenge of the concept that by now seems so ingrained in our minds and our culture that it seems almost silly to question it - the concept of heterosexuality**. What Blank sets out to discuss is the idea of the newness of this concept, the influence of the contemporary culture on the idea of it, the way it served and continues to serve the agenda and the *doxa* of our sexuality (*more on that later*), and the evolution of this seemingly stable concept over time. And in her tracing of the lifetime of the concept of heterosexuality she touches upon the 'science' (or pseudoscience) of it, the history of marriage, the contraception, the concept of romantic love, the idea of sexual pleasure, and, of course, Freud (the man whom I would love to shake to his senses through some kind of a time loop).

In order to understand her arguments, Hanne Blank makes sure the readers are familiar with the concept of *doxa*, which she explains as the 'everybody knows' idea:

*"When anthropologists talk about 'this stuff everyone knows,' they use the term 'doxa.' Doxa comes from Greek for 'common knowledge,' and that's a pretty good description of what it is: the understanding we absorb from our native culture that we use to make sense of the world. Doxa is, quite literally in most cases, the stuff 'that goes without saying,' the assumptions and presumptions and 'common sense' ideas we have about our world and how it works. Virtually everything we know about sexuality and heterosexuality, we know - or think we know - because of doxa."*

Hanne Blank then takes this concept and goes on to show how we have arrived at our current, mainstream, and often presented as the only and valid understanding of sexuality, and specifically what we perceive as solid and unchanging heterosexuality. Concluding at the end of this lovely constructed introductory overview to this flawed and fascinating subject, in tone of what she's been arguing about in this book about the changing concept of something that many choose to see as solid and eternal and set in stone, ***"And this, too, shall pass."***

**And, in no particular order, here are the bits and pieces that I liked - letting the book speak for itself:**

- The frequent (and well-deserved) jabs and stabs at Sigmund Freud, a man whose works we are all familiar with despite, as Blank notes, barely anyone actually having read them (*seriously, most of the Freud's stuff most people know (doxa???) we have actually learned through someone else telling us about them - in countless texts, self-help manuals and all that stuff*). **Oh, dear Freud, hell-bent on his ideas of what should be the proper sexuality, especially for all those hysterical women:**

*"By the 1930s, thanks to Freud's students and followers who carried on his work both before and after Freud's death in 1939, the idea that "vaginal orgasm" was the only valid heterosexual orgasm for women had gathered an extraordinary amount of steam."*

*"Among many beliefs that Freud shared with his generally well-off bourgeois peers was a deep, nearly mystical belief in the importance of penis-in-vagina copulation."*

- The crackdown on **slut-shaming** and everything else that people perceive as out-of-normal, not consistent with their sex doxa:

*"There is no meaningful word for the middle of that bell curve, the space that fits comfortably inside the boundaries of doxa, the space that most people occupy most of the time. Nameless and characterless, the space we can loosely characterize as 'normal' is almost completely undefined.*

*This is why 'slut' and 'prude', 'pervert' and 'deviant' all work so well as insults and as ways to police the boundaries of sex doxa. The labels are effortless to deploy and hard, even impossible, to defend against. As any woman who has been the subject of slut-shaming knows all too well - and about two out of three American women deal with this while they are still in high school, according to a 1993 study done by the American Association of University Women - the victim has no traction."*

- Presenting the desire to find that 'something' that clearly separates the 'normal' from the 'deviant' as

basically a need for some kind of reassurance:

*"The self-identification of small numbers of sexually non-normative individuals was not something that generated a sensibility of 'the heterosexual' or 'the normal-sexual' in the rest of the population. What generated this sensibility in the mainstream was the increasingly common experience of looking into the mirror to see if a deviant or a degenerate looked back."*

*"It is a conceit we are reared on: how many children's stories have evil characters who are hideous or deformed and good ones who are beautiful? we stigmatize the disabled, the deformed, and the just plain funny-looking on the basis of their bodies, assuming them to be stupid or incompetent."*

*We do this where sex is concerned, too. Even now, despite there being no proof for it whatsoever, many people are still profoundly attached to the idea that having penetrative sex for the first time permanently changes a woman's body, that you can tell that a woman is no longer a virgin by the width of her hips or the way she walks. [...] Physical and biological scientists who look for evidence of distinctive 'gay' bodies - whether in terms of genes or hormones or brains or gross anatomical features like fingers or genitals - are working from the same principle. In order to look for evidence of a physically or biologically distinctive 'gay' body, an additional assumption is necessary: that there is also a distinctive 'non-gay' body from which to draw comparisons."*

- The reminders of how **contraception changed the world**, including the entire concept of family and heterosexuality itself, shifting the emphasis in relationships from unavoidable procreation and child-rearing to pleasure and companionship:

*"Pregnancy had always been a fraught time, gradually interfering with women's physical function even when it doesn't bring serious discomforts and complications. It has always meant a prospect of another mouth to feed. What we often forget, from our first-world perch with its hospital births, antibiotics, and antiseptic procedures, is that until the twentieth century, childbirth was also deadly."*

- The sardonic look at our culture's preoccupation, despite everything we know (or think we know) about sexuality, with **penis-in-vagina sex as the only normative sex there is**:

*"But Viagra ads make it clear that Viagra-fueled erections are intended for vaginal penetration, the one distinctive act of 'heterosexual sex' and the only fully legitimate source of sexual pleasure for most of Western history."*

*"For Hirschman and Bergler, 'frigidity' had a single criterion: 'absence of vaginal orgasm.' The standard was unqualified and absolute. A woman who did not enjoy intercourse: frigid. Women who derived sexual pleasure from acts other than intercourse were frigid too. Nothing else mattered, only whether a woman had an orgasm because a man's penis was inside her vagina. Sexually aggressive women were labeled 'frigid' because of the association between masculinity and aggressiveness. Womanhood that was not passive was not properly womanly. 'Frigidity,' as Jane Gerhardt points out, 'thus became a label and a diagnosis that defined how much sexual desire a woman must have and in what kinds of sexual behavior she must engage to be 'healthy.'"*

*"[...]In virtually every culture we know, to be a sexually active man is to penetrate with the penis, and to be a sexually active female is to be penetrated by one. The medieval English take on it was that in sex, there are two partners, 'the man that doeth and the woman that suffereth'[...]It meant that the man, not the woman, engaged in sexual activity - he penetrated - while the woman merely permitted it to be done.*

And finally, this:

*"We want women to be secure enough in the pursuit of their own pleasure to pick out vibrators of their choice in friendly, feminist-owned sex shops, but we don't want them to prefer vibrators to men. We want men to be virile, experienced, and highly sexually skilled, but not to prioritize sex over love or to refuse marriage and fatherhood. We are anxious to experience sexual pleasure and plenty of it, but only if it happens to the right people, at the right ages, in the right combinations."*

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**The original pre-review:**

I read the Google Books preview of this book and found it to be interesting and written in a very accessible way. It made me want to read the whole thing - and so I'm on the waiting list for it at my library, and will post the full review as soon as I get it and finish it. Yes, this book has a few inaccuracies and relies on quite a bit of oversimplification - but I do appreciate the fact that it should be understandable to the 'average Joe'. Yes, you can say it pushes its agenda - but I don't mind since I fully agree with the said agenda.

In the meantime, while I wait for it to become available, I will leave you with some of the quotes that I found interesting from the introduction and part of the first chapter:

*"There are no such things as "opposite" genders, any more than a strawberry is the "opposite" of a plum. They are merely different."*

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*"In truth, sexual activity is social activity. Our culture is often loath to recognize this, although we do embrace the idea that sexual activity can be about the social function of expressing affection and intensifying social and emotional bonds. Indeed, many people believe that sex is only justified by love. But sexual activity has many other social roles to play. It can be a reward, a mode of exchange, a way to affirm loyalty, or an appeasement. It can be a commodity, a way of providing reassurance, and a rite of passage. As a source of pleasure it has few equals. It's an age-old means of asserting dominance and a visceral mode by which to demonstrate submission. It can furthermore be a means of gaining control, a way to humiliate and violate, and a way to punish. And any given sex act, no matter who engages in it, and often will involve more than one of these dynamics.*

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*"...Sexual desire (what we like or want) and sexual behavior (what we actually do) are not the same thing, and may or may not be related."*

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*"And last, we must bear in mind that the relationships between perception, thought, emotion, and behavior are neither automatic nor consistent. In many cases they are demonstrably affected or directed by culture and socialization. We don't just want what we want because we want it; we want what we want because that's what we've learned to want."*

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## Elena says

A light, quick read. Like Blank's previous cultural history, *Virgin*, this book is full of fascinating anecdotes, some of which you're likely to know about if you've spent much time involved in gender or sexuality studies. The book combines broad strokes of history with these anecdotes and details smoothly and readable, and like *Virgin*, ought to be accessible to the general reader.

Like Blank, I have been in relationships that might - or might not - be definable as heterosexual, and so I have a personal investment in her unraveling of the term and its history. I found her eventually conclusion (is this a spoiler? can you spoil nonfiction?) - "this too shall pass" - hopeful and reassuring.

One negative note - I found some of Blank's language choices when discussing transgendered individuals strange, such as the footnote where she briefly observes that "the horrific rape and murder of Brandon Teena" demonstrates her point that "women who are perceived to be overly sexual, or too sexual in the wrong ways - meaning, especially, ways that do not focus on conventional feminine receptivity - are still likely to be shamed, ostracized, and punished." (n 27, p 179; p 143). I don't disagree that the example of Brandon Teena (whose life, as Blank notes, has been dramatized in the movie *Boys Don't Cry*) demonstrates the brutality that those who violate gender norms often face, or that Teena's rape and murder was due to the revelation that he was not cisgendered - that he was perceived by his murderers as a woman pretending to be a man. But Blank here seems to identify Teena as a woman, against his self-presentation.

This is a small detail, but it did mar an otherwise enjoyable read for me.

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## Rae says

While this book was very informative as a history of marriage, sex and often women's liberation in Western society, I did find that there was something lacking. I enjoyed reading it because of how much I was learning about the history of sex/love/gender in the West - While some parts of the book can feel a little "Feminism 101" to readers who have reading experience on these topics, other bits of history and research Blank wrote on were very new to me, and I found that really valuable. It was an interesting examination of where some of our cultural norms come from and how they have (or sometimes haven't) changed over time. As a gay and trans person, I found the book gave me some insight into ingrained cultural norms on gender/sexuality that I'm often encountering in my day-to-day life and fighting against. Knowledge is power.

However, I also got the feeling of "Alright, where are we going with this?" for a lot of this book. Sometimes the book gave way to glimmers of theory that I found I very much wanted to read more about, only to be looped back into the history of the mechanics of "straight" sex again. I also found the book surprisingly lacking in information on homosexuality - Maybe my fault for picking up a book called "Straight" and expecting something else. However, I do feel these two topics go hand-in-hand, and would have liked a little more on that, especially because Blank has such an interesting and critical eye. We wouldn't be examining what "heterosexuality" is if there weren't an opposite to bring it into focus, which Blank does write about some, but not nearly enough. Perhaps a kind of side-by-side examination of the history of both our Western ideas of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" is what I was looking for, and just didn't quite find here (not

necessarily a fault of Blank's - just know that the book really is what it says it is and you won't be disappointed).

My only additional pet peeve with this book is Blank's objectification of her partner's intersexuality. Her partner here is referred to entirely as a rhetorical device so that Blank can claim some "queerness" in her relationship, which, at the end of the day, is an (intersex) man dating a woman, who largely go through life as a straight couple. Intersex people are already minimized, objectified and unheard as it is in the LGBT+, feminist, social justice and scientific communities, so it did sit uncomfortably with me when I read Blank's descriptions of her partner and the use of her partner as an object to boost her own "queerness".

Despite this, I'd still recommend the book to those looking to consume more history and gain more insight into why things are the way they are in all that is love, sex and marriage in Western society. Blank is a strong writer with a critical eye and sharp sense of humor who easily balances the accessible and the academic. If I could, I'd give it three and half stars.

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## **Melodie says**

I almost never read non-fiction unless forced and this was not an exception. I wasn't expecting much when I picked up this book to read for a class but I actually enjoyed it. The title was interesting enough and the content serves as a huge eye-opener. There are so many things I learned from this book and it also made me rethink many things I thought I knew. This might be the most interesting book I've ever read for school.

This book puts romance novels in a bad light, basically accuse them of brainwashing the public. While I understand the concern, I am in no way inclined to give up romance novels. I do recognize the discrepancies between these novels and reality. I love romance novels, they're my preferred genre because I would rather not read a novel that discusses real-world issues. That is just depressing and the whole purpose of my reading is to find an escape from the stress in life.

Okay, so the book talked way more than about romance novels. There's actually a lot of things that I never even thought about and you have to read the book to understand what I'm talking about.

While I certainly understand the points the author is trying to make and I mostly agree with her, I find it depressing.

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## **Garrett says**

Insanely informative, compellingly written and exhaustively researched, Straight is one of those, "Well, I didn't know that - did YOU know that?" kind of books. Because of that, the tone is sometimes smug and lacking in subtlety, but perhaps that's what's called for here. The thesis of the book is that "heterosexuality" (and as a consequence, its oppositional characterization, homosexuality) has only really been a concept for a short period of time, and that its entire existence is based more on the perception of the real (and people's collective desires to adhere to example and conventional wisdom) than it is anything real. While some things will no doubt piss people off - there's no gay gene, and no scientific basis for "Born this Way," but astute readers will notice that there's no "straight" gene either, and that no one is born any way but potentially every way, which is going to shake some folks' self-images to the core - again, this is, perhaps a sign that the book is working, and shaking the reader over the line to a new paradigm where being defined by law, the church, other people's morality or anything other than ourselves is an outmoded concept and certainly not a binary

operation with simple, oppositional classifications. This would make a great addition to any health or sexuality class - it's certainly cited well enough.

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