



When Brooklyn was Queer by Hugh Ryan

Comstock Township Library, Friday 1/17/25 @ 4pm

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you finish reading the book?
2. “From entertainment to education, women in the mid-1800s lived controlled lives that rarely allowed for the extensive writing, yawping, and queer-life building done by Whitman and other white men.” (pg. 29) What did you think of the comparison between life as a queer woman in the mid-1800s versus the opportunities for queer white men at that time?
3. Hugh states that, “The Victorian cult of domesticity dictated that women were to stay in the private sphere, away from public life.” (pg. 29) suggesting this limits the ability of women to explore their sexuality and gender identities. He later argues that this private sphere allowed women the opportunity of “preserving the intense world of female relationships...” (pg. 35) What is your take on this juxtaposition, if not seemingly contradictory situation for queer women in the 19th century?
4. “It is often assumed that the history of American sexuality is one of linear progress, moving from a time of benighted homophobia to our present-day enlightenment. However, the further back one looks, the more it seems to be a story of incoherence before intolerance, of ‘not knowing’ before ‘not accepting,’” (pg. 40) Do you think we are experiencing a “present-day enlightenment” or would you define the current era of American sexuality differently?
5. In the late 1800s, male and female impersonators became very popular in the entertainment industry. How does this phenomenon help individuals with gender exploration/realization and help foster a budding knowledge of queerness among the masses?
6. There are a lot of divisions throughout history between the societal expectations of heteronormativity and the acceptable presentations of queerness (Examples: entertainment industry using “gender transgressions” often, but those entertainers couldn’t present as the opposite gender in their day-to-day lives; stage shows including male or female impersonators, but not including queer audience members). With the creation of the Hays Act, the Motion Picture Production Code, and the New York State Liquor Authority (SLA), we see a greater divide between queer and straight entertainment, spaces, and lives. Where do you think American society would be today in the “history of American sexuality” if these limits, expectations, and political/legal actions had not been utilized to separate these groups?

7. What is your take on the Committee of Fourteen and their fervor at finding and punishing queer people? One example being the Schackno Bill which for the first time in NYC history, criminalized consensual same-sex activity. “More dangerously, it criminalized any man that the police decided was looking for same-sex activity.” (pg. 126)
8. The book discusses two specific colleges that seem to be inclusive and safe havens for queer students, teachers and administrators: Bryn Mawr College (pg. 146-147) and Brooklyn College (pg. 170-179). Do you think colleges are more likely to be accepting, if not supportive, of queer life or were the institutions mentioned in the book anomalies?
9. The consistent theme of queer creative communities popping up again and again was an interesting aspect in the city of Brooklyn. Do you think these communes are unique to Brooklyn or something to be found across the US, if not the world?
10. While the average reader might not know which authors or poets were queer, it seems to be an open secret among other queer creatives decades to a century later (examples: Harold Norse speaking on Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe in his autobiography (pg. 173) and Carson McCullers calling Walt Whitman and Hart Crane her idols (pg. 189)). What are your thoughts on this phenomenon?
11. What stories did you want to see more of, which parts of the book would you have left out?
12. Do you think if the book was focused on a different city it would be more interesting or less interesting?



If you're interested, there's more online about the author and the book:

To Watch:

- ★ When Brooklyn Was Queer – A Walking Tour with Author Hugh Ryan (5 min):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S44GoV7dtIs>

To Read:

- ★ Electric Lit Interview – Celebrating Brooklyn's Queer History:
<https://electricliterature.com/celebrating-brooklyns-queer-history/>
- ★ The Guardian – When Brooklyn was queer: telling the story of the borough's LGBT past:
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/27/when-brooklyn-was-queer-telling-the-story-of-the-boroughs-lgbtq-past>
- ★ Washington Square News – 'When Brooklyn Was Queer' Uncovers the Borough's Buried History:
<https://nyunews.com/arts/book/2019/04/22/hugh-ryan-author-when-brooklyn-was-queer-interview/>