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# Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men (Sexual Cultures)



## Synopsis

A straight white girl can kiss a girl, like it, and still call herself straight—her boyfriend may even encourage her. But can straight white guys experience the same easy sexual fluidity, or would kissing a guy just mean that they are really gay? *Not Gay* thrusts deep into a world where straight guy-on-guy action is not a myth but a reality: there's fraternity and military hazing rituals, where new recruits are made to grab each other's penises and stick fingers up their fellow members' anuses; online personal ads, where straight men seek other straight men to masturbate with; and, last but not least, the long and clandestine history of straight men frequenting public restrooms for sexual encounters with other men. For Jane Ward, these sexual practices reveal a unique social space where straight white men can—and do—have sex with other straight white men; in fact, she argues, to do so reaffirms rather than challenges their gender and racial identity. Ward illustrates that sex between straight white men allows them to leverage whiteness and masculinity to authenticate their heterosexuality in the context of sex with men. By understanding their same-sex sexual practice as meaningless, accidental, or even necessary, straight white men can perform homosexual contact in heterosexual ways. These sex acts are not slippages into a queer way of being or expressions of a desired but unarticulated gay identity. Instead, Ward argues, they reveal the fluidity and complexity that characterizes all human sexual desire. In the end, Ward's analysis offers a new way to think about heterosexuality—not as the opposite or absence of homosexuality, but as its own unique mode of engaging in homosexual sex, a mode characterized by pretense, dis-identification and racial and heterosexual privilege. Daring, insightful, and brimming with wit, *Not Gay* is a fascinating new take on the complexities of heterosexuality in the modern era.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[Ward] shows that homosexual contact has been a regular feature of heterosexual life ever since the concepts of homo- and heterosexuality were first created -- not just in prisons and frat houses and the military, but in biker gangs and even conservative suburban neighborhoods." - New York Magazine

"[Ward] has arrived at an interesting conclusion: straight men - specifically white men - are having sex with other men to affirm just how straight they are, because to be straight and still be able to perform 'gay sex' - while always remaining uninterested - is the height of white masculinity." - The Guardian

"So readily visible are the pieces of evidence she amasses, and so surprising are her conclusions, that reading *Not Gay* is like doing a Magic Eye puzzle for the mind: All the dots you'd never before put together suddenly snap into place, allowing you to see just how hot for other men some straight men are." - Vice

"Jane Ward...has written what may be the definitive (or perhaps the only) book on [this] subject." - Breitbart

"Jane Ward...[has] penetrated the internet with one of those ideas that people were maybe thinking but just weren't saying: Male sexuality is as fluid as female sexuality... Ward's idea that our cultural understanding of men's sexuality has been way too simplistic for way too long is fundamentally sound and refreshing. Ward's reach suggests she's well on her way to enacting the change she intended with her writing." - Gawker

"[*Not Gay*] provides a compelling and intriguing argument, that, rather than erasing queer identities, complicates the concept of identity itself." - The Society Pages

"Ward's significant contribution to the current discourse on sexual fluidity lies in her deep reflection on how self-identified straight men construct an identity where context-specific, same-sex, sexual behavior can be incorporated into an otherwise white, straight, masculine identity." - PsycCRITQUES

"Clear-eyed and unsqueamish, *Not Gay* defiantly insists that sex between contemporary American straight white men is in fact meaningful sex that can't and shouldn't just be hand-waved away. Jane Ward provides a timely and convincing corrective."

-Hanne Blank, author of *Virgin: The Untouched History*

"*Not Gay* is nothing less than a breath of fresh air. This book is certain to change the way that we think about heterosexuality's relations with the homoerotic."

-Roderick Ferguson, author of *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*

"The title of Jane Ward's book is not meant to be ironic. Her argument is that while sexual activity between straight white men does take place, it doesn't mean that the participants are gay. The book is about exploring the circumstances

under which this situation can be said to arise.âThe Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review" Ward pays close attention to the ways in which white straight men justify their own sexual behaviors with other men.â She neatly breaks down common defenses given to 'explain' such actions... Ward is not arguing that these men are 'really' gay or bisexual.â Instead, her point is that what makes these men 'not gay' isn't their actions, nor the complicated and contradictory emotions that are involved in those actions, but rather, their commitment to straight, normative life."-Vice.com "Not Gay" opens up a discussion of male sexual fluidity that is real and needed."-Bitch Magazineâ With a lot of nuanced arguments and a provocative, corrective thesis,â Not Gayâ is undoubtedly a book that demands to be read.â -Gender & Societyâ [â]â Not Gay, an insightful treatise on the nature of heterosexual male interaction with other men, addresses many of the stereotypes and assumptions associated with straight and gay men.â The book also skillfully analyzes the often fluid nature of sexuality, race, privilege, and the taboo crossover behavior between sexually active men of opposing preferences.â -The Bay Area Reporterâ Ward presents a critical piece missing from GLBTQ studies: the examination of white homoerotic activity within heterosexuality... Ward exposes the cultural construct of heterosexuality as it applies to men and women, illuminating the patriarchal and gendered roles assigned to gay and not-gay men and women. [â]â A valuable study for those interested in gender and GLBTQ studies.â Summing Up: Essential.â -Choice Listed on Gift Guide 2015: LGBT Titles to Round out Your Holiday Shopping Lists: âPlenty of straight guys have sex with other men while protesting vehemently that they are ânot gay.ââ This provocative book is an attempt to understand that phenomenon.â -Not Gayâ âWhat I love about this book is that it expands our notions about what it means to be human.â -Womenâ Studies Quarterly "Ward's idea that our cultural understanding of men's sexuality has been way too simplistic for way too long is fundamentally sound and refreshing. Ward's reach suggests she's well on her way to enacting the change she intended with her writing. Greater understanding of any cultural phenomenon is only a good thing for the world."-Gawker.com "Wardâ book is confident and theoretically well-informed, and offers a rich, often counterintuitive and thought-provoking tour through straight white menâ homosexual activities and their shifting meanings â in history, in the military, in fan fiction, in French kissing among Hellâ Angel members, as well as in the accounts of pop psychological experts who assure straight men having sex with other men that they areâ not gay. In short, this is cultural studies at its best."-Times Higher Education "Rather than focusing so much on sexual orientation, or trying to unmask the feelings of these men, who position themselves as heterosexual yet engage in same-sex sexual behavior, Ward turns her attention to the ways in which certain organizations use homosexual acts to further men's investment in heterosexuality, hypermasculinity

and homosociality in order to build lasting, strong bonds and friendships and to reassert white manhood."-Metapsychology" This fascinating book explores the worlds of white men who have sex with other white men and yet identify as straight. â••Pacific Standard

Jane Ward is Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the University of California, Riverside. She is the author of *Respectably Queer* (2008). Visit her website at [janewardphd.com](http://janewardphd.com).

My feelings towards this book are highly ambivalent. As someone who is in the very rare position of having done a large study of straight identifying men who have sex with men that has tried to break out of the racialised stereotypes that characterise this type of research, any research which shifts this racialised discourse is very, very welcome. However, the more I read the book the more disappointed I became. The main problem with the book is that it is not based on meticulous qualitative/ethnographic research with the participants, but on personal anecdotes, historical accounts, media accounts and popular stories in the main. I recognise the value of this type of secondary research, but only as a background to empirical study, particularly where the subject is so personal and sensitive. The problem I think, with the research, lies from this fundamental lack. Firstly, the methodological construction does not allow the many generalisations about this activity that are made as knowledge claims. These need to be reined back. I was taken aback at some of the generalisations about this group. Secondly, and again this is probably due to the data used - there is a massive lack of empathy with this group, many of whom are leading painful, difficult and complicated lives that they feel they have no escape from. Thirdly, the over characterisation of misogyny and violence as central to this activity is naively handled. I have seen a great deal of misogyny and violence in gay and lesbian sexual behaviour. No attempt is made to locate the contribution in terms of sexuality per se, only straight male sexuality. Fourthly, there is a permeating bisexual erasure throughout the work. The writer claims to challenge the straight-gay binary, then reproduces it again and again. I have seen an argument which irritated me (given that I have read the book) where the writer makes the aside while talking about this critique that the people giving it probably have not read the book! Another reviewer made the comment of ad hominem critique - they might do well to rethink that in the light of that comment! One of the main issues facing many straight identifying men who have sex with men is that they are bisexual and that bisexuality is almost an impossible identity to sustain successfully. As the writer argues (drawing on Sara Ahmed), being other than straight even when there is a great degree of ontological security in the individual about their sexuality takes work, and that work, as countless researchers have

documented is facilitated by identity communities (such as the LGBTQ community). Note the extensive research on bisexuality, for example the recent research by Stonewall, or the Bisexuality report which highlights the specifics of bi erasure and discrimination based as it is on double discrimination. That is, bisexuals are discriminated against and have their sexual identities erased/questioned by both heterosexual and non-heterosexual communities. This means that bisexuals find coming out of the closet extremely problematic, and this is particularly so for bisexual men. To say, as in one commentary - why would you want them in your community? is at once incredibly naïve, and incredibly discriminatory - but I think this goes back to the data used. I realise that the author does not want to use the discussion in her work about whether people are actually gay or straight (sic), but to ignore the role of bisexuality (not merely whether people are bisexual, but more the whole issue of the problematic nature of identifying as bisexual, and sustaining a bisexual identity) within this is a fundamental and critical omission. The final critique is that some of the activities recounted in the work, during hazing etc., I see as violence and humiliation, not sexual - obviously BDSM, kink etc. are also based sometimes on humiliation and violence but this is contextual - the participants interpret it as sex - and this is confusing to me. To say that sex is contextual as the work does, and then that the contextualising of the participants is faulty (i.e.) they don't characterise the activities involved in hazing as sexual but it is, seems contradictory. In summary, I would advise that people considering reading this book do read it, but with a critical eye on the validity of the generalisations and claims vs data sources, and in terms of its performativity as a piece of politics - what it does in the world, as a bisexual woman, married to a bisexual man, we found it troubling.

An extraordinary but dense read for someone relatively unschooled in any formal queer theory (this coming even from a queer person, such as myself) -- but filled with such intelligence and humanity this book is a must read for anyone interested in evolving their point of view towards a more authentic and sincere understanding and appreciation of the complexities of sexuality.

This is more of a research paper than anything else. I think the organization and presentation is great, but my word, it is a ton of educational jargon. It is my level of vocabulary, however, no reflection of the author's research.

A very worthwhile read. Well-written & researched. Academic in tone but very readable. Some of the conclusions were a bit far-fetched, but they certainly made you think outside the box. One crucial

point: this book is for anybody interested in race / sexuality studies. By focusing on white, straight sexuality and its cultural sphere, the author delves deep into the formation of how whiteness and straightness have been concocted out of a larger swath of human expression, so we end up learning about our society as whole, not just white, straight men.

It reads like a college study paper on cause and effect.

The thing with Jane Ward is she always makes you think! I mean, really, she challenges how you look at the world. Great book! Can't say enough good things about this.

This book is not at all of what I expected. It is poorly written and is a very challenging dense read such that I didn't even finish it.

Found the work to be excellent in its presentation of material as I research the issue of white masculinity.

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