

# Gays and Genes

**Reinventing the Male Homosexual:  
The Rhetoric and Power  
of the Gay Gene**

by Robert Alan Brookey.  
Indiana University Press,  
167 pp., \$27.95

**The World Turned:  
Essays on Gay History, Politics,  
and Culture**

by John D'Emilio.  
Duke University Press,  
264 pp., \$18.95 (paper)

**Normal: Transsexual CEOs,  
Crossdressing Cops, and  
Hermaphrodites with Attitude**

by Amy Bloom.  
Random House, 140 pp., \$23.95

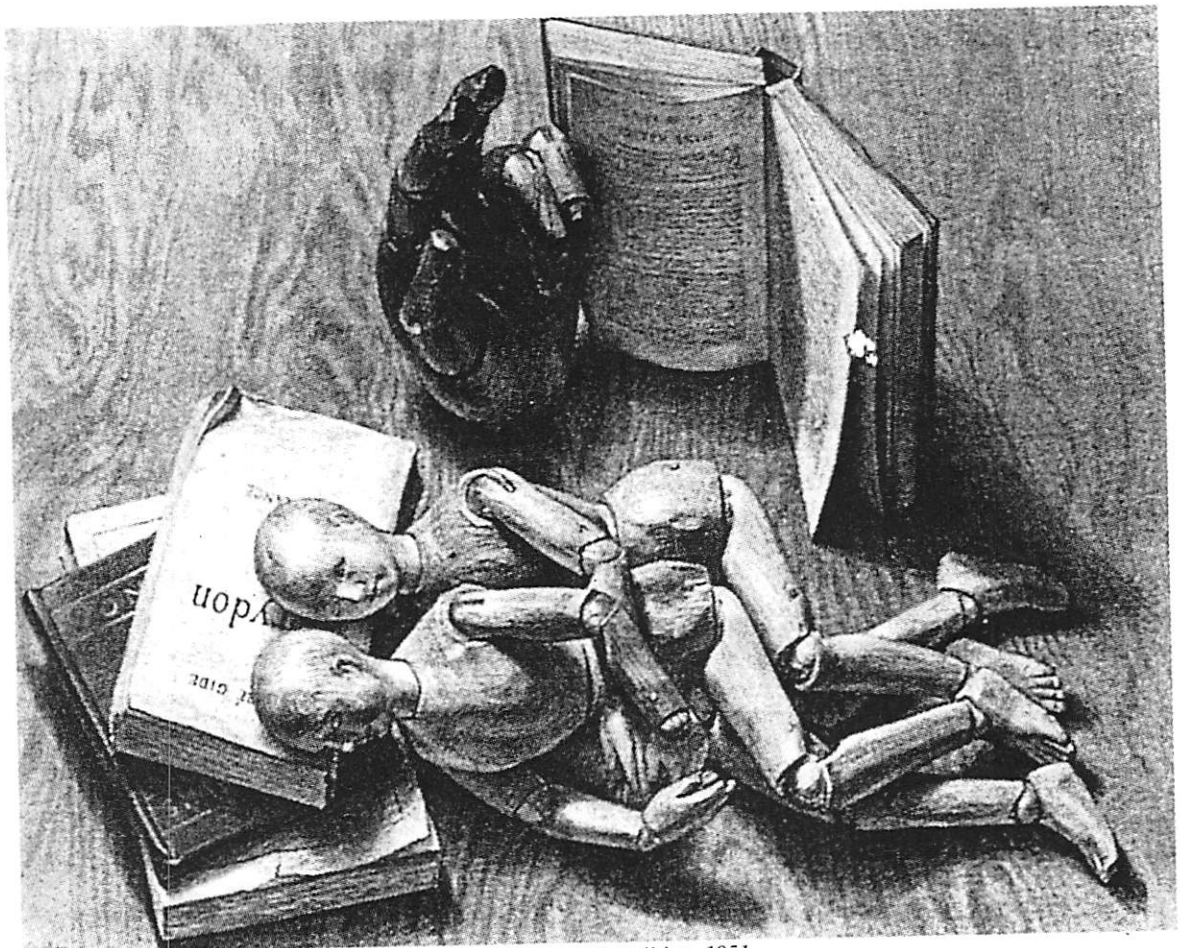
**Left Out:  
The Politics of Exclusion,  
Essays 1964–2002**

by Martin Duberman.  
South End Press,  
504 pp., \$22.00 (paper)

**Andrew Hacker**

*The New York Review*

*March 27, 2003*



*Paul Cadmus: Manikins, 1951*

March 27, 2003

## 1.

It sometimes seems that as much attention is given to the causes of homosexuality as to the causes of any other aspect of human variation. Heterosexuals are fascinated by this minority in their midst, and homosexuals seem equally curious about themselves. Indeed, almost everyone feels free to float ideas on homosexuality, many of which figure in Robert Alan Brookey's acute study *Reinventing the Male Homosexual*. Thus one theory posits that homosexuality is "an altruistic behavior in which one sibling foregoes reproduction in order to better the survival odds for the offspring of other siblings." Another surmises that men who identify themselves as gay have "failed in the masculine competition for female partners," and must endure "the frustration of unrealized heterosexual intercourse." These speculations, like many others, are based on the premise that heterosexuality is nature's norm, with the corollary that homosexuality is a deviation.

But not all inquiries occur in armchairs. In 1991 and 1993, the results of two laboratory studies were published in *Science*, a rigorous and reputable journal.<sup>1</sup> The first was based on autopsies conducted on nineteen gay men, sixteen straight men, and six heterosexual women at seven hospitals in New York and California. Dissections of their forebrain hypothalamus found that the glands in both the women and the gay men were less than half the size of those in the straight men. "This finding," the author concluded, "... sug-

<sup>1</sup>Simon Levay, "A Difference in Hypothalamic Structure Between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men," *Science*, Vol. 253, No. 5023 (August 30, 1991), pp. 1034-1037; Dean Hamer et al., *Science*, Vol. 261 (1993), pp. 321-327. Also see Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland, *The Science of Desire: The Search for the Gay Gene and the Biology of Behavior* (Simon and Schuster, 1994).

gests that sexual orientation has a biological substrate." The second study examined forty families which had two gay brothers. It found that in thirty-three of the pairs, their other gay relatives—uncles and cousins—were mainly on their maternal side, pointing to "a correlation between homosexual orientation and the inheritance of polymorphic markers on the X chromosome," which gay men receive from their mothers.

Hence there has been an ongoing debate over whether there is a "gay gene." Part of this debate has centered on the scope and reliability of the empirical studies, with some scientists expressing doubts about their methods and assumptions. *Science* has since

published the results of one attempt to replicate the earlier studies, which reported its inability to find "a gene of large effect influencing sexual orientation."<sup>2</sup> Still, Brookey seems to believe that time will bring such a discovery, and this prospect worries him. He is particularly concerned by the findings that the hypothalamus of gay men is close in size to women's, and that the supposed gay marker is transmitted through mothers. These findings, he feels, will promote not only "the belief that male homosexuals are effeminate," but that they are "physically feminized as well."

As befits a democracy, members of the public feel free to form opinions, even if they have no knowledge of scientific studies. Not only that, their views are solicited in polls and published in the media. On this subject, as on others, ideology looms large. The Gallup Poll responses in Table A show that while two thirds of Democrats take the innate view, most Republicans cluster on the environmental

<sup>2</sup>George Rice et al., "Male Homosexuality: Absence of Linkage to Microsatellite Markers at Xq28," *Science*, Vol. 284, No. 5414 (April 23, 1999), pp. 665-667.

side. The latter tendency seems to arise from a conservative wish that homosexuality did not exist, accompanied by the belief that eliminating it is possible. Hence the view of conservatives that identifying oneself as gay is either a freely made choice or results from events and influences in one's upbringing that could or should have been avoided.

The "gay gene" also figures in politics. Brookey cites the controversy over a 1992 amendment to Colorado's constitution, which was passed by a statewide majority. Referring to "homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation, conduct, practices, or relationships," it said that none of these could

entitle any person or class of persons to have or claim any minority status, quota preferences, protected status or claim of discrimination.

Proponents of the amendment said that states have the right to disfavor or even ban certain proclivities and practices. A case cited frequently was polygamy, which is barred by several state constitutions.

Dean Hamer, the biologist who conducted the hypothalamus study, testified as an expert witness when the amendment was challenged in court. Not surprisingly, he cited his research to argue that being gay was not a preference like polygamy, but an innate element in a person's makeup. As it turned out, the Supreme Court bypassed the genetic issue in overturning the amendment. Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing the 7-2 decision, said, "It identifies persons by a single trait... to make them unequal to everyone else."<sup>3</sup> Or as Brookey adds, "It denied homosexuals the same legal recourse and access to political participation that is available to all other citizens." A corollary is that if states seek to ban certain sexual practices, as with anti-sodomy laws, the prohibition must apply to all pairs of participants.

<sup>3</sup>*Romer v. Evans*, 517 US 620 (1996).

## 2.

As can be seen, there's another asymmetry in Table A. While the gulf between men and women generally is not as wide as the division between Republicans and Democrats, it still calls for comment. (The percentage of men favoring an explanation based on upbringing or environment would probably be higher had gay men been excluded from the count.) So why do men, especially those who regard themselves as straight, prefer to see homosexuality as deriving from choice or environmental elements? We might turn the question around, and ask why most men reject the genetic explanation. They might think that if being gay is innate, it just could be that they have the homosexual gene themselves. Even if the gene is currently dormant, it might surface at any time, as seems to happen occasionally among married men. In view of such possibilities, straight men may find it comforting to vote for choice or circumstance. This allows them to presume that it is not a choice they would ever make, and that they have weathered influences that make other people gay.

In his essay "Born Gay?," John D'Emilio says he really doesn't care whether he was. He then goes on to cite several reasons why he feels it's best not to pursue that question. He begins by describing changes in terminology, from "sexual preference," with its inference of choice, to a more fixed "sexual orientation." But even that denoted a direction in which someone had changed his or her attitude, leaving open what induced the journey. Hence the recent shift to "sexual identity," which abandoned ambiguity, since it "went to the very core of who one was."

But D'Emilio and others who call themselves gay aren't always completely sure about who or what they are. In this vein, he alludes to "the fluidity, the serendipity, the—yes—choice that went into creating our sexual selves." Without using the word "bisexual," he points to husbands who have satisfying sex at home, but occasionally have a fling with a man.

While not discounting the power of conservatives, D'Emilio is also unsettled by "the ease with which many liberal Americans have embraced the born-gay approach." Being able to say that being gay is genetic, he feels, allows them to "push aside their personal squeamishness about what we do." Nor is he sparing about the views within the gay community. In his judgment, the premise that people may be born gay "allows us to sidestep our own internalized homophobia." He argues plausibly that the genetic explanation makes it too easy to deflect "the uneasy—and unarticulated—feeling that, if we did have a choice, we might choose otherwise." But it isn't clear why he frames the issue as one of self-hatred. Musing about having a different life need not imply enmity toward the one you have.

If gays and lesbians make up a relatively small part of the US population

—my own estimate would be about 6 percent of all men and between 2 and 3 percent of women—they have many ties with others. Apart from their parents, most have siblings who are straight. A considerable number were once married and have children, while others are conceiving or adopting offspring. In another essay, "Laying Claim to Family," D'Emilio looks forward to "the acceptance of lesbian and gay families as an integral part of American society." He calls this a "quest for family recognition," which would include same-sex marriage, full rights to adoption and child custody, along with the granting of social and legal legitimacy to varied domestic arrangements. Some steps toward such legitimacy are already being taken. Vermont allows same-sex couples to register as "civil unions," and Hawaii has a strong "domestic partnership" law. Some businesses and localities extend benefits to employees' partners, and more hospitals are viewing companions as next of kin in situations when only a few visitors are allowed.

D'Emilio claims that fully a quarter of gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults have youngsters living with them. The figure may be true for women, since many are raising children from earlier marriages. But I have seen no convincing evidence that one out of every four gay men has a child in residence.<sup>4</sup> Whatever their numbers, young people whose parents are gay deserve to be treated in their schools and elsewhere like any other offspring, just as do those born to unmarried parents or without a resident father. Yet even so benign a sentiment can stir controversy.

Think of a class of six-year-olds where one pupil is being raised by a set of same-sex partners. If the child is teased, the teacher may feel bound to turn the situation into an educational lesson. As it happens, there are books aimed at just this grade level. Among the best known are *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate*.<sup>5</sup> In the first, the girl lives with two women. In the second, the boy is with his mother, but spends considerable time with two men. The purpose of the books isn't simply to make youngsters with gay parents feel better about themselves. It is also to convince their classmates that their households are an acceptable form of family life. Needless to say, not all school systems are using such texts. Their fear is that some students could conclude that being gay or lesbian has equal status with heterosexuality. Indeed, they see

<sup>4</sup>D'Emilio cites an exit poll conducted by the Voter Research Service during the 1992 election. However, Lee Badgett of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst tells me that its sample of 13,729 contained only 263 men who were willing to say that they were gay, and 186 women who identified as lesbian. This subset yielded 61 men and 70 women who said they had children in their homes, not really large enough to warrant broad generalizations. Kenneth Sherrill of Hunter College also led me to a 2000 Harris Internet poll, where 13 percent of gay men and 46 percent of lesbian women said they were raising children. See [www.harris-interactive.com](http://www.harris-interactive.com), November–December 2000.

<sup>5</sup>Lesléa Newman, *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Alyson, 1989); Michael Willhoite, *Daddy's Roommate* (Alyson, 1990).

this as yet another example of an "environment" that might lure youngsters into homosexuality.

### 3.

A related concern—among those who voice concern—has been the growth of what might be called a gay presence in the US and elsewhere. A gay partnership is basic to the prime-time plot of *Will and Grace*, just as gay characters recur in network programs and multiplex movies. Hence the question is raised whether the number of gays and lesbians is actually growing, relative to the total population. By all outward indicators, more Americans than ever before are now willing to say they are gay or lesbian, or allow others to

make that inference. The big shift from the past is among young people coming of sexual age, many more of whom feel able to admit being gay both to themselves and to the world.

If the gay population seems to be on the rise, the easiest explanation is that more people are coming out. Look, for example, at the 2000 Census figures for men aged forty to forty-four, who were reaching adulthood at a time when disclosing being gay was gaining acceptance. As can be seen in Table B, the proportion of men of this age who hadn't married by 2000 had more than doubled since 1970, rising from 7.5 percent to 15.8 percent. The

latter figure is noteworthy, even allowing for the later ages at which people are now marrying. Of course, many of these bachelors identify themselves as heterosexual. Still, most straight men have already married at least once before reaching their forties, and our most recent tabulations show that fewer than 2 percent of men who marry for the first time are over forty.

But men who stay bachelors make up only part of the picture. The table also shows that among men aged forty to forty-four, the proportion who were divorced and had not remarried leaped from 3.8 percent in 1970 to 13.2 percent in 2000, over a threefold increase. As it happens, divorced heterosexual men almost always remarry, usually quite soon, often because they

feel bereft without a domestic nest. This would seem to be especially true among those who get divorced in their forties, which maybe is a bit late for mastering the domestic arts. But the growth of the divorced-and-not-remarried group hints that it now contains a number of homosexual men who were once married, and will not be doing so again. (Or cannot until many laws are changed.) In 1970, most homosexual men who had married stayed married, since coming out was much more hazardous than it is today.

So why have as many as 15.8 percent of all men in their early forties chosen

Table A

**PUBLIC OPINIONS**

"In your view, is homosexuality something a person is born with or is homosexuality due to other factors such as upbringing and environment?"

	<i>Born With or Innate</i>	<i>Upbringing or Environment</i>
Republicans	39%	61%
Democrats	66%	34%
Men	45%	55%
Women	58%	42%

Percentages based on persons who stated opinions.

Source: Copyright © 2002 by the Gallup Organization. All rights reserved.  
Reprinted with permission.

Table B

**MARRIED AND OTHERWISE**

<i>1970</i>	<i>Men Aged 40-44</i>	<i>2000</i>
84.2%	Currently Married	66.3%
3.7%	Separated	4.2%
3.8%	Divorced	13.2%
0.8%	Widowed	0.5%
<u>7.5%</u>	Never Married	<u>15.8%</u>
100.0%		100.0%
<i>1970</i>	<i>Women Aged 40-44</i>	<i>2000</i>
80.4%	Currently Married	66.4%
4.9%	Separated	5.3%
5.6%	Divorced	15.0%
3.7%	Widowed	1.5%
<u>5.4%</u>	Never Married	<u>11.8%</u>
100.0%		100.0%

Source: Bureau of the Census

not to marry at all, and what about the additional 13.2 percent who are divorced and have not remarried? Together, they total almost one in three of men at this age, the highest such proportion in the nation's history. In 1970, by way of contrast, bachelors and divorced men who hadn't remarried made up only 11.3 percent of men in the same age range.

The most plausible explanation for much of this sharp increase is that more men are discovering that they are gay, either early or after years of pretending to be heterosexual. Does this mean that male homosexuality is more prevalent than in the past, and not just that more men are coming out? This question can't be easily answered, since it's impossible to get head counts from the past. What is clear is that more men are acknowledging homosexual inclinations although not enough to affect population growth in the short term. The next generation will come from heterosexual parents, as it always has. One day, the gay population may reproduce itself by donating sperm to women friends.

Table B also shows distributions for women. Between 1970 and 2000, those in their early forties who were unmarried or had been married but were separated, divorced, or widowed rose from 19.6 percent to 33.8 percent. Figures like these suggest that there will be fewer marriages or remarriages for heterosexual women, partly because growing proportions of men are interested in other men. The presumption that there is a man somewhere for every woman simply doesn't hold anymore.

#### 4.

In *Normal*, Amy Bloom, a psychologist who has taught at Yale's medical school, takes the question of sexual identity several steps further. The three groups she considers are quite small in size, which might lead them to be dismissed as anomalies. They are transsexuals who have actually undergone surgery to embrace a new gender; heterosexual men who are drawn to wearing women's clothes; and adults who were born with ambiguous genitalia but now identify with one gender. Bloom discusses several dozen men and women, and most striking is how "normal" all of them seem, which is of course the reason for her title. (One man may show you his collection of women's wigs. But is he any odder than his neighbor who boasts about his guns?)

In the adult population, Bloom estimates, about one person in every 50,000 is a transsexual who has undergone surgery; and of these, 80 percent are men who want to become women. Christine Jorgensen, Renee Richards, and Jan Morris have been prominent examples. However, *Normal* focuses on the smaller group of women who have become men, and their transition has been more complicated anatomically. (This chapter may contain more than you want to know about "phalloplasty" and "metoidioplasty.") Most of the new men she talks about are now living with women, who are obviously aware of their pasts. Many of the women-to-men had been lesbians and found their old circles shunning them in their new incarnations. On the other

hand, one woman made the change so she could become a male homosexual. He has been asked why he didn't remain a woman, who could as easily sleep with men. He replies that this misses the point: his basic identity is male and gay, not female and heterosexual. All transsexuals came to feel that their physical bodies weren't consonant with their dispositions. After all, not all constitutions come into this world congruous or complete. Many children now survive and thrive under a regimen of medicines. Bloom feels that for adults to seek their salvation in surgery is not to defy nature but to alleviate nature's oversights.

The next group consists of heterosexual men who feel drawn to wearing women's clothes. Here they must be distinguished from gay drag queens. Most straight men who cross-dress do so furtively, settling for underwear or trying on their wives' dresses when they are alone at home. Often the wives don't know, or forbear from airing their suspicions. (Bloom estimates that more than 5 percent of all men experiment with women's clothes, although she grants that there is no way to verify the figure.) However, the men in *Normal* do their dressing in the open. Or at least they do when they join in cruises and conventions, where they bring gowns and pumps and makeup, and can be their sartorial selves. Typical participants are "Presbyterian accountants from Cedar Rapids and Lutheran engineers from Omaha," along with at least one Baptist minister and a state trooper. We take it that they get some emotional satisfaction from acting

out the fantasy of cross-dressing, but Bloom has little to say about this.

While some wives are sympathetic and supportive, Bloom says that most of those she met were maintaining a brave face, but patently wished that their husbands had other inclinations. What is also evident is that many cross-dressing men hardly try to be "feminine." For one thing, many have builds that prevent them from resembling a woman; nor do they soften their demeanor when in women's garb. In short, they are very much men, except for their preferences in clothes.

After about one of every two thousand births, the parents hear a physician saying something like "Somehow your baby's genitals haven't finished developing, so we don't quite know right now what sex it is." (Nowadays, many parents are able to find out prior to the birth.) Here, too, surgeons are ready to step in. But first come hormonal tests to see toward which gender the infant is inclined, even if only marginally. Yet the practice of most doctors is to declare most hermaphroditic children girls, since in the words of one specialist, it's "easier to make a hole than build a pole." They also contend that if the child is treated as a girl, that's what she'll turn out to be.

Unlike transsexuals and cross-dressers, who largely make their decisions as adults, Bloom was unable to find or interview persons who were born as "intersex" children, as they are now called. One who is known is John Colapinto, who was made into a Joan shortly after being born, and decided in his teens that he really was a boy. Bloom located a man who has al-

ways had a very small penis, but whose parents resisted when doctors urged its removal. For this, he says, "I will be grateful for the rest of my life," not least because he and his wife have highly enjoyable sexual relations.

## 5.

*Reinventing the Male Homosexual* says hardly anything about women, which should not be taken as a criticism, since Brookey's chosen subject is men. Yet it is worth noting that there have been very few references to a "lesbian gene." We do know that relatively fewer women—from a third to a half as many—call themselves lesbians compared with men who identify as gay. The main reason is that women who have had intimate experiences with partners of their own sex are less apt to redefine themselves. They can move on to men, or back to them, without seeing this as affecting their basic sexual identity. It is not so much that women are more "bisexual" as that they are more fluid and flexible about love and attraction and their physical expressions. What may be added is that men, whether homosexual or heterosexual, tend to be more "monosexual." Not only are they uneasy with ambiguity about their sexual selves, but men in both groups are firm in insisting that there is no likelihood of changing from what they now are.

Martin Duberman's essays in *Left Out* cover a broad range, including discussions of Cuba and Vietnam, and racial and academic politics, along with articles on Paul Robeson, William Styron, and Anita Bryant. However, his main emphasis is on gay life, and contains recurring allusions to what he calls "Freud's hoary suggestion that all human beings are potentially receptive to bisexual stimulation." Freud said all of us are sexually polymorphous, or are inherently that way. And he surely knew what he was doing when he used "poly" instead of "bi." The permutations of human sexual behavior verge on the infinite, including threesomes and foursomes, penchants for brutality and bondage, in public or by purchase, not to mention fascination with children, which grips enough adults to keep entire societies on edge.

Duberman quotes Donald Webster Cory, who called homosexuality and heterosexuality "rather meaningless oversimplifications," as well as Albert Ellis, who wrote that "exclusive heterosexuality can be just as fetishistic as exclusive homosexuality." And he notes that Masters and Johnson devised the term "ambisexuality," for persons who show "complete neutrality in partner preference."

If the great majority of men and women regard themselves as either heterosexual or homosexual, this still leaves a considerable number who resist either designation, and who often identify themselves as bisexual. Indeed, on many campuses, gay and lesbian organizations include such students among those they represent. Even so, people who actually refer to themselves as bisexual are a very small group. In Kinsey's surveys—which did not use the term—only 1.9 percent of the men and 0.7 percent of the women said they were "equally heterosexual

and homosexual."<sup>6</sup> While the last half-century has certainly seen huge changes in the sexual sphere, there isn't much reason to believe that figures would be far different today.

More important than what people call themselves is what they do or have done. The most reliable recent study, which was based at the University of Chicago and supported by seven foundations, found that most lesbians and many gay men had had heterosexual sex in the past.<sup>7</sup> But if this signifies a bisexual history, they are hardly the only ones with that experience.

We know that same-sex experimentation is quite common in the teen years. However, these episodes are usually too youthful and tentative to be recorded as homosexual or bisexual. So the Chicago study probed further, and found that among adults who currently viewed themselves as heterosexual, almost half again as many women as men said they had also had one or more same-sex relationships after the age of eighteen. While the real numbers may be higher, those we have hint at the incidence of bisexual behavior.

Broadly speaking, bisexuality tends to have two expressions. The first is found mainly in women who have had both men and women partners. Anne Heche and Sinéad O'Connor have been recent examples; earlier, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Virginia Woolf come to mind, each in her very different way. (This is a theme in Alison Lurie's novel *The Last Resort*.) Starting younger, some women students now speak of "being gay until graduation," meaning that they are now deeply in love with a girlfriend but are open to other choices later on.

With men, a more usual pattern involves a husband who comes to realize he is gay, or suspected it earlier, but married anyway. In the past, most of these men remained with their wives, and many still do. However, from time to time, they look for encounters with men, sometimes in gay bars. But the truth is that most of these husbands know they are gay, and many feel that sex with their wives is not expressive of their core identity. So it might be a misnomer to call these men bisexual. (Quite another question is how many of their wives know what is going on but decide to remain silent.)

It could well be that we are all innately neither heterosexual nor homosexual; nor may we be innately bisexual or ambisexual. Rather, we are capable of being attracted to a spectrum of our fellow creatures; whether they carry XX and XY chromosomes may not determine sexual preferences. Perhaps it is a triumph of our species that there's no clear accounting for the imaginativeness of sexual fantasy and the permutations of sexual pleasure. Much of what I am suggesting was captured by the wedding guest—gender not specified—who was overheard remarking of the bride and groom: "They're a charming couple. I've slept with both of them."

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (W. B. Saunders, 1948), p. 652; *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (W. B. Saunders, 1953), p. 499.

<sup>7</sup>Edward O. Laumann, et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 305.