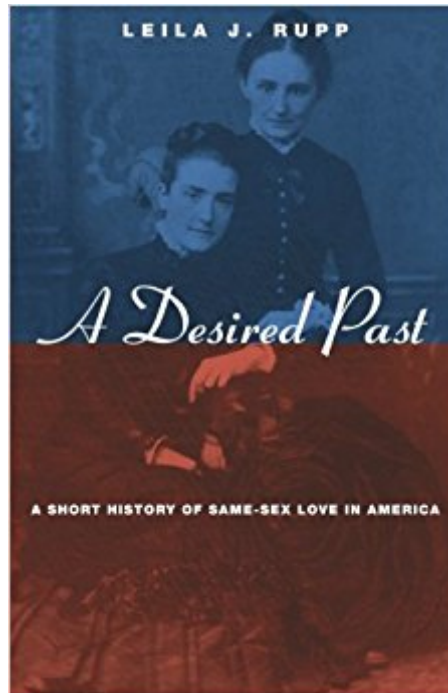




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# A Desired Past: A Short History Of Same-Sex Love In America



## Synopsis

With this book, Leila J. Rupp accomplishes what few scholars have even attempted: she combines a vast array of scholarship on supposedly discrete episodes in American history into an entertaining and entirely readable story of same-sex desire across the country and the centuries. "Most extraordinary about Leila J. Rupp's indeed short, two-hundred-page history of 'same-sex love and sexuality' is not that it manages to account for such a variety of individuals, races, and classes or take in such a broad chronological and thematic range, but rather that it does all this with such verve, lucidity, and analytical rigor. . . . [A]n elegant, inspiring survey." --John Howard, *Journal of American History*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Although this new history of same-sex desire does not offer the long, satisfying narratives of Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* or the sweep of David Greenberg's *The Construction of Homosexuality*, it does provide a solid introduction to the subject. Tantalizing fragments from the 17th and 18th centuries are joined with later evidence to flesh out Rupp's vision, which draws on Native American and African practices as well as the culture brought to (and imposed on) America by the Europeans. While surveying the more familiar history of gay culture in the cities, she also describes the growth of small, hidden lesbian and gay communities in places as unlikely as Salt Lake City, far removed from the urban centers of vice. Rupp also surveys changes in attitude toward same-sex love within academia in the last 50 years, as well as in American culture at large, and provides a useful bibliography. --Regina Marler --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

While most books on gay and lesbian history tend to be scholarly, at times informed by postmodern analysis that can make them challenging for the general reader, Rupp's survey of four centuries of "same-sex love in America" is, by contrast, extremely accessible. By way of introducing her material, this professor of history at Ohio State University writes very personally about her lesbian aunt, Leila; her own coming out; and her work in the lesbian and gay community, as well as a range of contemporary issues such as antigay political initiatives and gay male urban sexual cultures. The bulk of the book, however, is an engaging but cursory look at such highlights of same-sex desire in U.S. culture as Walt Whitman's life and poetry, Emily Dickinson's "romantic friendship" with her sister-in-law, gender variations among Native American berdaches, the importance of WW II in helping gay men and lesbians come out and the growth of national gay communities. While Rupp invokes the standard sources for gay and lesbian history, including the work of Allan B?rube, Esther Newton, George Chauncey, Jonathan Katz and Lillian Faderman, she tends to summarize them rather than build new or larger arguments; there is little new research here. A highly regarded scholar of women's history, Rupp has produced a version of gay American history that's suitable even for young adult readers (the promotional material refers to it as "breezy"). As much as it might be needed, it's an odd offering from a university press. (Sept.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

good book, interesting to look at the topic of same sex over history. needed this for a college class but ill be keeping it for suture reference

revealing and informative.a good read.

This fall semester (2001), I will be teaching a course in Lesbian and Gay history at my community college. In preparation for this course, I looked at many different books, hoping to find an ideal survey text for an introductory course in GLBT history. Alas, Rupp's book falls short of the ideal -- but is nonetheless the best brief introduction to the history of same-sex sexuality available on the market today. I will be using her book in my class this fall. What I appreciate about this text is her almost seamless interweaving of personal experience with historical narrative. I realize that traditionalists tend to find this practice either unprofessional or self-indulgent (or both), but I delight in it. More importantly, I have noted that my students respond very well to history texts that do not shy away from the highly personal. Rupp does a good job of giving a quick overview of the

"essentialist" and "constructionist" schools of thought among the historians of sexuality. Perhaps best of all, she insists on the use of the term "same-sex sexuality" rather than Lesbian or Gay, recognizing that the latter terms are perhaps too easily associated with the essentialist argument. All in all, a brief but well-constructed text, ideal (I hope) for the classroom and for the curious general reader.

...but .com's own editor-review (and Professor Hugo B. Schwyzer's review) are both certainly right; it's no Lillian Faderman-quality work! Faderman's work is never a gloss-over, never leaves the reader with the feeling that underneath the information and/or conclusions proffered there is still a great deal not only unsaid but \*unseen\* by the author. Perhaps that is why I found this book personally unsatisfying; I want to know something more, something different than the same old well-and-better-plowed ground. Compared to Faderman's work --- and that of some other good lesbian historians, as well (and I would also highly recommend *'Boots Of Leather, Slippers Of Gold'* for a "limited-community" history) this book's brevity and surface feel is rather like a history of the Civil War that wound up offering the premise that "In the 1860's, the North and the South fought each other over a lot of things, including slavery, and then Lincoln freed the slaves, and then the North won." Where \*are\* the reasons and the events??? Selfishly, perhaps, I just plain expect more from a purported lesbian history, even one limiting itself primarily to the last 50 years in small communities, than I found in *'A Desired Past'*. While Rupp does offer somewhat of a new chronicle in her attention to the growth of academic acceptance of lesbian teachers, professors and students, it's just not enough to rescue the book and make it at all engaging. Lacking the the sweep, the depth, and the sheer power of *'Odd Girls And Twight Lovers'* and *'To Believe In Women'*, for example, Rupp's book is really more a 20th-century Lesbian History 101 text than anything else. But in that context, it's good for introducing newbies (and perhaps your local scared-to-come-out academic) to the subject, it's still competently written and it's still a nice, light read for all lesbians. (P.S. For a departure from Faderman's usual subject matter, lesbian history, DON'T miss her \*terrific\* new autobiography *'Naked In The Promised Land'* --- wonderfully written, and complete with her pictures from the girly mags of the 50's and her career as a stripper, which she used to work her way through UC Berkeley and a PhD, at 26! To paraphrase Dorothy Parker, "Who \*sez\* a girl can't give as good as she's got?")

Leila Rupp has done a competent job of examining same-sex relationships in American life, beginning with colonial attitudes, all the way through the "coming out of the closet" era of our own

time. She has laid aside her historian's objectivity to tell us bits of her own life story. I hadn't realized that many same-sex involvements were looked upon more tolerantly in earlier times. The entrenched positions, pro and con, that are present today, are anomalies, considering the history she provides. One comes away from the book, also, with an appreciation for the confusions and mysteries that still cloud our view of same-sex attachments. No one has the answers, and no research thus far has explained why things happen this way. As a hetero wife and mother of four, I must admit that I have very little understanding of the feelings of gays and lesbians, especially since my own view of female sexuality is not limited to just the male-female attraction, and copulation. To me, female sexuality is that and much more---it is bound up also with maternity, with conceiving, bearing, and raising one's children, with breast-feeding one's babies, with nurturing a family, with holding grandchildren in your arms. Rupp makes one weak reference to "diffuse female sexuality." Yes, it is diffuse, compared to male behavior. I can understand "romantic friendships" as Rupp describes them. Most girls go through this stage as young adolescents, and throughout their lives, most women treasure their female friends, who often are able to provide more necessary emotional support than their husbands. Yet somehow it seems sad to me that lesbians live their lives outside the fulfillment of diffuse female sexuality, which involves a male partner, pregnancy, nursing---a rich, heterosexual family life.

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