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# No Future: Queer Theory And The Death Drive (Series Q)



## Synopsis

In this searing polemic, Lee Edelman outlines a radically uncompromising new ethics of queer theory. His main target is the all-pervasive figure of the child, which he reads as the linchpin of our universal politics of a œreproductive futurism. Edelman argues that the child, understood as innocence in need of protection, represents the possibility of the future against which the queer is positioned as the embodiment of a relentlessly narcissistic, antisocial, and future-negating drive. He boldly insists that the efficacy of queerness lies in its very willingness to embrace this refusal of the social and political order. In *No Future*, Edelman urges queers to abandon the stance of accommodation and accede to their status as figures for the force of a negativity that he links with irony, jouissance, and, ultimately, the death drive itself. Closely engaging with literary texts, Edelman makes a compelling case for imagining Scrooge without Tiny Tim and Silas Marner without little Eppie. Looking to Alfred Hitchcock's films, he embraces two of the director's most notorious creations: the sadistic Leonard of *North by Northwest*, who steps on the hand that holds the couple precariously above the abyss, and the terrifying title figures of *The Birds*, with their predilection for children. Edelman enlarges the reach of contemporary psychoanalytic theory as he brings it to bear not only on works of literature and film but also on such current political flashpoints as gay marriage and gay parenting. Throwing down the theoretical gauntlet, *No Future* reimagines queerness with a passion certain to spark an equally impassioned debate among its readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Queer theory, a fairly recent academic discipline, has been commonly used as an analytic tool to deconstruct literature, film and art, although writers such as Judith Butler and Michael Warner have also applied it to philosophy and sociology to subvert accepted concepts of the "normal." Edelman's slim volume takes this idea further than anyone else to date. Arguing that the traditional Western concept of politics is predicated on making the future a better place and that the accepted literal as well as symbolic image of the future is the child, he states that "queerness names the side of those not fighting for the children." Edelman argues that homosexuality's perceived social threat has to do with its separation from the act of reproduction, yet, he says, this non-reproductive capacity must be embraced as a social good. He illustrates his provocative stance by analyzing numerous cultural artifacts; Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (why do the birds keep attacking children?); *A Christmas Carol* (he favors Scrooge over Tiny Tim); the musical *Annie* (with its hit song "Tomorrow"); and by discussing the theories of post-modern writers such as Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Zizak, Jean Baudrillard and Barbara Johnson. While Edelman also focuses on recent events; the murder of Matthew Shepard, the bombing of abortion clinics, the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal; most of his book is densely written and theoretical. This is a notable contribution to post-modern theory, but Edelman's knotted, often muddled writing will limit his readership to hard-core academics and students of post-modern thought. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

âœThe book represents a rigorous attempt to think at once generatively and against tropes of generation, to work at once in irony and in earnest to demonstrate the political's material dependence on Symbolic homo-logy.â •Whether we decide to follow Edelman's example of rejecting the future or vehemently react against his polemic, *No Future* leaves no doubt that we cannot get around thinking critically about the uses and abuses of futurity.âœThe book represents a rigorous attempt to think at once generatively and against tropes of generation, to work at once in irony and in earnest to demonstrate the political's material dependence on Symbolic homo-logy.â • - Jana Funke, *thirdspace*;"One of the great virtues of Edelman's thesis is that it restores the distinction between queerness and homosexuality per se. Edelman goes some way to returning the uncanniness attached to queerness which has been dispelled by the very signifier 'gay' and the cosy, Kylie-loving, unthreatening cheeriness with which it has become associated." - K-Punk"This is a book, I confess, that I would love to have written. Angry, eloquent, precise, beautifully composed, funny, over the top, and very smart, the four chapters . . .

articulate a controversial and disturbingly persuasive figural and rhetorical diagnostic of a moment in U.S. political life." - Carla Freccero, GLQâ œEdelman has certainly articulated a new direction for queer theory, making *No Future* required reading both within the field and beyond.â • - Andrea Fontenot, *Modern Fiction Studies*â œThe book represents a rigorous attempt to think at once generatively and against tropes of generation, to work at once in irony and in earnest to demonstrate the politicalâ ™s material dependence on Symbolic homo-logy.â • - Carolyn Denver, *Victorian Studies*â œ*No Future* is a nuanced polemic, both ringingly clear in its aesthetic and theoretical explications and simply thrilling to read. I learn so much from the way Lee Edelman grounds a queer ethics and politics outside kinship and reproductive circuits, those spaces of assimilation that use the bribe of futurity to distract us from the ongoing work of social violence and death.â • "Lauren Berlant, author of *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*â œIn consistently brilliant theoretical discussions (for the most part, psychoanalytically inspired), as well as in strikingly original readings of Dickens, George Eliot, and Hitchcock, Lee Edelman argues that in a political culture dominated by the sentimental illusions and frequently murderous moral imperatives of â ^reproductive futurism,â ™ homosexuality has been assignedâ "and should deliberately and defiantly take onâ "the burden of a negativity at once embedded within and violently disavowed by that culture. The paradoxical dignity of queerness would be its refusal to believe in a redemptive future, its embrace of the unintelligibility, even the inhumanity inherent in sexuality. Edelmanâ ™s extraordinary text is so powerful that we could perhaps reproach him only for not spelling out the mode in which we might survive our necessary assent to his argument.â • "Leo Bersani, author of *The Culture of Redemption*, *Homos*, and, with Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio*â ™s *Secrets*â œ*No Future* is a highly imaginative, terrifically suggestive, and altogether powerful book. The question at its political heart is an arresting one, not least because it appears so counterintuitive: Must every political vision be a vision of the future? This is the first study I know that submits the rhetoric of futurity itself to close scrutiny. An intellectually thrilling book.â • "Diana Fuss, author of *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them*â œEdelman has certainly articulated a new direction for queer theory, making *No Future* required reading both within the field and beyond.â • (Andrea Fontenot *Modern Fiction Studies*)â œThe book represents a rigorous attempt to think at once generatively and against tropes of generation, to work at once in irony and in earnest to demonstrate the politicalâ ™s material dependence on Symbolic homo-logy.â • (Carolyn Denver *Victorian Studies*)â œThe book represents a rigorous attempt to think at once generatively and against tropes of generation, to work at once in irony and in earnest to demonstrate the politicalâ ™s material dependence on Symbolic

homo-logy. • Whether we decide to follow Edelman's example of rejecting the future or vehemently react against his polemic, *No Future* leaves no doubt that we cannot get around thinking critically about the uses and abuses of futurity. • The book represents a rigorous attempt to think at once generatively and against tropes of generation, to work at once in irony and in earnest to demonstrate the political's material dependence on Symbolic homo-logy. • (Jana Funke *thirdspace*) "One of the great virtues of Edelman's thesis is that it restores the distinction between queerness and homosexuality *per se*. Edelman goes some way to returning the uncanniness attached to queerness which has been dispelled by the very signifier 'gay' and the cosy, Kylie-loving, unthreatening cheeriness with which it has become associated." (K-Punk) "This is a book, I confess, that I would love to have written. Angry, eloquent, precise, beautifully composed, funny, over the top, and very smart, the four chapters . . . articulate a controversial and disturbingly persuasive figural and rhetorical diagnostic of a moment in U.S. political life." (Carla Freccero *GLQ*)

Awesome thoughts from a brilliant mind...but it gets a little repetitive. This really shakes the fabric of social structuring around the our precious constructions of the child.

This is a smart, funny, and challenging book. (It does require fluency in theory-speak, largely of the Lacan dialect. So Edelman is writing largely for academics of a certain ilk. Fair enough, but I wonder what these ideas would look like if they were written with a larger public in mind--it seems to me Edelman's challenge to the child-driven purity politics of the US will never reach those who operate most within its languages and symbols.) Edelman makes a compelling case for refusing the "futurity" built into the rhetoric not just of conservative politics but also much of liberal or progressive politics. He acknowledges that in calling for this refusal, he is proposing an "impossible politics," a politics that will sidestep the trap by which one or another group (queers or an equivalent population deemed deviant) has to be sold down the river in order to rally everyone else around future improvement and greater inclusion. This is also an "impossible politics" because it won't suppress the death drive that structures every identity or political vision (this is the Lacanian part of the argument). But once you stipulate that any and every kind of politics (except Edelman's impossible politics) is built on suppressing the death drive, you have painted yourself into a corner--an impossible politics, indeed. Once Edelman has shifted the site of politics to the deep structure of the human psyche in this way, it's hard to see how one could think or act in any purposeful way that might count as political. There is only the act of refusing, but no hope or even historical possibility for imagining social and power arrangements that operate otherwise. In the meantime, political

change will happen, for better or worse, and those who refuse have just taken themselves out of the game, and also limited their ability to even diagnose the change that happens. What is missing is any speculation from Edelman about what his politics of refusal would amount to, how it might play out in the world to affirm rather than suppress or deny the death drive. Other theorists have taken up the challenge of thinking about how we might act or at least think politically once we give up the idea of a self-directing political actor and a self-governing political society. But Edelman seems content to plant himself at the paradox of an "impossible politics" and expose the delusions and ill will that suddenly come into view from that standpoint. The book is brave and often brilliant, but I find I want to refuse the impossibility of this picture of impossible politics.

It might seem harsh to say that the problem with Lee Edelman's account of queer theory is that there's no future in it, but according to its own logic this would be highest praise. Edelman's title says it literally and succinctly: "No Future." And as the back-cover publisher's blurb tells it, queer theory is also "a fairly recent academic discipline." If I read this statement correctly, it means that in addition to having "no future," queer theory also has "no past." Leo Bersani, himself a distinguished academic with a past, a present and a future, writes in his blurb: "The paradoxical dignity of queerness would be its refusal to believe in a redemptive future, its embrace of the unintelligibility, even the inhumanity inherent in sexuality." It is true that the ancient Gnostics renounced sexuality as a way to subvert the demiurge ("an artisan-like figure responsible for the fashioning and maintenance of the physical universe") and to guarantee themselves: No Future. Might their "demiurge" equate to the neoliberal proponents of heteronormative pronatalism--child-lovers--so compellingly denounced by Edelman? Fortunately, however, I believe there is at least one kind of future for the most excellent queer theorists, or at least for the radically subversive, pro-unintelligibility (-ist?) Lee Edelman: a tenured position in Gnostic academe.

fascinating

Author is widely respected though his argument fails to impress. It feels heavily married to Lacanian structures of thought, which have been taken up by an array of authors. He puts significant work into defining "the Child" as a Symbolic projection, yet his strongest cultural examples talk about actual children (not just the idea of the Child). Overall, his argument is a great example of highlighting the limits of Lacanian logic. Beyond that stylistic inquiry, we're left with an unsubstantial exploration of "straight time" vs "queer time" and a polemic reading of American politics.

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