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edited by Thomas Keith

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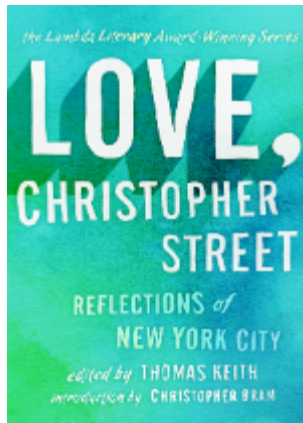
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Love, Christopher Street: Reflections of New York City **edited by Thomas Keith**

Posted on 11 July 2012 by Rachel Wexelbaum



[Love, Christopher Street: Reflections of New York City](#)

Edited by Thomas Keith; Introduction by Christopher Bram

Vantage Point Press

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Since the nineteenth century, New York City has provided inspiration, sanctuary, and community for millions of LGBTQA Americans and immigrants in pursuit of dreams. Some came to visit, in search of culture, enlightenment, or love. Some came to make their mark as artists, writers, dancers, and actors. Others came to escape persecution in their home countries, and to start new lives as free people. They built gay neighborhoods in the Chelsea District and Park Slope, sometimes claiming entire apartment buildings or housing blocks in the name of the rainbow flag. Others live in straight neighborhoods, without apology, and blend into the fabric of life. As same-sex marriage is now legal in New York, and the Big Apple continues to see population increases, the LGBTQA community of New York City will continue to grow.

Due to the great diversities of LGBTQA communities and experiences in New York City, it is difficult to capture the personal stories of every LGBTQA New Yorker in one volume. Even ten volumes would not do them justice. For this reason, *Love, Christopher Street: Reflections of New York City* editor Thomas Keith had a Herculean task ahead of him. In the preface, editor Keith admitted that he “declined, politely” at first when asked by Vantage Point Editorial Director Joseph Pittman to edit *Love, Christopher Street*. “Too little money. Too much time. All those diplomatic refusals from talented writers,” Keith sniffed. The editor of the fourth anthology in a series that includes *Love, Bourbon Street* (2007 Lambda Literary Award Winner), *Love, Castro Street* (edited by heavyweight champions Katherine V. Forrest and Jim Van Buskirk), and *Love, West Hollywood* (2010 Lambda Literary Award finalist), *Love, Christopher Street* had tough acts to follow.

Keith, a non-native New Yorker, famous for his edited works on Tennessee Williams and Robert Burns, did not seem a likely candidate to build an anthology of New York stories. But this reviewer, born and raised in New York, enjoyed every story that Keith put on the table. This is a testament to the talents of each contributor, as well as Keith ensuring that, if nothing else, at least all five boroughs of New York City would have representation. The twenty-eight contributors represent LGBTQA New Yorkers of various ethnicities, classes, and generations. Roughly half of the contributors are women. And while Keith was doubtful about his ability to attract well-known writers to contribute, he did not do too badly; the collection includes pieces by Val McDermid, Jewelle Gomez, Aaron Hamburger, Felice Pelicano, Thomas Glave, Charles Rice-Gonzalez, Christopher Bram, and Michael Musto, among others.

Forty years of LGBTQA history in New York are captured in these stories, for it is impossible to talk about LGBTQA New York without talking about cruising, gay bars, Greenwich Village, Stonewall, AIDS, 9/11, and marriage. It is impossible to talk about New York City in general without capturing the music of subway travel, good food, ethnic neighborhoods, the art scene, culture, literature, and nightlife. Keith has managed to compile stories that capture all of that and more. While this anthology should not replace a tourist guide, it seems that all twenty-eight contributors present their New York in a positive light, attributing some element of Big Apple fairy dust—be it the general environment, a person, a specific place, or a specific opportunity—to their success.

As Frank Sinatra once sang about New York, “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere.” The first two stories of *Love, Christopher Street* reflect that credo through two vastly different experiences. In “Silence=Death: The Education of a Comedian”, Bob Smith records his career as stand-up comedian in New York City, and how he succeeded as an out gay stand-up comedian in the cutthroat mainstream comedy circuit. At the height of his career Smith acquired Lou Gehrig’s Disease (ALS), which affected his speech and forced him into retirement, but did not affect his sharp wit and ability to write. Since developing ALS, he has written three award-winning novels and is still going strong. In “An Old Queen’s Tale” by straight New York performance artist, actress, and playwright Penny Arcade, Arcade tells her story of initiation into the gay bar scene in Hartford and Provincetown. In P-Town she meets the fiercest drag performers from New York, who tell her that she should go there because “she was a natural”. She moved to New York at seventeen, roaming from hotel room to art gallery, living off the kindness of drag queens and the gay community as she sought to find her footing in the New York performance art scene. Without the informal support of the gay community, and its strong communication network before the days of Facebook and Smartphones, Arcade would not have made it. She admits that today’s New York is a different world—very few gay New Yorkers would take in a homeless teen today, as she witnessed firsthand, conversing with a gang of homeless lesbian youths of color she met outside the new gay and lesbian center.

New York City is a living organism. It grows and changes shape through migration, class warfare, and changing definitions of family and community. It is best to read *Love, Christopher Street* like one would listen to oral histories or study photo albums; to interpret these stories as snapshots in time, as pieces of the eight million piece jigsaw puzzle known as New York City, rather than a sweeping overview. The book begs for a sequel...perhaps “Love, Park Slope” or

“Love, Queens”...to acknowledge the new queer meccas of New York City, and to capture even more true New York stories.