



## Before Stonewall

**Edward M. Cohen**

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The short stories of Edward M. Cohen's collection gather electric, humane scenes from New York City's mid century gay community.

An aspiring playwright basks in the warmth of near success; it's a moment he'll always remember, even after its promise evades him. A young actor accepts a night job grifting for a furrier, watching as his boss pantomimes the sexual expressions he avoids. A morning quarrel over insecurities devolves into thrown fists, while snippets from McCarthy's hunts play in the background.

In these and other tales, and from childhood into old age, gay men are forced to conceal their truths. They publicly act in the ways that others demand; in private, they struggle to shake those shells. Men who have, for their whole lives, skirted open conversations with their families watch as their parents fade and pass; they deal with guilt over halted gestures, and conceal their pain at having not been seen or accepted. Some men choose art over professional artifice, but are still pushed toward confining, stultifying social roles. Time passes; changes come, but true freedom lies out of reach. Some men flail. Some fade. Some wear their costumes well.

While many of its characters face similar circumstances, this is a subtle and diverse collection. It's set in the neighborhoods and subcultures of New York City, where young artists have to hustle, where appearances must be kept up, and where the police and other officials, across the decades, lie in wait to expose, and punish, men for their deviations from reigning norms.

Cohen's images are acute, and his insights on people's behaviors—their cruelties, their yearning, their play acting—are sharp. *Before Stonewall* is a precise, evocative short story collection that centers the lives of queer men who were otherwise relegated to the shadows.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May / June 2021)

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