

Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement

David K. Johnson

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David K. Johnson's *Buying Gay* is a compelling retrospective of physique magazines, which provided gay men with an outlet in the 1950s and 1960s.

The “Physique Era” encompasses the rise and fall of physique magazines from 1951 to 1967. Magazines like *Physique Pictorial* and *Tomorrow's Man*, which were ostensibly about bodybuilding and were widely distributed on newsstands, were designed primarily to appeal to homosexual men. They turned out to be vanguards of a movement that legitimized the freedom of sexual expression.

Through a finely tuned narrative, Johnson traces the arc of physique magazines, offering an inside look at the stories and personalities of the courageous publishers of gay magazines and books. He also documents legal scuffles with the US Postal Service that eventually led to an obscenity case brought before the Supreme Court by a publisher of gay magazines.

While they were repellent to some of the justices, the magazines were ruled as not “patently offensive” and therefore protected under the First Amendment. The author calls this a “pivotal gay rights case.” Still, physique magazines declined soon after. The Supreme Court case and a subsequent federal district court case dramatically changed the marketplace and “opened up not only full-frontal male nudity but also open homoeroticism.”

This carefully documented and extensively footnoted work includes numerous black-and-white photographs. Content is presented in a factual manner, and Johnson tells the story with an appropriate amount of drama without sensationalizing anything.

It is clear from Johnson's excellent study that physique magazines had more than historical significance; they were central to gay culture in the 1960s, representing a way for gay men to celebrate their own sexuality and find commonality with others. As Johnson writes, “Beyond the images and the merchandise, what the publishers were really providing their customers was contact, both real and imagined, with other customers.”

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (May/June 2019)

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