



★ **Dear Queer Self: An Experiment in Memoir**

**Jonathan Alexander**

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In *Dear Queer Self*, Jonathan Alexander zeroes in on the turbulent years of his early adulthood, during which he came to terms with his sexuality, recreating them with the help of hindsight. Adapting a creative approach and “inhabiting the space between the real and the imagined,” his radiant memoir takes the form of wry, concise letters to his younger self, illuminating the queer scene of the 1980s and 1990s.

Alexander grew up shy in the American South. He was aware that his Uncle Glen was gay and perhaps died of AIDS, and he sought to distance himself from this—even dredging up a false memory of sexual abuse under the care of a counselor. During his college years, he dated men and women. A literature scholar focusing on poets, including Wilfred Owen and Walt Whitman, he married a woman in 1993, but continued to fantasize about men. After he came out as bisexual, he divorced; he had his first long-term gay relationships.

The narration is a triumph, establishing instant intimacy. Alexander serves as simultaneous director, guide, and archivist. He describes his drunken escapades and masturbatory habits in raw detail. There is a laser focus on a compact span of time—evoked by the pop songs that give each of the short chapters their titles—and scenes set in gay bars and university classrooms are cinematic and rich.

The retrospective point of view emphasizes the interplay of then and now: “Future you will blush at the pretentiousness” of a lecture that Alexander gives, for instance. Here, coming out is the start of a new life, representing a complete change in one’s perception by others. From passing as straight to attending Pride parades and championing queer studies on his campus, the book commemorates this total identity shift.

*Dear Queer Self* is an intense, daring coming-of-age—and coming out—memoir.

REBECCA FOSTER (March / April 2022)

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