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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Folsom Street Blues: A Memoir of 1970s SoMa and Leatherfolk in Gay San Francisco

Jim Stewart
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In 1976, San Francisco's South of Market (SoMa) neighborhood was a hub for gay men who were into leather, public sex, head shaving, boot licking, and bondage. It was also home to Jim Stewart, a man at the intersection of the hypermasculine ideals of late-twentieth-century America and the aesthetics of Euro-classical manliness. It was a time when the raw, industrial, working-class spirit fused with a deep appreciation for beauty and passion.

By trade, Stewart was a carpenter responsible for the construction of numerous bar interiors and bondage accoutrements, and an erotic-art photographer. In *Folsom Street Blues*, Stewart builds *and* celebrates the world he inhabited.

An enjoyable journey through the author's adventures in San Francisco, reading this book is like sifting through shoe boxes filled with prints and negatives of beautiful and strange things. Stewart comes across as charismatic and self-assured. From the photographer who took boudoir pictures with light creeping in through filthy, second-floor windows, to the reminiscing professional librarian who emerges in the book's epilogue, Stewart's story is one of "art lived."

The book takes its title from the street known for its gay bars (particularly serving the leather community). It is augmented by the inclusion of several of Stewart's poems. His poetry, which offers considerable self-reflection, could replace the narrative passages describing the events to which they refer. These and the reproduction of many black-and-white photographs and advertisements from Stewart's late-1970's gallery showings make *Folsom Street Blues* a valuable record of the freedoms that were so much more attainable in the years before "GRID" (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) and the anti-gay fear that accompanied the outbreak of AIDS. Like the scenes of bondage and pain-play that are sprinkled throughout Stewart's story, both his art and his younger life played at the edges of acceptability, reality, and expectation.

It is important for memoirs like Stewart's to be saved and shared. Although punctuated with well-known names and historical moments in the SoMa community's history, *Folsom Street Blues* ultimately tells of the transformation from pre-Stonewall life to the strong, self-defined identities of the gay community that emerged through unabashed, joyful sexual liberation. The only thing to be blue about is the feeling we can never go back.
PATTY COMEAU (September 15, 2011)

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