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I Came Out For This? A Novel

Lisa Gitlin
Bywater Books (July 2010)
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Lisa Gitlin's story of first love has all the passion, drama, and roller-coaster ups and downs that most writings on the topic have, but with a difference—Gitlin's heroine, Joanna Kane, is a Jewish lesbian writer who in her own words, was "too stupid to come out" until the age of forty-five. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio (which she calls a "pit stop on the lake"), Joanna worked out her teen frustrations by setting fires to dumpsters until her threat to torch a gas station resulted in a stint in the "loony bin." After graduating from college, Joanna moved to New York City to write and then, due to a "mini-nervous breakdown" that she refused to admit she was having, back to Cleveland. Thoroughly sick of life there, her obsessive (and unrequited) love for a woman led her to move to Washington, DC.

"Do you know what it's like to come out in your forties, having menopausal symptoms, for God's sake, and then fall madly in love with someone? All of a sudden you're in adolescence for the first time. You don't even recognize yourself," says Joanna of her love for Terri Rubin.

Gitlin's tale is a lively romp through DC's gay culture; written as though it were the protagonist's journal, and sounding very much like a teen girl's diary, brimming with the angst of first love. But Joanna is no longer a teen, and following her exploits can be a mind-bending experience as one must remind oneself that these are the words, acts, and obsessions of a forty-five-year-old woman.

For lesbians of Joanna Kane's generation, first love often came later in life. With no real-life role models, little or no access to gay and lesbian literature, and no one in whom to confide or to ask the necessary questions, young lesbians would sometimes experiment with heterosexual relationships. When those relationships proved unsatisfactory, these women began to doubt themselves until the true nature of their dissatisfaction was discovered. Fortunately, Gitlin's feisty protagonist has support in the gay community and its diverse characters: the drag queens and druggies who inhabit the underbelly of the city, as well as the scientists, social workers, teachers, and psychologists who reflect American gay culture and life.

Lisa Gitlin, whose story is much like that of Joanna Kane, graduated from the New School for General Studies in New York City, and is a freelance writer. This, her first novel, demonstrates that Gitlin is a writer to contend with—both plot and character development are detailed and convincing, and even though the protagonist's circular logic might serve to drive a roommate or best friend mad, Gitlin's pacing is such that she holds the reader's interest in confident hands.

KRISTINE MORRIS (November 19, 2010)

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