

Indecent Advances: A Hidden History of True Crime and Prejudice before Stonewall

James Polchin

Counterpoint (Jun 4, 2019)

Hardcover \$26.00 (256pp)

978-1-64009-189-4

James Polchin's *Indecent Advances* extracts more than its title from true-crime press clippings dating back to the 1920s, examining both what appeared in print and what was sanitized or excluded. "Indecent advances" was just one euphemism employed by newspapers to serve dual purposes: alluding to homosexuality while blaming queer victims for their fates, up to and including death.

This self-described "hidden history of true crime and prejudice" cites hundreds of sources, and Polchin's investigation of queer culture is introduced with a journal entry from Tennessee Williams about being struck by another man. Williams's suppression of specifics from his diary, attributed to self-inflicted shame and guilt, exemplifies the formidable task of recreating history by sifting through the intentionally incomplete remains of an underground culture.

Although excerpts from sources as stylistically disparate as tabloids, texts, novels, and the *Physicians' Desk Reference* curb the fluidity of the prose, they enrich the scope of the book's analysis to an extent otherwise impossible. Tracing the journey of viciously persecuted people necessitates traveling treacherous, unmapped roads where the final picture is more of a mosaic in progress than a complete work of art.

Stories are picked up along the way to fit with chapter outlines. They include long-forgotten murder victims like the "scion of a wealthy New England family," a rabbi, and a teen navy apprentice, but also more looming stories, like the Newport investigation into navy personnel and psychiatrist Edward Kempf's development of the "gay panic" defense. Whether large or small, many of these stories function like mirrors, reflecting light onto one another or reflecting nearly identical images from today.

James Polchin's *Indecent Advances* inspires further exploration into the hidden histories of marginalized populations and how the violence they suffer might be the result of a system that excludes some people from its protections, exiling them to places where they are made more vulnerable.

LINDA THORLAKSON (May/June 2019)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.