

Memories of a Gay Catholic Boyhood: Coming of Age in the Sixties

John D'Emilio

Duke University Press (Sep 9, 2022)

Hardcover \$29.95 (248pp)

978-1-4780-1592-5

Memories of a Gay Catholic Boyhood traces the growing promise of New York's LGBTQ+ community.

Organized into a three-act structure, the book moves from John D'Emilio's boyhood to his Jesuit education, his experiences of change, and his evolving perception of God. From an Italian family, he applied to be a Jesuit, learning Latin and Greek before attending Columbia University. The school's progressive politics and protests against the Vietnam War and religion challenged D'Emilio's core beliefs, though. Later, on a trip to Europe, he finally embraced his true identity as a gay man.

Characterized first by its nostalgia for a bygone version of New York City, featuring chocolate cream sodas at drug store counters, D'Emilio's book captures an idyllic childhood amid a big family whose members were spread across the Bronx. D'Emilio went to Mass and confession every week. But beyond this early sense of comfort, there's unease: D'Emilio's growing awareness that he was gay led to youthful indiscretions, like rubbing legs with others on the subway. In college, he lived with boyfriends before finally coming out.

D'Emilio is deft in exploring New York City's LGBTQ+ history, too. The city was one of the US's great epicenters for gay communities. Greenwich Village in the mid-1960s had hidden gay bars and underground bookstores. But sexual encounters in the city's bushes and parks were still fraught and furtive, and D'Emilio writes that he struggled to reconcile his faith, which forbids LGBTQ+ love, with his identity.

Memories of a Gay Catholic Boyhood concerns how an Italian boy abandoned thoughts of the priesthood to embrace his true identity.

JEREMIAH ROOD (September / October 2022)

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