

Martin Meeker, **Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s**, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 321 [+xviii] pp, \$25 (paperback).

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This book investigates “how changing networks of communication helped to bring that social group [gay communities] into being, how the narratives of a communications shift is tantamount to the history of a homosexual identity forming into a collective sense of itself.” [p 9] While a good deal of the postwar emergence of homophile organizations is rehearsed in this book, its central interest and contribution to gay and lesbian studies is in recapturing the historical moment when often isolated individuals began to find each other and connect together into the far-flung networks that gave rise to the LGBT communities of today. In doing this, it treats a core issue that has occupied so much scholarship: how homosexual feeling and bonding become organized into the social formation recognizable as the lesbian and gay worlds of advanced, industrial societies. It offers careful, primary research challenging the cultural studies orthodoxy, that would have LGBT people marching directly from the pages of medical textbooks, by restoring the agency of the many men and women who sought to find others like themselves in an era characterized by silence and repression. A major strength of the book is placing onto the public record, the letters that flowed into Mattachine and the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s from small-town America—and indeed from Canada, the Philippines, and even Gujarat—that speak movingly of the desire and aspiration for a community that, as yet, scarcely existed. It examines some of the breakthrough moments, most notably the 1964 *Life* magazine article, “Homosexuality in America,” that arrived like a lightning bolt in middle America, presented the existence of gay-affirmative places, and generated thousands of letters and migrants who seized on a potential they had only hoped for and imagined up until that point. Meeker sorts through a series of intriguing data sources that show how lesbians and gay men began to find each other, signal their existence, and develop ties. Among the most notable are the early book and pen pal clubs, the first gay guides that sought to map a vast undiscovered archipelago of gay places, and the journals from Mattachine Review and the Ladder to Amazon Quarterly, that found and drew together people who wanted to affirm and defend their same-sex relations. Gay and lesbian organizations were, at that time, small, struggling, and low profile as they combated the climate of fear and repression that characterized the period. Few people even knew of their existence, especially outside of San Francisco where this study is based. Homophile groups sometimes courted or handled various gatekeepers, such as journalists, psychologists, and clergymen, in the hope that silence and fear could be overcome, and this book documents a series of moments, especially in the 1960s, when magazines and books alerted the masses of their existence, even if they were typically framed as exposés.

The book, overall, presents a portrait of the 1950s and 1960s where individuals actively seek out their fellows, and thereby build the gay and lesbian institutions that usher in the gay and lesbian world we know today. Homophile leaders are canny and strategic, cultivating journalists and novelists who can communicate to the larger world. In other words, *Contacts Desired* distinguishes itself from several alternative depictions of the postwar period. Oppression and terror fade into background context; the emphasis is not on lesbians and gay men as victims of larger forces but as creators of their own destiny.

The post-Stonewall view of the homophiles as timid and assimilationist is largely disavowed, and the claim that gay identities result from western semiotics inherited from church and medicine receives little support here.

In an epilogue, the author wonders if today “the persistence of desiring, of seeking, of reaching out beyond the family or community into which one was born in hopes of finding sexual pleasure, companionship, and maybe even a new home may then actually spell the end of a gay male or lesbian or homosexual identity.” [p 258] Well maybe, but there is an alternate question too: why has LGBT scholarship been so intent on proclaiming the end or deconstruction of gay and lesbian identities for at least two decades at the same time as these identities and communities continue to grow and proliferate around the world and show few signs of abating? The sequel to *Contacts Desired* will be to see how the internet galvanizes new realms of isolated individuals into networks in more societies around the world. Out of these communication networks arise shared discourses—in other words, cultures, communities, and identities—that are likely to be less an “end” than a multiplication and cultivation of sexual identities.