

books

The First Stone

Just in time for the 37th anniversary, a riveting read brings us closer to *The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*

by Gary Morris

One hot night in June 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village, the police arrived for their usual beat-up, harass and arrest routine on what they assumed would be compliant queers. It wasn't like the homos weren't used to this treatment—if it wasn't the police (who'd just been there doing the same thing a few days earlier), it was the Mafia (which owned the bar) extorting and even blackmailing the clientele. A far cry from the party-down gay bar scene that emerged in the 1970s.

But this night would be different. The police attacked a bull dyke, bloodying her head. As she was dragged out of the bar to the paddy wagon, she wailed to her queer brothers, "Why won't you help me?" This galvanized the crowd of street hustlers, homeless youth, drag queens and other patrons and onlookers, who turned on the cops. These "weak faggots" began throwing bricks, overturning police cars, setting fires, smashing windows and trapping their frightened tormentors in the bar. The riots continued off and on for six days, but the result was a sea change. Queers would no longer be silent victims. Gay rights groups sprung up everywhere, and bashers now had to think twice.

David Carter's *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked*

the Gay Revolution (St. Martin's Griffin, 2005; \$14.95 softcover) brilliantly explores what led up to the riots, the riots themselves and their aftermath. The author interviewed hundreds of eyewitnesses and commentators from that era and trawled through scores of original documents (some unsealed for the first time) for this riveting read. In the process he brings us closer to what occurred, and why, and clarifies some of the confusion around an event that's become such an important myth for gay people that some of the reality has been lost or obscured.

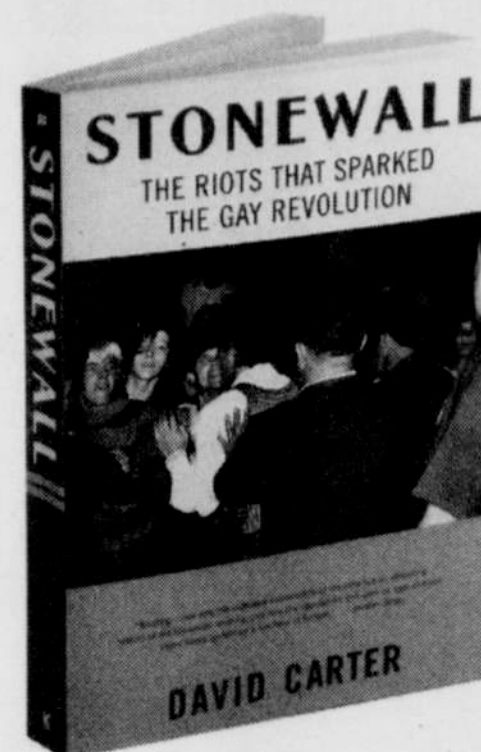
Carter shows the event as a unique confluence of factors, including the activist mentality of the time, a stepped-up harassment campaign against queers during an election year, Greenwich Village's status as a unique queer ghetto, the one-way streets that permitted easy pedestrian travel but limited police car access, Stonewall's varied clientele that included tough street queens who had nothing to lose by fighting back, even a nearby construction site that provided plenty of bricks for throwing.

The centerpiece of the book is a breathless, minute-by-minute account of the riot through a prism of eyewitness viewpoints, including those of cops, reporters, street queens and previously apolitical queers who'd had enough. Carter anchors the

story in its major players, from Police Chief Seymour Pine to homophobic reporters from *The Village Voice* to street queens like Jackie Hormona and "Congo Woman" to incredible characters like Ed Murphy, a bald, hulking criminal faggot who used the Stonewall Inn as an office for blackmailing gay Wall Street types as well as J. Edgar Hoover. (Murphy, like many others of equal dubiousness, would claim a major role as an activist in the event.)

Carter highlights the queens' extraordinary arsenal that helped them to victory—not only the fists and bricks but their camp onslaught as they spontaneously formed long kick lines, chanting camp ditties while dancing ever closer to the heavily armed but terrified cops. How do you handle an attack fueled by camp?

The book is also useful in laying to rest some of Stonewall's urban legends, including the notion that it was mostly a drag queen riot (though small in number, the trannies were apparently some of the most fearless fighters) and that it was triggered by grief about Judy Garland's death. Typical of the



book's excellent research, Carter traces several sources of the Garland rumor to show not only that it wasn't true but that its purpose was to trivialize and minimize the most important event in the history of queer rights.

Allen Ginsberg summarized it well when he saw the riots: "The guys there were so beautiful—they've lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago." 10

Holocene presents its second annual STONEWALL benefit 7 p.m. June 28 at 1001 S.E. Morrison St. Performers include MC Regina, Splendor of Sissyboy, comedic troupe Portlandian Theatrical Society, CJ & the Dawls and Danny & the Damage Done (formerly Caught in Candy), Nicky Click, Do N Dudes and DJs L-Train, Sew What and Copy. Special guests include Darcelle XV, Joshua "Sasha" Ryan, Juan Martinez and Byron Beck. Cover is \$5-\$1,000 sliding scale. Proceeds benefit Q Center.

GARY MORRIS edits and publishes Bright Lights Film Journal, located online at www.brightlightsfilm.com.

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