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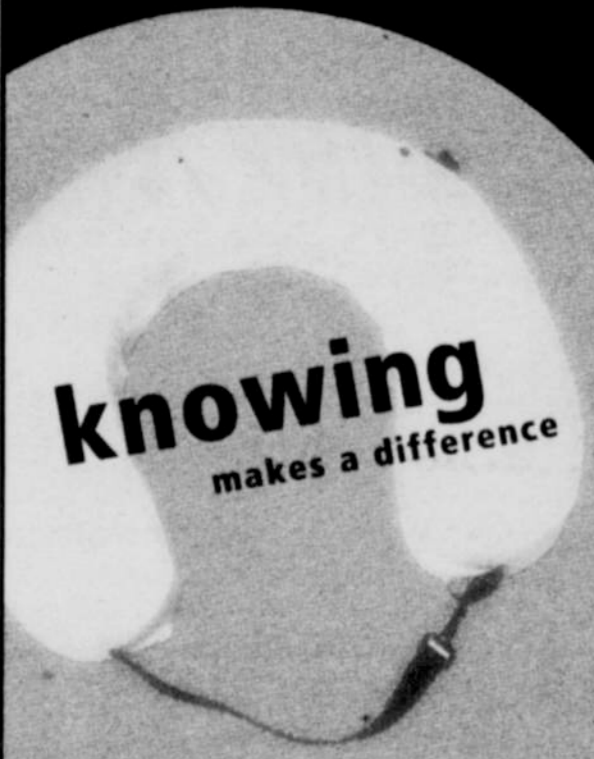
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books

**Don't Know Much
About History?**

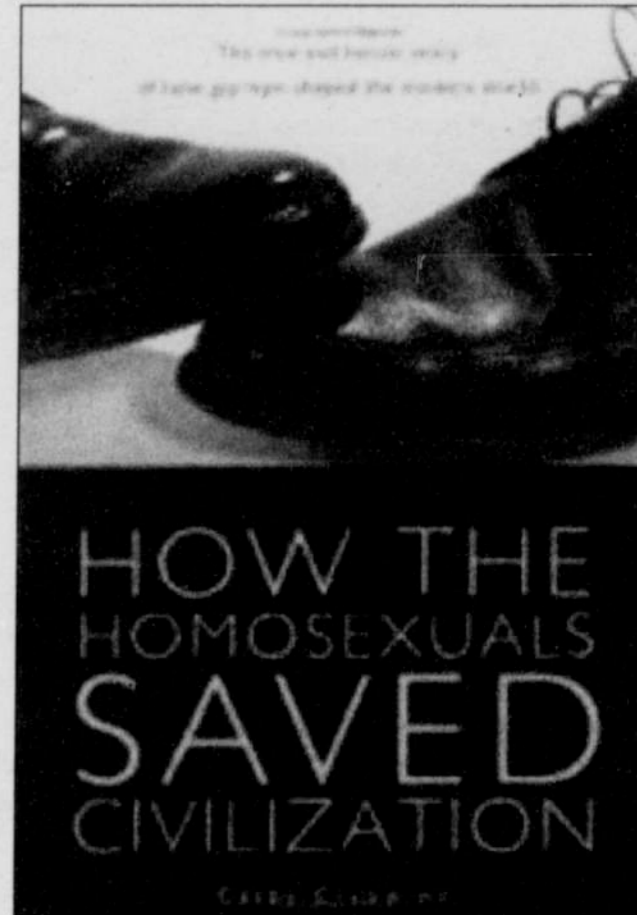
Let's give credit where credit is due
by Gary Morris

History, according to legendary punk group Gang of Four, is "not made by great men" but by the unwashed masses, with plenty of help from various marginalized groups. Jews, blacks and, of course, fags 'n' dykes have been seen as major contributors in this regard, thoughtfully improving an uptight culture sorely in need of it. Wasn't that nice of us, given the kind of welcome we (along with our black and Jewish comrades) have historically received from the Big Mad Mutha culture?

Several recent books work this territory with varying degrees of success, claiming that everything from vibrant seaports to fun fashion to haute cuisine has been pioneered and perfected by us homos.

The breeziest read of the bunch is *How the Homosexuals Saved Civilization* (Tarcher, 2005; \$14.95 softcover). Cathy Crimmins, who made a splash a few years ago with her witty *Newt Gingrich's Bedtime Stories for Orphans*, is a self-described "unrepentant fag hag" who's never met a queen she didn't adore and admire—and defer to in all matters of style and taste. Crimmins makes the case for queer overachievement in every corner of modern life. That would include flower arrangements (straights' versions are boring), language (we popularized terms like "closet," "out" and "girlfriend"), fashion (of course), cooking, martinis and Manhattans, gentrification of dying neighborhoods and even bingo, which the author says we rescued from the dull-minded heteros in places like Seattle, where Gay Bingo Night lures scads of straights with skating drag queens and "tasteless jokes."

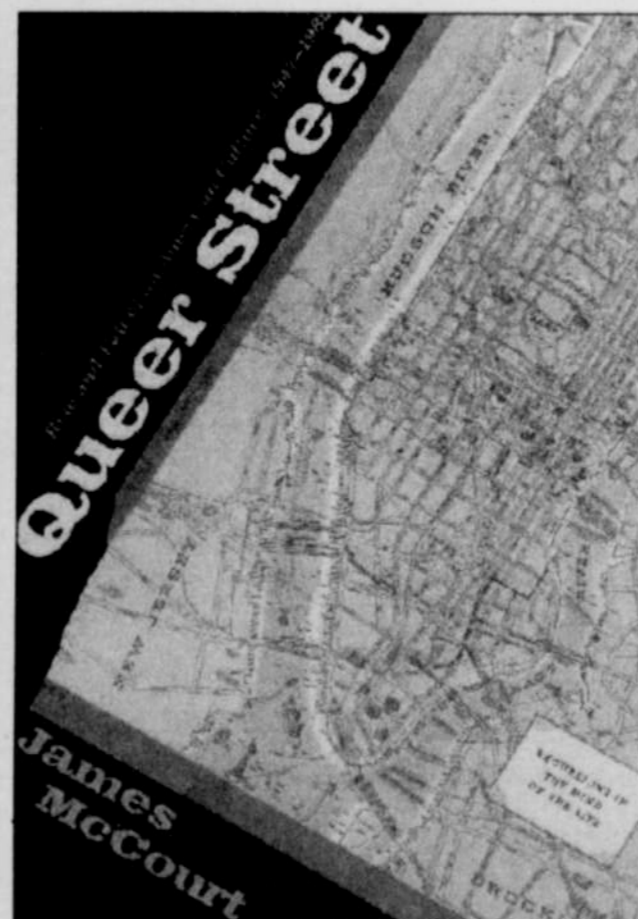
Crimmins is a persuasive writer, clever enough to obscure how much this book is fueled by stereotyping and shallowness. Is every queen really a brilliant stylist, happily spending all his time transforming "clueless" straights? You'd think so from reading this book. Crimmins pooh-poohs Barney Frank's complaint about *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* as "damaging" by portraying gay men as superficial,



caring only about "decorating and style." Frank's objection is certainly worth examining instead of flipping off, as she does.

I realize this is supposed to be a witty tribute to a certain kind of style queen, but Crimmins seems to lump us all into the "fabulous" stewpot. She's so enthusiastic in her viewpoint that she makes dubious claims. Something like language is much more fluid than she imagines, and our influence is arguably less than she thinks. Are straight people really embracing terms like "butch/femme"? ("Butch," yes, but "butch/femme"?) And to say that queers popularized "girlfriend," "diss/dish" and "bitchslap" is to ignore their origins—and widespread use—in the black community. More realistically, we borrowed those terms. And did we really resurrect the martini, or was that driven by a retro-hipster culture that's surely as much straight as queer?

Crimmins' idea that gay men (and this book is only about gay men, not lesbians) are sexual pioneers ignores the role of 1960s counterculture, where phenomena like the clusterfuck, and indeed the whole idea of sexual liberation, originated. A more supportable view might be that we've contributed to the culture, in collaboration with other marginalized groups from blacks to Jews to hippies, out of proportion to our numbers. As a light read, *How the Homosexuals Saved Civilization* has its interest, but anyone looking for real insight might find the rampant clichés irritating.



More ambitious in its scope but less appealing is James McCourt's *Queer Street* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005; \$17.95 softcover), which seems to have two subtitles: *The Rise and Fall of an American Culture, 1947-1985* and *Excursions in the Mind of the Life*, whatever that means. McCourt is a novelist, and it shows.

Queer Street seduces at first glance as a particularly meaty history (577 pages) of a particular time and place for our culture; instead, it's a hodgepodge of literary riffs, as much about movies and books