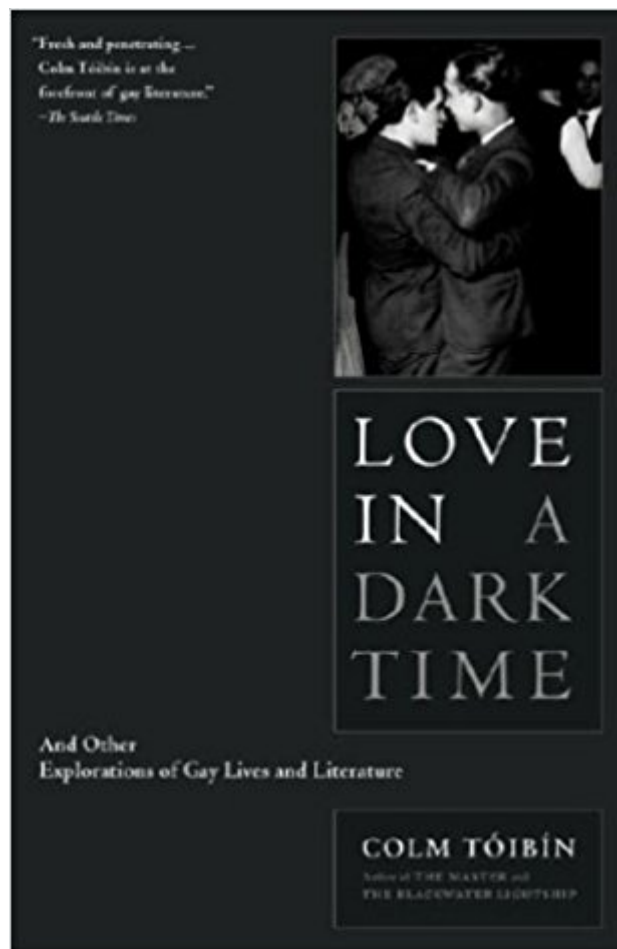




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Love In A Dark Time: And Other Explorations Of Gay Lives And Literature



Synopsis

Colm Tóibín knows the languages of the outsider, the secret keeper, the gay man or woman. He knows the covert and overt language of homosexuality in literature. In *Love in a Dark Time*, he also describes the solace of finding like-minded companions through reading. Tóibín examines the life and work of some of the greatest and most influential writers of the past two centuries, figures whose homosexuality remained hidden or oblique for much of their lives, either by choice or necessity. The larger world couldn't know about their sexuality, but in their private lives, and in the spirit of their work, the laws of desire defined their expression. This is an intimate encounter with Mann, Baldwin, Bishop, and with the contemporary poets Thom Gunn and Mark Doty. Through their work, Tóibín is able to come to terms with his own inner desires -- his interest in secret erotic energy, his admiration for courageous figures, and his abiding fascination with sadness and tragedy. Tóibín looks both at writers forced to disguise their true experience on the page and at readers who find solace and sexual identity by reading between the lines.

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Customer Reviews

Departing from recent novels *The Blackwater Lightship* and *The Story of the Night* and nonfiction such as his *Bad Blood: A Walk Along the Irish Border*, Dublin-based writer Toibin offers nine case studies in as many chapters of how "gay life" has informed our readings of writers, artists and filmmakers like Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, Elizabeth Bishop, James Baldwin, Pedro Almodovar

and Mark Doty. The chapter "Goodbye to Catholic Ireland" wonders if Cathal Ó Seachúigh is the first gay poet in the Irish language, and speaks against the Church's continued hold on the Irish life of the mind. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A noted Irish novelist and critic discovers the comforts of gay literature. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This is my first nonfiction read by Toibin. I've read three of his novels and think he gets better with each one. *THE BLACKWATER LIGHTSHIP* was an altogether fine book and deserved the Booker Prize I think. So I couldn't wait to start this one. I confess that I'm not sure what is going on here. In the introduction Mr. Toibin presents some of his favorite artists. He says that he writes about "gay figures for whom, in the main, being gay seemed to come second in their public lives" writers who write in code, whose works are not published during their lifetime, who use vague pronouns in their poetry. (Certainly I wouldn't have wanted to miss a novel like "DEATH IN VENICE," for instance.) Toibin goes on further to say that writing this book helped him come to terms with his "own interest in secret, erotic energy," his interest in both Catholicism and Irish Protestants, his admiration for "figures who lived in a dark time and were not afraid," and his fascination with sadness and tragedy. Herein lies Mr. Toibin's problem. He takes on too much in too little space. Additionally his treatment of these artists he admires is wildly uneven, both in depth and space. For example, the chapter on Oscar Wilde covers almost 50 pages; the chapter on Mark Doty-- one of my favorite writers-- covers only 7. And for the life of me I'm not sure what Mr. Toibin is trying to say in the concluding chapter entitled "Good-bye to Catholic Ireland," a chapter I read twice. Like many Catholics who attempt to say what is wrong with their church, Mr. Toibin is too "tentative," a word he uses elsewhere in this book, in his taking on the church. Certainly he is not alone in his dilemma, however. It's easy for me to make that criticism, never having walked in a Catholic altar boy's shoes either. In Toibin's chapter on Elizabeth Bishop, we are told that "like all orphans, Bishop was clever at making friends and inventing a family for herself." I suspect that that statement is true for many people but for "all orphans"? I'm not sure that that is a true statement. There is a lot to like about this book, however. Mr. Toibin is never dull and is best when doing a narrative, something we would expect from a fine novelist. For example, when he describes a party that both he and Almodovar attended in Madrid, I wanted to be there. When I finished this book, I wanted to reread James Baldwin and read for the first time both Elizabeth Bishop and Thom Gunn. Toibin is also good at giving us delicious trivia

about people. For example, we learn that Francis Bacon slept with a dog the night before being examined for military service in order to exacerbate his asthma and flunk his physical. I'm certainly glad I read this book and would read anything by this writer. I just don't think this book is as good as Mr. Toibin's fiction.

Toibin's books are always GOOD!

Does the fact that Colm Toibin is a gay Irish writer mean he has greater insight into the works of gay Irish writers than those of us who are not gay or Irish? Based on this book, I would say the answer is an emphatic No. It is a collection of essays described as "Explorations of Gay Lives and Literature" even though its subjects include an artist and a filmmaker. Toibin rehashes old cases like Oscar Wilde, Roger Casement and Walt Whitman and writes about other homosexual artists like Francis Bacon and James Baldwin. He even throws a lesbian in for good measure Elizabeth Bishop. Toibin generally mixes a bit of biography, autobiography and literary criticism as he tries to explain how the characters' "gayness" affected their work. I found it so dull and unconvincing that I kept skipping pages until I eventually gave up as James Baldwin appeared as the next item on the production line. I am not even sure of the accuracy at times. At one point he writes: "many or most of the figures who re-created modern writing were gay, or Irish, or Jewish: Melville, Whitman, Hopkins, James, Yeats, Kafka, Woolf, Joyce, Stein, Beckett, Mann, Proust, Gide, Firbank, Lorca, Cocteau, Auden, Forster, Cavafy." First of all, what is the link between being gay, Irish and Jewish and, secondly, were Joyce, Yeats, Hopkins and Mann really homosexual? I think Toibin was lucky to find a company willing to publish this unconvincing mish-mash.

Our group likes this author very much. Here, he looks at various authors and the various influences on their lives. For Jorge Luis Borges being homosexual is like being Jewish. Those who came out of liberated concentration camps still wearing a pink triangle were rearrested and reincarcerated. Jews and Northern Irish Catholics have had a chance to work out the implications of their oppression but gays have no history. 'Pathological and homosexual' are almost synonyms. Kafka, a Jew in Prague, exhibited and hid. Oscar Wilde was alone in prison 24 hours a day, not allowed to speak during exercise, had no writing paper, had problems with his ears and eyes. His plank bed induced insomnia and he could hardly escape becoming insane. Roger Casement had read Heart of

Darkness and wanted Conrad's support. His diary mentioned the beauty of boys and he moved from pervert to invert, from using boys to getting them to use him. Conrad thought this was not in keeping with the aims of empire. After reading the Imitation of Christ he became a Roman Catholic and received his first communion on the day of his execution. It has been suggested that his enemies forged his diary to blacken his character. Thomas Mann's Felix Krull was homoerotic. Homosexuality was part of his German heritage and his sons were more secure in their homosexuality than he was. Bacon made no attempt to hide so people wrote about his unsatisfactory relationships ('The Gilded Gutter Life of Francis Bacon'), his unhappy childhood, his low-life friends, his masochism, how he was jealous of his nanny's soldier boyfriend, that he was locked in cupboard and did not ask the mirror why he wasn't normal. Elizabeth Bishop thought she had to write 'precious' poetry, that it was risky to use a word like 'heavens' and that 'Oxford graduates smell'. James Baldwin's work is about more important things than age or race or sexuality. His style is a mixture of the King James Version of the Bible and African-American. His father died when he was 19, after chilling in the pulpit, being cruel at home. He threw jug of water at a waitress who wouldn't serve him because of his race. He believed that only mass conversion can change things, that it is too subtle merely to be an angry black man, merely a black writer. He castigated the dishonesty of Greenwich Village and Paris. His was dangerously explicit writing for 1951, where a black man hanged from tree and his genitals cut off. He was not at home in the Civil Rights movement as it was hostile to homosexuals. Pedro Almodovar is covered though I was disappointed that his films are not mentioned. Born in 1951, he enjoyed reading lives of saints and Gregorian chants but he disliked the priests' Religious Education. In 1960s, people behaved as if Franco was already dead yet the film school was shut down, Military service was a nightmare and he spoke to nobody for 12 months. His long hair was considered scandalous. He loves managing chaos as long as he can control it. Mary Kenny has lived in London for 20 years so she is out of touch with Ireland. She mentions a Roman Catholic priest who dies in gay sauna - another two priests were there to give him the last rites. This book is well worth reading though those who know more literature than I will get more out of it than I did.

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