



The Leather Boys

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Librarian note: First published in 1961 by author Eliot George, a pseudonym for Gillian Freeman, all later editions use her real name

From the First Edition dustjacket:

The leather boys are the boys on the bikes, the boys who do a ton on the by-pass. For their expensive machines, they need expensive leather jackets. They are an aimless, lawless, cowardly and vain lot with a peacock quality to their clothes and hair style.

The problem of these working-class boys with big wage packets and nothing to do is the background to *The Leather Boys* which is the story of two of them, Dick who lives with his widowed grandmother and Reggie who married Dot when he was 17.

After a row with his wife Reggie goes to stay with Dick in his grandmother's house; their friendship develops into love and they break away from their gang to rob a local cinema together.

The author of *The Leather Boys* does not treat homosexuality as a personal or social problem but takes for granted that the love between these two inarticulate young men could exist between two human beings at any time at any place.

The climax of the story is impelled by the forces of the times and the place in which they move—the psychological pressures and the transient, indefinite air of the South London suburbs.

The Leather Boys Details

Date :

ISBN : 9780907040613

Author : Eliot George , Gillian Freeman

Format :

Genre : Fiction, Lgbt, Gay

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From Reader Review The Leather Boys for online ebook

Andrew Murphy-Williams says

I've finished the book, but I don't know how to react to it quite yet. The blurb on the back says: "They're Britain's 'Wild Ones'-the motorcycle cow-boys who live for fast machines and faster girls.

Who ton-up along the Motorways, terrorising drivers and defying the law. Who experience sex too young, marry unthinkingly and live only for the next kick-whatever or wherever it is.

THE LEATHER BOYS is a savage, brilliantly told novel of these aimless young men and women. It is also the story of Dick and Reggie and the strange, twisted love that developed between them."

Hmm, where do I start with that? I know the book was marketed as sleazy pulp fiction, as that's what was selling at the time, but this blurb really angered me; and for a few reasons. Firstly, it alludes that the characters in the story are British versions of characters from The Wild One (a 1953 Marlon Brando film); then it says that these characters 'terrorise drivers' on motorways, yet none of that happens in the book; and the story of Dick and Reggie is the main story of the whole book, so I don't understand why that is given such little precedence. I'm also upset by the description of their love as strange and twisted, but I realise I'm looking back at it from 2010, and attitudes are very different now.

Okay, the writing isn't as bad as I was expecting. I was expecting it to be a lot more sensationalist, sleazier somehow than it was. The writing focused on telling the reader what a particular character was feeling, "Dick was anxious", "He was happy here. He liked the friends he had made, or at least he liked Reggie. He was looking forward to going out with Reggie tomorrow", "Reggie felt lonely and depressed. What a mess life was." Gillian Freeman obviously hadn't heard 'show don't tell' when she wrote this book. It's actually a novella, and only 125 pages long; I read most of it in a few hours. The writing is not great, but there are some lovely stylistic quirks, and the speech is brilliant. The character of Gran especially, she is often hilarious; and old lady's funny little ways are captured beautifully.

I just didn't believe the characters: they weren't developed, and weren't given the time (both time together, and not many pages) to develop. The film is about Reggie and Dot's life and their marriage failing, and Pete (Dick in the book) coming into Reggie's life and turning everything upside down. The book is much more about Dick's life and Reggie coming into it. In both versions, Dick/Pete is obviously gay; in the book he hasn't yet accepted it, in the film he has. Freeman's explanation of what makes a gay man, and how to make a gay story acceptable is to have characters not 'realise' they are gay until they find the right man. Up until he meets Reggie, Pete feels no sexual attraction at all; and when they finally kiss and have sex in Gran's house that's the first time he's ever felt like that. It was obviously written by a straight person, and meant for a straight audience.

All that said, I did enjoy it - but I enjoyed the film more than the book.

Sean Kennedy says

An interesting piece of historical gay lit, but unfortunately beholden to the tropes and limitations of the time, so don't expect a happy ending.

Erastes says

The book is an essential read for anyone who might be interested in the late 50's and the youth of that time, it

may come over as rather quaint to Americans, because I'm sure that American bikers were never quite that shy and gauche as some of the characters here. Although – sorry to disappoint you once again – this isn't exactly about biker boys either. Hell, could a book and a blurb and a cover BE more misleading?

Anyway, there's not much to the story, really. Reggie is married but dissatisfied. His wife has told him that she's pregnant with another man's child so he leaves her. He meets up with Dick, another biker, who lives with his ailing grandmother in a typical two up two down terraced house with no loo but the one outside.

When the two young men do get together it's not accompanied by pages of pre-kiss angst. They are friends, and neither of them see much further than that. Reggie has moved in with Dick, and as was more common in those more innocent times they sleep in the same bed. One night it just seems right and they kiss. Any sexual conduct is off screen, but is clearly alluded to afterwards. Dick is the one who asks "is this love? And do you think of me as a girl?" and Reggie, who is far more pragmatic simply says "of course not – you aren't the right shape." Dick voices his confusion by saying that he thinks it's strange that neither of them want to start playing the girl, by putting on lipstick and stuff like that. There's none of the questioning of self and identity that we see more often in more recent coming out books. Dick loves Reggie and that's it, really. For better or worse.

They decide-not just for the sake of their relationship, which they are aware they can't share with anyone-but also to get away from Reggie's wife, and Dick's grandmother, and the book winds to a terrible conclusion, sadly in keeping with most gay novels of the time. It is interesting to note that the film – which is well worth seeking out if you can get hold of a copy – has a completely different ending and one that disgusted me more than the end of the book. In the film (as in the book) Dick goes to the naval yard to inquire about signing up with the Merchant Navy, and while he is there he meets up with a few of the other homosexuals who band together and all know who's who. In the book Dick simply wonders at these men – almost like a different species. He realises then that although he is homosexual – that he's not like these camp men, neither is Reggie and hopes they'll be left in peace onboard ship. However – in the film, the director makes that the end – Dick decides that he can't accept that camp lifestyle and walks away from Reggie forever.

This doesn't ring true with the depth of feeling in the book, and I don't know why they changed it. Perhaps it was the only way to get the film made – in 1964(!) Dick was far too much in love with Reggie to have done this, and the last few pages of the book convince any reader that he never would have done that.

It's a lost world – Britain's Gone with the Wind. There are no more leather clad gangs who frequent coffee bars. The day of the outside toilet are gone forever and Britain has lost that tang of innocence. I remember the early sixties (just) but it takes the film to put it clearly in the mind of anyone who wasn't around then. The empty roads, the way people lived, I don't often advise reading the book and watching the film, but for anyone interested in the social history of this time, I highly recommend doing both.

The book is – in its way – comparable with Renault's *Charioteer*, and certainly deserves to be as popular and as lauded as that book. Perhaps the prose isn't quite as beautiful, perhaps the heroes are dirty, criminally minded and working class – far far below the lofty heights of Ralph and Laurie, but for my money it's every bit as good and deserves to be back in print, not labelled as pulp – but a modern classic.

Aleardo Zanghellini says

I loved this little book. First, it has one of the most beautiful scenes of same-sex intimacy I have read in any

book. Secondly, and remarkably for a mid-century gay-themed novel, the love between the two main characters is almost entirely angst-free (in the sense that the lovers, refreshingly, don't waste much time agonising about its same-sex nature). The author seems to be addressing neither an implicitly homophobic audience (by selling them a gay story that appeals to values of tolerance), nor a gay readership interested in novels reflecting their own inner struggles for self-acceptance. The author is, quite simply, writing a book about love and loss. Yes, there is the tragic ending you would expect of a gay-themed novel written at that time, but it doesn't *read* as the tragic ending of a mid-century gay novel. It is, rather, the natural conclusion of a tragic love story in the best Shakespearean tradition - one that happens to feature gay protagonists. The sort of novel that confirms my belief that some of the very best books about male same-sex relationships come from the pens of women authors!

Neil says

This is a tightly written page-turner about working-class same-sex love, small-time heists, and domestic life in postwar London. The narration is concise and compellingly conveys the discovery of desire, the pressure of family and marital commitments, and the frequent difficulty of imagining a future when one has few examples to go on. There is also leather: Freeman bears witness to the pleasurable roar of motorcycles, the euphoria of buying new leather pants, and crowd of young men at a late night cafe. *Leather Boys* (1961) is a must read for those with an interest in British queer history and postwar fiction.

John says

Set in the time in which it was written – the 1950s - and in South London. It is the story of 2 eighteen year old working class lads, Reggie and Dick, both emotionally starved to a greater or lesser extent. One is trapped in an unhappy marriage, the other lives with his doting, elderly grandmother, the preferred alternative to living with emotionally cold and materialistic parents.

It is an easy, fairly undemanding read and follows the relationship between these 2 lads – a friendship which develops into more. It is written in an almost terse, matter of fact style which is certainly lacking in sentimentality and syrupy -ness. It is certainly not intrusive (I felt almost uncomfortable as voyeur and reader, grounded in 2016). It is therefore perhaps very much of its time.

That time provides additional interest for me: post war, written at the time of the Wolfenden Report (1957) which recommended the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults (legalised 10 years later in 1967) in private. This was the time of the “Coffee Bar” which closed around midnight, the motor bike with the must have leather accessories, the mark of the rebel.

I knew nothing of the author before reading this. It seems that after graduating, Gillian Freeman wrote a number of novels, many well received at the time, particularly the *Leather Boys* – first published as written by Elliot George! - and non fictional work - including the story of Mayerling, used by Kenneth MacMillan for his ballet of the same name.

I want to know whether G. F. saw the film, “*The Wild One*” starring Marlon Brando, prior to writing this novel? At any rate she wrote the screen play for the film *Leather Boys*, based on the novel and released in 1964.

I hesitate to recommend a book I've given only 3*s to but for those who might be interested in the themes it covers I'll be brave and do so.

Chris says

Here's a very quick enjoyable summer beach read (two hours) validating same-sex love and desire from the Dark Ages of 1961. I read the first edition so was not misled by the ridiculous cover copy of the two or three later editions which denigrated the "strange and dangerous" relationship between the two teenage boys by suggesting they would be better off with leather clad biker women. That is not at all the content of the book. The love affair between Dick and Reggie is presented naturally, even if precipitously. It is not a spoiler to reveal that not all ends well, anyway obvious from the first page, but it's refreshing that their sexuality is not the proximate cause. Although not completely free of negative stereotypes, those wanting an early sympathetic read won't be disappointed. It was reprinted in 2014 here: [The Leather Boys](#) so it's deservedly readily available.

Ethnicolor says

Not my usual read, this short novel was a real pleasure. Whilst the main (and subtle) theme is of an unexpected gay romance between two relative strangers, the book is as much about post-war London and working class life. I'm rarely touched by any kind of romantic book or film, but here the author's skill in simply describing the thoughts and feelings that Reggie and Dick have for each other communicates an honesty that is genuinely sweet; they simply fall in love, and they don't really wonder too much about why.

Delicate, short and bitter-sweet, this is an unexpected favourite.

Carol Fenlon says

thoroughly enjoyed this book which I'd asked for in my Christmas stocking together with the film version. Freeman's writing style is plain simple and refreshing yet the content of the book was groundbreaking for its time. Set and written in the very early 1960s, Freeman deals sensitively with the subject of love between two young working class teenagers. Also authentically describes the culture of 1950s teenage bikers. I couldn't put this down and devoured it in two days flat. I have also seen the film version which is terribly disappointing, despite starring Rita Tushingham and bears little relation to the novel, in its efforts to avoid confronting the taboo subject of homosexuality at that time. I believe Freeman also wrote the screenplay for this and can't help feeling she must have cringed as she did so.
