



Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights

Ann Bausum

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That's the Stonewall.

The Stonewall Inn.

Pay attention.

History walks through that door.

In 1969 being gay in the United States was a criminal offense. It meant living a closeted life or surviving on the fringes of society. People went to jail, lost jobs, and were disowned by their families for being gay. Most doctors considered homosexuality a mental illness. There were few safe havens. The Stonewall Inn, a Mafia-run, filthy, overpriced bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, was one of them.

Police raids on gay bars happened regularly in this era. But one hot June night, when cops pounded on the door of the Stonewall, almost nothing went as planned. Tensions were high. The crowd refused to go away. Anger and frustration boiled over.

The raid became a riot.

The riot became a catalyst.

The catalyst triggered an explosive demand for gay rights.

Ann Bausum's riveting exploration of the Stonewall Riots and the national Gay Rights movement that followed is eye-opening, unflinching, and inspiring.

Stonewall: Breaking Out in the Fight for Gay Rights Details

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Ije the Devourer of Books says

Excellent and enjoyable!

This is excellent. It is an easy to read, educational perspective of the Stonewall riots.

Recognised as a key galvanising moment in the struggle for gay liberation, the Stonewall riots initiated a fresh stage in the political movement for gay rights in the US. At the time of the riots there was an existing movement for gay rights and Stonewall served to galvanise this movement and strengthen it.

The riots led to a fresh wave of gay activism at community levels and laid new seeds of activism that nurtured and inspired many people, and which also led to a strong activism in the Aids movement and beyond to the present day.

The establishment of gay pride marches is also a lasting legacy from Stonewall. One hopes that the activism which the riots gave birth to will continue to grow and develop until there is justice for LGBT people all over the world.

It is a good book to read and suitable for young people. It is well illustrated and the narrative is engaging and a pleasure to read. It isn't a 'dry history' book and would make a very good addition to school libraries. It was enjoyable and informative at the same time and emotional. It sets the scene and enables the reader to understand the social context of the time and shows how the activism inspired by Stonewall matured into the activism seen in the Aids movement and the present day activism.

The book also shows how far gay rights have come in global northern countries. From the days when gay people were harassed by police, closeted at work and denied their civil liberties, to a time of change in the present day where gay people are allowed to marry, is a long transformation process but a fascinating one.

There is much to learn from this history about compassion and vision and the hope of a more just and inclusive society. It is also an inspirational book which tells the stories of courageous men and women who seized the opportunity to stand up for themselves. It shows that change is always possible and that we don't have to tolerate bullying, discrimination, human rights abuses and a denial of our rights. These are lessons for all of us whether straight or gay and this book with its narrative is a good place to begin to reflect on that.

Kristen says

A good introduction into the Stonewall riots, and the gay rights movement before and after. It was really interesting to learn about how Stonewall galvanized the gay rights movement (and how celebrating the riots led to gay pride parades). I found the actual account of the riot to be a bit confusing and muddled (which I suppose makes sense, as riots aren't really linear, clear things to document).

Tim Federle, writer of the fabulous Better Nate Than Ever, is the narrator of the audiobook and he is a really great narrator.

Rebecca Honeycutt says

As a basic, surface-level look at Stonewall and its historical importance, this is fine.

As narrative nonfiction, however, it's not terribly compelling. And as a factual account, it leaves out a lot of important individuals (including trans folks and people of color) and generally embraces an upbeat, "Gay Inc" tone which I found kind of insulting to the intended teen audience. Teens (especially the teens who are most likely to pick up this book) are aware of and able to discuss thorny subjects like institutional oppression and violent vs. nonviolent resistance, yet this book fails to really address those issues. While it's appropriate and important to celebrate the hard-won progress that has been made since Stonewall, young people should be trusted with a deeper look.

Recommended for teen readers looking for a quick, generic look at the fight for LGBTQ rights in the U.S.

Alie Stumpf says

This was a helpful resource to build my understanding of this important event, but certainly commits the common sin of omitting women and people of color and trans activists from the history. I think almost all of the testimony quoted here is from white gay men. Important book & very readable for any interested age, and I hope there is a sequel about the unsung heroes from Stonewall.

Sonia Crites says

I am so happy to have found this book and been able to explore the Gay Rights Movement through it. It share a lot of powerful history and really shows how it all came together at the right time and place.

Kara Belden says

This quick read (just over 100 pages) was interesting, informational, and inspiring. It taught me a lot about an important part of history that I knew nothing about. This book is perfect for a YA audience, and it would make a nice addition to any high school library.

“The most burdensome problem the homosexual must bear is the stigma placed upon him by an unenlightened and intolerant society” - Abigail Van Buren

Eliana says

Overall, this book was enjoyable, well-written, and a good introduction to anyone who wants to learn more about the beginnings of the gay rights movement. (Including me, who picked up this book because I was

thinking "I'm gay and I want to be more of a leader in the LGBTQ community, but all I know about Stonewall is what I read on the wikipedia page. I should probably fix that.")

But I felt like this book overwhelmingly focused on gay men who (I assume) were cisgender, and I wish more attention had been given to lesbians and trans people and their involvement in Stonewall and the movement overall. I mean, they were occasionally mentioned, but if you look at the index, you can see how out of balance it was, and it would've been nice if the author could have made a little more effort to even it out.

Daniel Dillon says

A decent rendition of the story. The writing is good, but the focus of the narration tends to foreground gay men, often using them to stand for the entirety of the LGBTQ+ community. There's a distinct lack of trans figures from the story. As a general introduction to the violence that sparked the queer rights movement, it does a good job of highlighting that we did not win all those early victories from respectability politics.

Donalyn says

Well-researched and fascinating look at the early battle for gay rights.

Kelly says

This was generally well-crafted and fairly well researched however, I felt it had a few problems. I found some of the dated vocabulary (which I believe was intentional) disconcerting and frankly uncomfortable. Additionally, I think that it might be excluding some aspects of the event-i.e. I was hoping to find more information about the roles of transgender people and people of color. I'd love to hear opinions from reviewers with the specialized historical knowledge that I sadly lack.

Evan says

A great intro to the Stonewall Riot and the role it played in the Gay Rights movement. Expertly narrated by Tim Federle (of "Better Nate Than Ever" fame). Seriously, I would listen to him read the phone book, if that still existed.

Kelly says

An okay introduction to Stonewall. It acknowledges some of its shortcomings, but it overlooks others. It felt quite short, and the pacing was a bit strange with its time leaps.

I wonder if reading an adult, more fully-fleshed, history of Stonewall would better serve those who are

interested. It's not bad but it's just okay.

Sunny says

I couldn't finish this book. I should have known from the phrase "gay rights" right there in the title that this was going to be an inaccurate recounting that focuses almost entirely on cis gay people (and possibly mostly cis gay men). This book was published in 2015. The author had absolutely no excuse for erasing the contributions of trans women and misgendering them. It doesn't matter what state trans politics were in at the time; just because these women were often considered crossdressing men at the time doesn't mean you get to call them that without acknowledging that they were actually women. One example of this is when the author refers to Yvonne Ritter using he/him pronouns, and says that she was a man "wearing the clothing of the opposite gender". The author has even less of an excuse, because she even acknowledges that Yvonne "had begun exploring life as what would now be called a transgender person." If you explicitly state that a person is trans, then you have a responsibility to correctly gender that person when referring to them.

Anyway, Stonewall was not just about "gay rights". Get it right, please.

Gerhard says

I was a bit nervous about reading this, as a 100-odd page book on the history of gay activism seems overly reductive, especially considering the complexities involved. However, Ann Bausum tackles her subject with commendable clarity and economy, to produce a highly informative, and remarkably neutral, pocket history.

The genesis of the book was when a woman at a signing asked her to write about gay rights. Bausum then recounts learning about the suicide of 18-year-old American student Tyler Clementi, who jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge on 22 September 2010 after his roommate outed him on Twitter.

"This book is written in memory of Tyler and in honour of all young people whose lives are challenged by homophobia," Bausum comments. Of course, that such a tragedy can still occur in our supposedly enlightened age speaks volumes about the social and peer pressures still facing gay youth across the world.

It also points to the complex balancing act necessary to negotiate one's private and public identities – a journey that many gay people struggle with alone, even today. Thus one can only fervently wish that Bausum's book is made available as widely as possible, for the ultimate message here is not only one of hope, but perhaps most importantly, one of dignity and compassion in the face of adversity.

Bausum locates her account of gay rights against the larger socio-political backdrop of the 1960s, particularly the so-called Summer of Love. Her inference is subtle but pointed: it is not only gay people who were overly promiscuous and rebellious during this period.

I learnt many things that I did not know about Stonewall prior to reading this book, such as how the mafia and police controlled the gay scene, and that at one stage it was illegal for same-sex people to even dance together. Also, "masquerading in the attire of the opposite sex was a criminal offense, except on Halloween." This adds immense poignancy to such seemingly simple lines about the opening of the Stonewall Inn in 1976, where "men danced with men, often for the first time in their lives."

We also learn about early activists such as Craig Rodwell, founder of the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, the first of its kind in the US dedicated solely to gay literature. (Rodwell, of course, was also involved with Harvey Milk at one stage, whose rejection of him precipitated a suicide attempt.)

Bausum even delves into the murkier areas of cruising and the so-called truck scene in lower Manhattan at the time, but does so in an entirely factual manner that is not morally prescriptive. Of course, one can view the gay scene through rose-tinted glasses as a cornucopia of flesh, drugs and alcohol, but Bausum deftly sketches a considered account of both the dangers and attractions facing gay people in this time.

We also learn about the Mattachine Society, founded by gay men, and the Daughters of Bilitis, founded by lesbians. Indeed, gay women are often at the forefront here, with Bausum commenting trenchantly on gender discrimination within the gay community itself: “Gay men could be just as chauvinistic, just as blind to the confining stereotypes of the era as their heterosexual contemporaries.”

Bausum is careful to note that “the progress of gay rights, as with other social justice movements, was not linear.” However, what is often required is a single spark or some kind of event that galvanises like-minded people in a united show of force. This event was the riot that began in the wee hours of 28 June 1969 at the Stonewall Inn.

Roland Emmerich’s latest movie *Stonewall* has been accused of white-washing gay history by having the first brick hurled by a mom-and-apple-pie All American white male, when many contend it was a bunch of drag queens in the front line. Bausum comments presciently:

Differences of fact and opinion swirl around that night’s scene in general and certain details in particularity ... Such controversies are not uncommon in history, and it makes sense that they occur ... no one can take in every detail, especially when an event involves so many sub-components of simultaneous activity. Such was the case at the Stonewall on that hot night in 1969.

Bausum has a fine eye for telling detail. At one stage she recounts how “an unlikely team of effeminate and muscular gays had managed to uproot a nearby parking meter and convert it into a battering ram,” as the hapless and outnumbered police force had barricaded themselves inside the building.

(This was a crucial decision taken by Inspector Seymour Pine of the NYPD, who was also instrumental in calming his fellow officers enough so that they did not open fire indiscriminately on the protestors. Remarkably, there was no loss of life during the Stonewall riots, which was largely due to Pine keeping his cool while he literally had his back to the wall. I also did not know that the Stonewall riots actually occurred over several nights, with New York’s Tactical Patrol Force being called upon when unrest flared up for the second night).

Perhaps the most important decision taken by the gay community after the Stonewall riots was Rodwell’s ‘Get the Mafia and the Cops out of Gay Bars’ campaign, due to the bribery and blackmailing that this entailed. Another was the idea for an annual commemorative march, which of course became Gay Pride. By 1984, the fifteenth anniversary of the riots, there were marches in 25 major cities across the US. The openly gay Harvey Milk gained elected office in San Francisco in 1977. Of equal importance was the pronouncement by the medical community that homosexuality was no longer considered a mental illness.

Bausum writes that “being gay became something to celebrate, to share, to enjoy,” which is a polite way of referring to the drugs-and-fucking gay lifestyle excoriated by Larry Kramer in his 1978 book *Faggots*. Unlike loud-mouth Kramer though, Bausum is careful to place this in context: “During an era of widespread

promiscuity regardless of sexual orientation, many members of the gay community joined the national experiment.”

“And then came AIDS”, is the opening line of Chapter 9, entitled ‘Gay Plague’. While the first inklings of the disease appeared in 1981, it took then president Ronald Reagan until 1987, near the end of his second term in office, to mention AIDS in a public address.

Even here Bausum is careful to articulate a particular context: “Further complications arose among gay men themselves. Many gays were still exploring newfound opportunities for self-expression and they chafed against calls from within (and beyond) for them to abandon newly acquired freedoms.”

We learn about the remarkable AIDS Quilt project, Kramer’s founding of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), discovery of the first drug cocktail to stem the tide, legal milestones such as Bowers vs. Hardwick and the fallout from Clinton’s ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ campaign.

In short, it is quite remarkable how much information Bausum packs into this well-structured little book. She notes at the end: “I wrote this book in the company of ghosts,” a reference to Tyler Clementi and everyone else who has died since that first night at the Stonewall Inn.

*The spirit that emerged outside a Mafia-run bar in 1969 became the pulse of the gay community and inspired not just an annual parade but ways to express gay pride in individual lives.
Stonewall happens every day.*

Rachael says

It is impossible to review Ann Bausum's new chronicle of the gay rights movement without thinking about where I was one month ago today: standing on Market Street in San Francisco, watching the biggest, most joyous Pride parade I have ever witnessed. It was two days after we all woke up to learn that the Supreme Court had granted same-sex couples the right to marry in all 50 states, and the mood in the city was total jubilation. The parade itself felt incredibly uncontroversial, with every corporation you can think of trying to get in on the act and soak up some of that LGBT goodwill. The Apple employees alone took up several city blocks.

Contrast that with the way things stood on the eve of the Stonewall Riots. Marriage equality was such a distant dream that Richard Enman, representing the Mattachine Society, said, regarding the legalization of same-sex marriage, "Homosexuals don't want that." "Cross-dressing" was a criminal offense, homosexuality was listed as a mental illness in the DSM, and men trying to pick up a date might be told to "keep moving, faggot, keep moving."

Bausum does an excellent job of evoking that time and place with a chatty prologue that addresses the reader directly and invites us to walk the streets of Greenwich Village with her. She maintains that sense of immediacy through the next several chapters, quickly establishing the historical backdrop and then plunging us into a play by play of the events at the Stonewall on June 27, 1969. She combines eyewitness accounts with historical context and broader social analyses to form a full picture of the significance of the riots. And she doesn't shy away from plainspoken descriptions of the gay experience in 1969, from sex in unlocked semi-trucks previously used to haul animal carcasses, to the raunchy chants that gay teenagers shouted at the police.

While the entire first half of the book is concerned with the lead-up to and immediate aftermath of the riots, the second half touches, in less detail, on the ensuing gay rights movement, including the AIDS crisis and the fight for marriage equality. Of course, despite the fact that the publication date is May 5, 2015, the book is already out of date, because it doesn't include the recent Supreme Court decision. Sam and I were speculating about whether Viking will release an updated edition, but things are moving so quickly that it might be impossible to keep up. Just last week, several legislators introduced the Equality Act, a comprehensive federal non-discrimination bill.

As the LGBT community continues to rack up victories, it will become ever more difficult to remember this history of brutal oppression. Bausum's book serves as an essential reminder of that history, honoring those who risked their lives to pave the way, and, I hope, providing inspiration to the next generation to continue the fight.

I think it's unlikely that *Stonewall* will receive Newbery recognition. Despite the immediacy of Bausum's prose, I wouldn't call it narrative nonfiction on the level of something like *Bomb*, and it feels like a strong year for fiction. I won't be at all surprised if it the Sibert Committee honors it, though, and it seems like a shoo-in for the Stonewall Book Award. (There's a question: has a book ever won its namesake award before?)
