Stonewall National Museum & Archives
LGBTQ Literature Timeline

Introduction

The United States has had a long-standing discomfort with the transgression of sexual and gender norms. Influenced by religious ideals, society viewed people who had same-sex desires and engaged in same-sex practices to be immoral and sinful. As such, the US has long enacted laws to control and condemn those who betray sexual and gender norms. Since the nation’s earliest days, federal, state and local laws punished those who betrayed sexual and gender norms, often as a capital offense.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, commerce and industry flourished, causing people to move from rural communities to more developed urban areas. As a result of these social transformations, same-sex practices increased, as did organized efforts to suppress them. Accordingly, our examination of LGBTQ history in the United States begins after the Civil War and the growth of industrialization and urbanization. Despite insistent homophobia and transphobia in politics, culture, and society over the past 170 years, LGBTQ people have remained resilient, creative, and dedicated to the fight for rights and visibility. Rather than a comprehensive overview, this timeline is intended to provide a snapshot of significant moments in LGBTQ history so as to encourage further engagement and exploration.

Here are some milestones in LGBTQ American literature. Learn more about each entry by clicking on the “More” button. All of these books are available at the Stonewall library. Many will be available at your local library.

Check out other LGBTQ history timeline selections that specifically explore visual art, music, theatre and dance, film and television, AIDS, and sports in this series.

Many thanks to Jackson Davidow for his research on this project.

1855  Walt Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a pioneering book of poetry that contained homoerotic imagery. [More](#)
1870  Bayard Taylor published *Joseph and His Friend: A Story of Pennsylvania*, which is sometimes called the first gay American novel. [More](#)

1880  Henry James published *The Portrait of the Lady*, one of his most celebrated novels. [More](#)

1882  British writer Oscar Wilde, who would go on to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), traveled to America for a legendary lecture tour. [More](#)

1913  Willa Cather published *O Pioneers!* , the first novel of her Great Plains trilogy. [More](#)
1923  Edna St. Vincent Millay was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry collection, *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*. More

1926  Langston Hughes published his landmark essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” a key text regarding the Harlem Renaissance. More

1926  Poet Hart Crane’s romantic poem “Voyages” appeared in his debut collection *White Buildings*. It was inspired by his relationship with a Danish sailor, Emil Opffer. More

1928  To much controversy, John Radclyffe Hall’s lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* was published in the US, prompting fiery debates on homosexuality in literature. More
1932  Lincoln Kirstein published *Flesh is Heir: An Historical Romance*. [More](#)


1934  The diaries of Alice James, the sister of Henry and William James, were published posthumously for the first time. [More](#)

1936  *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes became one of the first novels to depict lesbianism. [More](#)
1940  Carson McCullers published her debut novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, at age 23. [More](#)

1948  Gore Vidal published *The City and the Pillar*, portraying homosexuality in positive terms. [More](#)

1948  Truman Capote’s semi-autobiographical novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was met with critical acclaim. [More](#)

1950  James Fugaté wrote *Quartrefoil: A Modern Novel*, which represented homosexuality in a positive light. [More](#)
1952 Under the pseudonym of Vin Packer, Marijane Meaker published *Spring Fire*, the first lesbian paperback novel, and in so doing, launched the genre of lesbian pulp fiction. More

1952 Using the pen name of Claire Morgan, Patricia Highsmith published *The Price of Salt*, a lesbian novel with a predominantly happy ending. More

1955 Allen Ginsberg wrote “Howl,” an epic sexually explicit poem that reflected the countercultural anxieties of the era. More

1956 James Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room* broke ground with its nuanced portrayal of homosexuality and bisexuality. More
1963  John Rechy’s *City of the Night* depicted a vivid world of gay hustling. More


1973  Naiad Press, one of the first publishing companies committed to furthering the project of lesbian literature, was founded. More
1974  Patricia Nell Warren’s *The Front Runner*, a novel about a gay love affair, became a bestseller. [More]

1976  Christopher Isherwood, an Anglo-American writer living in California, published his memoir *Christopher and His Kind*, which embellished his 1939 book *Goodbye to Berlin* (the basis of the musical and film *Cabaret*) with its fuller and freer details of his gay life during the 1930s. [More]

1978  Larry Kramer’s *Faggots*, a satirical novel about gay culture and promiscuity, sparked a debate on the representation of contemporary gay life. [More]

1978  In the novel *Dancer from the Dance*, Andrew Holleran captured the zeitgeist of gay liberation. [More]
1978  Armistead Maupin commenced his *Tales of the City* series, which amounted to nine novels and culminated in 2014. [More](#)

1979  Alyson Publications was founded to develop the field of LGBT literature. [More](#)


1982  In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde drew on her life experience as a “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” to write a pioneering “biomythography.” [More](#)
1982 Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for her novel *The Color Purple.*

1982 Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* started off his trilogy of acclaimed semi-autobiographical novels.


1985 Though written in the early 1950s, *Queer* by William S. Burroughs was finally published.


1987  Drawing on her personal experience as a Chicana on the Mexico-Texas border, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* became an essential text of cultural theory. More


1988  Samuel R. Delany’s memoir *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* detailed his experience as an gay African American man in an open marriage with fellow writer Marilyn Hacker. More
1988  Dorothy Allison’s short story collection *Trash* received critical acclaim. More

1988  Paul Monette’s memoir *Borrowed Time* chronicled his experience of living with HIV/AIDS. More

1989  Randall Kenan’s first novel, *A Visitation of the Spirits*, explored the gay black experience in the American South. More


1990  Cookie Mueller’s short story collection *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* was published a year after her AIDS-related death. More

1991  Ibis Gómez-Vega’s novel *Send My Roots Rain* foregrounded a Latina lesbian narrative. More


1993  Leslie Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* instantly became a classic of genderqueer literature. More

1998  Michael Cunningham received the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award for his novel *The Hours*—a retelling of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). More

2006    Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* became a popular and critical success, as well as the inspiration for a hit Broadway musical. [More]

2007    Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl* offered a transfeminist manifesto. [More]

2015    Hanya Yanagihara wrote her best-selling novel *A Little Life*. [More]
2017  Danez Smith’s poetry book *Don’t Call Us Dead* became a finalist for the National Book Award. [More](#)

2018  Jordy Rosenberg’s novel *Confessions of the Fox* brought to life a trans-centered historical fictional narrative. [More](#)

2019  Poet and novelist Ocean Vuong was named a MacArthur Fellow. [More](#)

2019  Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dreamhouse* poignantly navigated the topic of queer domestic abuse. [More](#)

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