



The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality (Studies in Gender and History)

By Mary Louise Adams

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In the years after the Second World War, economic and social factors combined to produce an intense concern over the sexual development and behaviour of young people. In a context where heterosexuality and 'normality' were understood to be synonymous and assumed to be necessary for social and national stability, teenagers were the target of a range of materials and practices meant to turn young people into proper heterosexuals.

In this study, Mary Louise Adams explores discourses about youth and their place in the production and reproduction of heterosexual norms. She examines debates over juvenile delinquency, indecent literature, and sex education to show not why heterosexuality became a peculiar obsession in English Canada following the Second World War as much as how it came to hold such sway.

Drawing on feminist theory, cultural studies, and lesbian/gay studies, *The Trouble with Normal* is the first Canadian study of 'youth' as a sexual and moral category. Adams looks not only at sexual material aimed at teenagers but also at sexual discourses generally, for what they had to say about young people and for the ways in which 'youth,' as a concept, made those discourses work. She argues that postwar insecurities about young people narrowed the sexual possibilities of both young people and adults.

While much of the recent history of sexuality examines sexuality 'from the margins,' *The Trouble with Normal* is firmly committed to examining the 'centre,' to unpacking normality itself. As the first book-length study of the history of sexuality in postwar Canada, it will make an important contribution to the growing international literature on sexual regulation.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The 1950s were a time of social stability, innocent childhood and adolescence, and family values. NOT. The benign world of *Father Knows Best* and *My Little Margie* may live on in cable reruns, but Mary Louise Adams points out in *The Trouble with Normal* that growing up in the 1950s was anything but a comedy. Adams, a professor of health education, explicates quirky sociological markers--popular sex advice books for teens, health education documentaries, social tracts against juvenile delinquency, and comic books--and argues that midcentury teens were under enormous social and political pressure to "be normal" and conform to the most narrowly defined sexual and personal standards. *The Trouble with Normal* approaches this material seriously, but has a breezy writing style and Adams's quotes from "Growing Up and Liking It" and "Facts of Love and Life For Teenagers" are both entertaining and chilling.

Review

'The trouble with "normal" - and with "heterosexuality" - is that they're usually assumed. Here, however, in this major, trouble-making contribution to the new history of heterosexuality, the "normal" and the "heterosexual" are explicitly questioned, their mode of production historically specified. Here, the "idea" of heterosexuality, "the discourse" about it, and the particular historical system of erotic, gendered relationships called heterosexuality, are shown to be socially produced, not natural. Mary Louise Adams proves a most able, enterprising detective of sex.'

(Jonathan Ned Katz, author of *The Invention of Heterosexuality*)

About the Author

Mary Louise Adams is an associate professor in the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies and the Department of Sociology at Queen's University.

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Bobbie Flores:

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