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point of view

Merle Miller's Closet

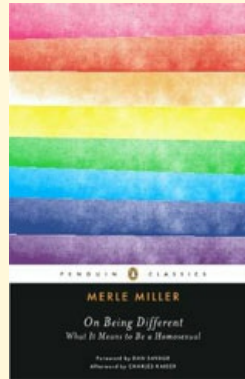
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Merle Miller's Closet

by [Paul Morton](#)

Merle Miller's "What It Means to Be a Homosexual" is remarkable in part for where and when it first appeared: in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* in January 1971.

There have been many additions to the coming-out genre in the years since, in fiction and non-fiction. Everyone knows the conventions. The lonely child is burdened by primal needs. He nurses his secret in a world that despises him and slowly, after years of heartbreak, overcomes fear of societal or familial rejection and admits to the world the man he truly is. His family and his society at that point either accept or reject him. Quite often, they already knew his secret; his behavior had many "tells." But by relieving himself of his secret he discovers at least a modicum of peace.



This is the stuff of *People* magazine, high-brow literary fiction, long-form journalism, celebrity memoirs, Marvel Comics, alternative comics, young-adult literature, Oprah, and Dan Savage's It Gets Better Project.

Miller's piece preceded these popular manifestations of the formula and by publishing it the *Times* made the genre respectable. A few months later, Miller expanded his essay into a book, *On Being Different*.

Miller had endured many insults by the time he told his story and his quiet anger permeates his prose as he asserts his dignity and refuses any further humiliation.

It has been 42 years since the piece was first published and the gods of publishing have returned to confer upon it now not mere respectability but also prestige in the form of a Penguin Classics reissue.

The new book is a handsome edition, but I wish it included the notorious essay that caused Miller to tell his story in the first place. I'll get back to Miller in a bit, but first a word on Joseph Epstein's "Homo/Hetero: The Struggle for Sexual Identity."

In 1970 *Harper's*, a publication few if any considered an incubator of right-wing cruelty, published Epstein's study of homosexuality. It is a long piece, taking up 11 pages in the magazine, but few people today remember more than a couple choice lines. Veterans of the nascent gay-rights movement still quote them through hisses. "If I had the power to do so, I would wish homosexuality off the face of this earth," Epstein wrote. "I would do so because I think that it brings infinitely more pain than pleasure to those who are forced to live with it, because I think there is no resolution for this pain in our lifetime. . . ."

The cruelest cut came at the end of the piece when Epstein, a father of four sons, imagined the greatest horror of all. "[N]othing they could ever do would make me sadder than if any of them were to become homosexual. For then I would know them condemned to a state of permanent niggerdom among men, their lives, whatever adjustment they might make to their condition, to be lived out as part of the pain of the earth."

It is obvious from reading this line, or at least it seemed obvious to some reading this line in 1970, that Epstein preferred his children to become rapists or murderers. He was expressing an illiberal rage incongruous with his Jewish name. A sit-in at the *Harper's* offices followed.

But the protesters were not entirely accurate in their characterization of Epstein's essay. It is always easier if bigots wear swastikas and white robes, and by that metric Epstein disappoints. I for one wish every genocidal hate monger posed as many questions to himself as Epstein did in his essay. The essay is not so much the anti-gay *Mein*

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Kampf as it is a portrait of an intelligent human being whose prejudices made him less intelligent and blinded him from seeing what was right in front of his eyes.

Epstein read all the popular materials on homosexuality then available to members of his intellectual class. He quoted Gide, Freud, even Dr. David Reuben, M.D.—the anti-gay author of *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex . . . But Were Afraid to Ask*—as well as some early studies of homosexuality in the animal kingdom.

On the nature vs. nurture debate Epstein was an agnostic. "[O]ne can't say with the same old confidence that homosexuality is unnatural, however deeply one might feel that it is." He had enough sense to feel uncomfortable about comedians who would never think of telling black or Jew jokes, but who had no problem making fun of the faggots, well-aware of the "assured approval from their audiences." He also condemned anti-sodomy laws.

But the piece took strange directions. Epstein pointed to several homosexuals he had met throughout his life, the pederast in Chicago, the lecherous mayor of a small Southern town, and a Lebanese army buddy who moonlighted as a drag queen. They were all miserable, or if not miserable, at least troubled and strange.

He admired those who repressed their homosexual desires. "Men who are defiant about their homosexuality, or claim to have found happiness in it, will, I expect, require neither my admiration nor sympathy."

The essay's meandering logic and its eerie condescension outlined the kind of conversation a husband and wife might have had at their Upper West Side apartment in 1970, after taking in the latest Edward Albee or Stephen Sondheim production, one that would be filled with a certain appreciation for the talented freaks whose sexuality endowed them with a keen eye for weirdness.

It should be noted that Epstein never discounted his essay. He never gave a full-throated defense of it either. Most of his voluminous magazine work has been reprinted in book-length collections. "Homo/Hetero," whether due to his own or his various publishers' preferences, has not.

If Epstein ever personally evolved—the current catchword in the Democratic Party—on the question of homosexuality, his subsequent work shows no evidence of any change in his views. He himself may have read widely on gay history and literature for his "Homo/Hetero" essay, but he did not see fit to publish material from gay studies scholars during his 22-year-long tenure as editor of the *American Scholar*, a period that coincided with the rise of the gay studies discipline. (He was equally hostile towards feminist and black studies critiques. He blamed his departure from the publication in 1998 for "being insufficiently correct politically.")

Merle Miller was one of the many gay men who read Epstein's casual bigotry in the *Harper's* essay as a declaration of war.

Miller was a novelist and journalist whose work was light and funny, if a little square. His life was interesting. He had done work for the ACLU in the 1950s during the McCarthy years. Later, he tried to develop an aborted TV series that was to feature Jackie Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck, and spent hundreds of hours interviewing Harry Truman for another aborted TV series. In between, he had written a few bestsellers.

He had many friends in Manhattan and after reading Epstein's piece, he complained about it to one of them, an editor at *Harper's*. A few days later he had lunch with Victor Navasky, who was then a staff member at the *Times* magazine.

This is the account of that lunch from the book version of Miller's memoir: "[Navasky] said he thought it was brilliant. He said, 'At a time when everybody is saying we have to understand and accept homosexuals, Epstein is saying . . .' I said, 'Epstein is saying genocide for queers.' And then for the first time, in broad daylight, before what I guess you would call a mixed audience, in a French restaurant on West 46th Street, I found myself saying, "Look, goddamn it, I'm homosexual, and most of my best friends are Jewish homosexuals, and some of my best friends are black homosexuals, and I am sick and tired of reading and hearing such goddamn demeaning, degrading bullshit about me and my friends."

He added, "There it was, out at last, and if it seems like nothing very much, I can only say that it took a long time to say it, to be able to say it, and none of the journey was easy."

Epstein was not calling for a roundup to the camps. But it may have been a good thing that Miller misread Epstein, for it filled him with righteous fury and provoked him to come out for the first time to his straight friends, there in that restaurant, at the age of 51.

Miller would claim that he reluctantly agreed a few days later to Navasky's request to write about what they had discussed over

lunch. Who knows how reluctant he really was. There's nothing that agitates a writer more than to listen to someone speak poorly on a subject the writer himself knows well. Miller had spent years listening to people with no knowledge speak about a particular at the very core of his being. At some point he had to answer back.

In 1971, a good few thousand years into human history, a literate person would have had access to several books about homosexuality—Gore Vidal had published in 1948 *The City and the Pillar*, a novel about a man doomed by a youthful love. In the mid-1950s James Baldwin wrote *Giovanni's Room* about white gay people, and then in 1962, *Another Country*, an interracial melodrama.

More patient readers had the novels of Jean Genet, that aged outlaw who was then hanging out with the Black Panthers. On the stage, the love that dare not speak its name howled it in Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*, which had by that time been adapted to the screen by William Friedkin.

This is to say nothing of the older books everyone knew about, Gide's *Corydon*, Wilde's *De Profundis*, Melville's *Billy Budd*, Proust, and Shakespeare. Every freshman at Columbia University spent their first week of school reading *The Iliad*, which features the love story of Achilles and Patroclus. Camp had seeped into the wider culture, but these books treated the subject of homosexuality as text not subtext. If you chose to condescend to gay people, you did so in the shadow of a canon.

The 1950s and 1960s can look at one angle like a sexual dark age, in which certain highly-sexed monks guarded the great secret of a more liberal civilization in libraries for a future time that would be better able to handle these fantastic truths. But these books were widely read and all too easily misunderstood.

Shakespeare, Melville, and the Greeks were all located far enough in the past for their homosexuality to be considered part of a distant culture's strange customs. Vidal and Baldwin were iconoclasts. And their genius, whether in the form of Vidal's exoticized waspiness or Baldwin's blues-intoned blackness, was filtered through an outsider's bent. Their novels were not about happiness. They were paeans to self-loathing.

Vidal's tragic narrator: "[I]t would be a difficult matter to live in a world of men and women without participating in their ancient and necessary duet." Baldwin's hero in *Giovanni's Room* is suspicious of the effeminate men who surround him. "I always found it difficult to believe that they ever went to bed with anybody for a man who wanted a woman would certainly have rather had a real one and a man who wanted a man would certainly not want one of *them*." The enraged queens in Crowley's play destroy each other with even crueller aphorisms.

And this is where Miller, with all his unbearable whiteness, found a place. He was a middle-aged Midwesterner who wrote with irony when he had to but was just as capable of writing without it. "I dislike being despised, unless I have done something despicable, realizing that the simple fact of being homosexual is all by itself despicable to many people, maybe, as Mr. Epstein says, to everybody who is straight."

Vidal would never demean himself on or off the page by saying he wanted to be liked. Baldwin always demanded to be loved or at least, with a Whitmanesque lilt, to live inside you and for you to live inside him. Miller was comfortable with camp language and employed it in his 1972 novel *What Happened*, but here Miller described the basic need most humans, straight and gay, actually have, in a plain prose unencumbered by genius, the kind of voice you could hear over lunch at a restaurant on West 46th Street.

The story Miller tells in *On Being Different* is self-consciously un-extraordinary. He is neither an Achilles nor a Patroclus. His story is not shrouded in melodrama and for that reason gay men easily found and still find in it parallels with their own lives.

Miller draws a portrait of himself as the one man on earth least capable of living the life of a confident outlaw. He was an effeminate boy, a budding pianist, growing up in Marshalltown, Iowa in the 1920s and 1930s. From the age of four to the age of 17 someone called him a sissy, the "faggot" slur of his generation, every day to his face, five days a week.

"It's not true, that saying about sticks and stones; it's words that break your bones," he writes.

He had three close friends, all misfits in this small homogenous culture, a Jewish boy, a polio victim, and a middle-aged woman with a clubfoot. He headed to the local train depot for his earliest sexual encounters, picking up boys from freight trains, lost in Depression-era America. "They were all lonely and afraid. None of them ever made fun of me. I was never beaten up. They recognized, I guess, that we were fellow aliens with no place to register."

Just as young gay men in later years would read his essay for

comfort, Miller did not turn to the library for solace, finding a mirror in an effeminate schoolteacher at the center of one of the stories in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Reading the story didn't do him much good. Literature didn't liberate him and oppression didn't ennoble him. Later, as the editor of the University of Iowa's student newspaper, *The Daily Iowan*, he found himself turning his years of pain outward, humiliating the theater queers at his school. It's an old story and all too human.

Miller did not go in for fag-bashing as an adult, but he spent his career ignoring the plight of people very much like himself. At the ACLU he would do nothing in response to the gay-baiting that characterized the McCarthy years. "The only group of outcasts I never spoke up for publicly, never donated money to or signed an ad or petition for were the homosexuals. I always used my radio announcer's voice when I said 'No.'"

Activists can be annoying and obnoxious and the old writings from the Mattachine Society can sound shrill, naïve, and filled with a cloying self-regard. Those are also the people most willing to fight the necessary wars.

If Miller's book is an argument for dignity and acceptance, it is also an argument against politeness. It is an argument against letting stray homophobic remarks from your liberal friends just go in the interest of keeping the evening pleasant. It is an argument against letting someone change the topic of conversation when they tell you they feel uncomfortable about gay marriage. It's an argument for demanding the part of the territory to which you are entitled. And that last part is an odd thing for a man with Miller's background to be arguing.

"I think white gay people feel cheated because they were born, in principle, into a society in which they were supposed to be safe," James Baldwin would say in his later years. "The anomaly of their sexuality puts them in danger, unexpectedly. Their reaction seems to me in direct proportion to the sense of feeling cheated of the advantages which accrue to white people in a white society." There's a wounded rage in Miller's piece, a fury at having to negotiate this territory in the first place.

The gay rights movement, despite what its depiction in *The Advocate* or the TV series *Queer as Folk* would suggest, was never an exclusively white movement. The great heroes of Stonewall were black and Latino drag queens. Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s mentor who was arrested for having sex with a man in the early 1950s, became an advocate of the gay rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s. But part of the power of Miller's piece is rooted in entrenched prejudices beyond homophobia.

The portrait Miller draws of himself is of a white man unable to find a proper place in a white world. As an Iowa boy in Manhattan he could be something that Baldwin and Vidal and even the later Jewish gay activists Larry Kramer and Harvey Milk could not be. If not for that *one thing* Miller could have fit into society and perhaps enjoyed a less traumatic childhood. If not for that *one thing* he would have enjoyed the comfortable place of his straight high school classmates. His cultural background allowed him to obtain a pose that an ethnic marker would have made inauthentic. His Midwestern whiteness could make him always tantalizingly almost normal.

The piece is arguing for something else as well. The gay man is miserable, in part, because of homophobia. The homophobe uses his misery not as proof of the evil of homophobia but as proof of the evil of homosexuality. How does one fight this line of attack?

Miller was married to a woman for four years and they remained friends after their divorce. And though he doesn't detail his adult male-male relationships, which included a 22-year-long companionship with fellow author David W. Elliott, he does tell the story of a couple who had been together for 25 years who find a place for themselves in a dark time. "They still hold hands, though not in public, and they are kind to each other, which is rare enough anywhere these days."

This is something you do not read in Vidal or Baldwin or the rest of the canon Epstein had probably read, though it does appear, at least retrospectively, in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, about an expatriate Englishman grieving the loss of his lover. Miller's book is a genuine argument for the possibility of such happy lives.

This is the part of the essay in which I am supposed to note the amazing march of history, the ways in which the world we now inhabit differs from the world in which Merle Miller first wrote his piece. Six months ago we re-elected a president who supported same-sex marriage, a position which seemed to help his campaign. A Midwesterner, a woman from Wisconsin, became the first openly gay member of the United States Senate. Three states, including the state in which I grew up and the state where I now live, passed referendums legalizing same-sex marriage in November and more have passed pro-gay marriage reforms since. The Supreme Court will soon rule on marriage equality, and though the likely outcome of the cases will not be as sweeping as we might want, it will almost

certainly be a step in the right direction. It is now braver, at least in elite circles, to oppose same-sex marriage than to support it, a sign of progress.

Gay men have an acute sense of history. Charles Kaiser, who wrote the afterword to this edition of *On Being Different*, was born about 30 years after Miller and remained in the closet throughout the 1970s while working as a reporter for the *New York Times*. Dan Savage, who wrote the foreword, was born about 45 years after Miller and came out as a teenager. Today there is this new breed of young men and women who never knew the closet and never second-guessed their bodies' desires. I was born in 1980 and, given the changes I have seen in my own lifetime, I believe that if I had been born a short five years later, I would have known a less difficult adolescence and become a less anxious man.

It does get better, as Dan Savage says, if not perfect. I am surprised when I meet gay men my age who are not out to any of their straight friends. I am even more surprised by the gay people my age who are not even out to themselves. It is even more surprising than that when I find that these souls enjoyed childhoods as I enjoyed mine in liberal communities, like the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D. C. Such stories upset the historical narrative we are telling ourselves. The march of progress is never neat. For the moment at least the closet is still a part of American life and for that reason alone *On Being Different* is still an important and relevant book.

But the gay closet, at heart a social construction of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, will eventually cease to exist. Sure, people will still feel embarrassed about some of their sexual desires. Notions of appropriate male and female behavior will persist and evolve as they always have. We'll continue to tweak our stereotypes.

What will no longer exist is the man who spends years lying to people about who he is, who marries a woman, and allows himself to grow cold, gray, and isolated as the years pass. What will no longer exist is that weird English graduate student who doesn't understand why everyone thinks Henry James or Walt Whitman is gay. Comic foils like David Cross's Tobias Funke in *Arrested Development* will have no corollaries in reality. Gay kids will go on their first dates when they're 12 or 13 and they will go out with kids of the same gender and everyone will be happier for that fact.

I don't know what place *On Being Different*, this classic of the coming out genre, will have in a world in which people no longer need to come out. Miller's internal struggles may look as bizarre to future generations as the intrigues and marriage plots of nineteenth-century novels look to us today.

But Merle Miller's book could just as easily survive. We humans have a long history of making people we don't like feel that they are not fully human. Even if homophobia were to die, human nature will remain. In another 100 hundred years *On Being Different* may simply serve as the record of one man's attempt in middle age to declare that his particulars made him no better or worse than you.

On Being Different: What It Means to Be a Homosexual. By Merle Miller. Foreword by Dan Savage. Afterword by Charles Kaiser. New York: Penguin Classics, 2012.

In the video below Dan Savage discusses *On Being Different* and coming out.

In the audiofile below, Savage, Charles Kaiser, and Victor Navasky discuss *On Being Different*.

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About Paul Morton

Paul Morton has worked as a cultural journalist in Vietnam, Bulgaria, and Latvia. He also completed a Fulbright fellowship in Budapest, where he researched Hungary's communist-era animation industry. His interview with Marvel Comics writer Brian Michael Bendis appeared in *Ultimate Spider-Man: Ultimatum*. He currently lives in Seattle where he is a graduate student in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington. He writes frequently for the online literary review *The Millions*, where an earlier version of this essay [appeared](#).



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