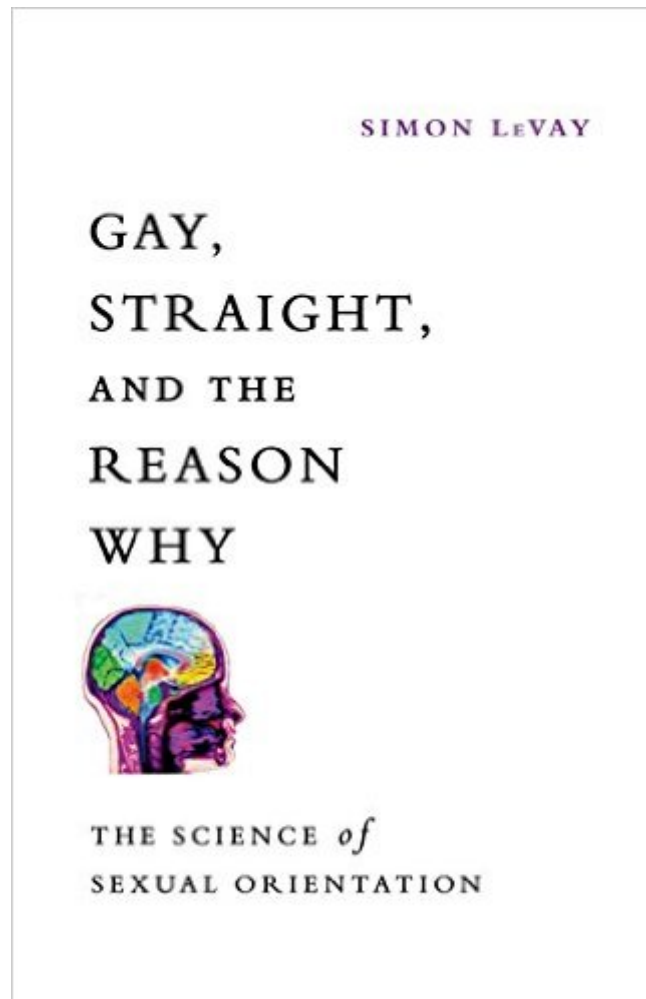


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Gay, Straight, And The Reason Why: The Science Of Sexual Orientation



Synopsis

What causes a child to grow up gay or straight? In this book, neuroscientist Simon LeVay summarizes a wealth of scientific evidence that points to one inescapable conclusion: Sexual orientation results primarily from an interaction between genes, sex hormones, and the cells of the developing body and brain. LeVay helped create this field in 1991 with a much-publicized study in *Science*, where he reported on a difference in the brain structure between gay and straight men. Since then, an entire scientific discipline has sprung up around the quest for a biological explanation of sexual orientation. In this book, LeVay provides a clear explanation of where the science stands today, taking the reader on a whirlwind tour of laboratories that specialize in genetics, endocrinology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, and family demographics. He describes, for instance, how researchers have manipulated the sex hormone levels of animals during development, causing them to mate preferentially with animals of their own gender. LeVay also reports on the prevalence of homosexual behavior among wild animals, ranging from Graylag geese to the Bonobo chimpanzee. Although many details remain unresolved, the general conclusion is quite clear: A person's sexual orientation arises in large part from biological processes that are already underway before birth. LeVay also makes it clear that these lines of research have a lot of potential because--far from seeking to discover "what went wrong" in the lives of gay people, attempting to develop "cures" for homosexuality, or returning to traditional explanations that center on parent-child relationships, various forms of "training," or early sexual experiences--our modern scientists are increasingly seeing sexual variety as something to be valued, celebrated, and welcomed into society.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Simon LeVay is a retired scientist. He is also gay. So you can expect his approach to be rational and sympathetic toward the question of homosexuality. I had been familiar with most of the arguments and evidence. I have had a little direct background too. I conducted experiments in 1968 as an undergraduate physiological psychology student to try to induce homosexuality in rats. I failed for reasons which I didn't understand then but LeVay's book helps explain. LeVay's great study was twenty years ago shortly before he retired. He found that two nuclei in the hypothalamus were of different sizes in the different sexes and that the male homosexuals brains were similar to the pattern of heterosexual women. This was a big discovery at the time and it remains an important finding. This finding has been confirmed in other studies but has not had the kind of follow up that you might have expected. That's a consistent pattern - suggestive observations but no follow up. Apparently the political climate makes homosexual studies too controversial. Gay activists in general oppose the idea that their homosexuality is a choice, but many also seem to oppose the idea that it is biological either. Some of the comments in this thread make bitter attacks on LeVay. LeVay seems to be a mild mannered, polite and reasonable person. The kind of person you might like to meet. He spent much if not most of his career studying these questions. He knows what he's talking about. However he does leave out some issues. I expected to see some references to the work of Steve Sailor, Gregory Cochran, Henry Harpending, and Paul Ewald. None.

I enjoyed this book, and I would recommend to everyone I know to read it. This book is useful and important because the majority of people are at best in the dark about what it means to be gay, at worst homophobes. I did not hesitate about buying this book: I don't know any gays personally, and I've always wondered what makes someone gay. All the false and naive ideas I had (and I had more than I realized) were certainly cleared up by this book. This is important reading, because it gives the average person real evidence to combat the dangerous notions spread by homophobes.

Since these false ideas and the discrimination they engender cause considerable suffering in our society today, I think it is important for people to read a book such as this one, which considers the origins of homosexuality from a scientific viewpoint. These are indeed firm arguments put forward, which are difficult to refute considering the volume of supportive data. In conclusion, one comes away from this book convinced that sexual orientation is a biologically controlled characteristic as natural as variation in eye color or height. One would expect the author to be biased, since he quickly declares he is gay himself, but I had the overall impression that he carefully considers the available data and does not push any ideas that are not fully supported by experimental data. Since I am a scientist myself, I appreciated his cautious approach and his consideration of competing ideas. I have a few criticisms, however: the fact that this book targets a general audience is no excuse to have omitted error bars on the figures and citations of the sample sizes. It gets a little long and technical at points, and there is perhaps not much interest in mentioning studies for which the results are not conclusive.

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