

HomoAmerican: The Secret Society

Michael K Dane

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HomoAmerican is a record of Michael K. Dane's struggle to break free and live in full, open celebration of himself at a time when gay rights were stifled, hidden, and silenced.

History, memory, and imagination converge in Michael K. Dane's memoir *HomoAmerican*, a dense, luscious account of growing up gay in midcentury San Francisco.

This is an exacting account of a life lived on the fringes of "polite" society. The memoir traces Dane's experiences of growing up in a poor family on the wrong side of the tracks, surviving a traumatic childhood, and facing the struggle of living as a gay man during a time of pronounced, brutal oppression.

The book's chapters are arranged chronologically and include color prints of photographs that are contemporaneous to each vignette. Landscapes and locations are drawn in beautiful detail, folding together the past and present: "The garden behind my grandmother's house grows out of control from years of neglect; wild fig and lemon trees drop their forgotten fruit into overgrown vines and hedges that conceal stone footpaths, laid down before my father was born." San Francisco is young, too, and the book includes descriptions of the city in earlier days, before the dot com boom and gentrification changed it from a chilly port town to a tourist magnet.

San Francisco is also a thriving home for gay culture, and the book relates vibrant memories of a secret, invisible "society" of homosexual men. From New York to Paris, cloistered bars to rainbow parades and riots, the book includes unforgettable scenes that capture momentous historical moments and moving, quiet ones, too. Waiting for his gambling addict father to come back with some cash, Dane recounts cold deserted offices, dusty desks, and banks of rotary dial phones with light up push button extensions. The hopelessness of being trapped in a family and culture that punishes or ignores homosexuality is punctuated with bright moments of triumph, joy, and pleasure. The book is fully, brilliantly human. Characters speak in fractured dialogue that spatters the text, adding dimension to an already rich narrative tapestry.

At the core of the book is Dane's faith in himself and his unique, caring relationship with his mother. Many times, the crumbs of love that Mamá shares are the only food on the table, but it's all that she has. Enough is plenty, and the book incorporates the theme of unconditional love throughout as friends, lovers, partners, and family members create a supportive, meaningful community.

Original and authentic, *HomoAmerican* is a unique memoir that manages to be humorous, wise, and moving all at once. With candor and a detailed recounting of people, places, conversations, and sensations, the book brings to life a world that existed seventy years ago and is forever lost to time. Both historical and profoundly personal, *HomoAmerican* is a record of Dane's struggle to break free and live in full, open celebration of himself at a time when gay rights were stifled, hidden, and silenced. This triumphant memoir is as timely as ever, and told with moving honesty.

CLAIRE FOSTER (April 6, 2020)

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