

Martin Duberman Receives HGLC Founding Father Award

At our June 5th annual dinner, the Caucus presented our Founding Father Award to historian Martin Duberman, PhD '57. Board member, Tim McCarthy, AB '93, and a former student of his, made the presentation. What follows is a transcript of this introduction and Martin Duberman's remarks.

Good evening. It is my pleasure now to honor tonight's award recipient. It is rare indeed to know someone who has both written and made history. Martin Duberman is such a person. Professor Duberman has devoted so much of his remarkable career as an award-winning historian, teacher, playwright, and activist to the lives of outsiders: gays and lesbians, the poor and working class, African Americans, and other minorities who have led the fight for freedom and equality in this nation. A fiercely eloquent voice for social justice, he's one of the nation's most distinguished writers and public intellectuals.

Educated at Yale and Harvard, professor Duberman is the Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus at Lehman College and the graduate school of the City University of New York. He was the founder and director from 1986 to 1996 of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the CUNY graduate school, the nation's first such research center. For his passionate devotion to making visible the lives of queer people who have been hidden from history, he is regarded by so many as the founding father of GLBT studies. An elegant and prolific writer, Professor Duberman is the author and editor of more than twenty books. They include *Haymarket*, a novel; *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey*; a brilliant biography of Paul Robeson; and a book that has inspired me, *The Antislavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists*. I was fortunate that he wrote the Afterword to my most recent book, which was inspired by that book.

Two of his plays, *Mother Earth*, which is a play about Emma Goldman, and *Visions of Kerouac*, have recently been staged in New York and Chicago. His most recent book, a brilliant book, *The Worlds of Lincoln Kirstein*, was one of two finalists for last year's Pulitzer Prize in biography. I should say as a fellow historian that he is a master of the archives. There is no one in the historical profession that understands and accesses and does with archives what Martin Duberman does. Altogether his career spans half a century and his opus canvasses over two centuries, from the battles over slavery in 19th-century America to the black freedom, feminist, and gay liberation struggles of our own time. In addition to his scholarly work, his essays have appeared in *The Nation*, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Liberation*, *The New Republic*, and *The Village Voice*. The New Press will publish a collection of his political plays called *Radical Acts* next year, and then his long-awaited memoir will be published the year after that.

Marty, your work has made visible so many pasts: the queer past, the black past, the radical past; and your life inspires us all to be more visible in our own lives, to demand a place at the table even and especially when we are denied that place. You have been an inspiration to so many of us in this room, and so many of us outside of this room, not least of all to a young PhD student more than a decade ago desperately searching for himself and yearning to be free.

That is why it's such a great honor for me to honor you tonight with the HGLC founding father's award, the citation on which—it's a west African proverb that I'm sure you'll enjoy and I know you've heard—reads as follows: "Only when lions have historians will hunters stop being heroes. The HGLC founding father award to Martin Duberman PhD class of 1957." Path-breaking scholar, prophetic writer, passionate activist, the founding father of GLBT studies, you have fought to cure America's historic prejudices by making its hidden past visible.
— Tim McCarthy

Martin Duberman, speaking without notes, delivered the following address:

I thank Tim for those eloquent and excessively kind remarks; they're much appreciated. If you see tears coming out of my eyes, which you will, it's not because I'm that moved by words spoken in praise of me. It's that—and you'll understand this when you grow older—I just had plugs put in my eyes because of dry eyes, and the tears are now streaming down my face. I just thought I should forewarn you.

I've been so overwhelmed by returning to Harvard—it isn't that I haven't been here in the years since 1957, but I haven't been here often, and I've never been to an LGBT-sponsored event. So one thing that I'd like to do is tell you why this is so overwhelming to somebody like myself who grew up essentially in the most oppressive decade in the 20th century, the 1950's, which is exactly when I was at Harvard. I was here roughly from 1952 to 1957 trying to win a doctorate in American history, and indeed I did in 1957.

During that time there were exactly two bars—there was none in Cambridge—there were only two bars for men. I don't believe women had any social outlet at all. The two were the Napoleon—does it still exist? I didn't think so—which was considered the high-class bar. And then there was the Punchbowl, which is probably long since ancient history. And we would sneak off to them in terror of being seen by anybody—a fellow graduate student, a faculty member, an undergraduate who we may have been tutoring. They were terrifying times to be growing up gay in the United States, so much so that I know from my own teaching—and I've taught gay and lesbian studies for many decades now—people simply do not understand, and there's no way that they could or probably even should, because the climate now is so different from what it was back then. I'll just tell you a little bit about "back then" which I think will illustrate what I'm talking about.

Early on, in one of my first extremely nervous visits to the Napoleon Club, I met the guy with whom I fell in love and, happily, he with me, and we were together most of the five years that I lived in Cambridge. We had some problems in the relationship, and of course every relationship has problems, but to have problems in a gay relationship in the 1950's meant that you automatically blamed yourself, and of course your partner. It just depended on the night of the week as to who got the most blame. But the screws had been placed in our heads already by a passionately homophobic culture. And if anything went wrong in a relationship, what you automatically said was, "Well, of course, it's a homosexual relationship. What do you expect?"

We were sick: the psychiatrists had been telling us this now for many decades. How could we possibly hope to find anything approaching happiness, to say nothing of fidelity and commitment, given our basic character disorder?

These are in fact the very words that were always used in those years. We were sick; we had a character disorder. The good news was supposed to be that if you presented yourself in the proper spirit to a competent analyst, through psychotherapy you would be able to change your sexual orientation and indeed become cured. I won't go on about that subject because I could for hours [see *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey*, 1991]. Nobody was ever cured. Kinsey's coauthor once challenged any psychoanalyst to present a "cured" case—that is, where the fantasy life actually matched the new heterosexual behavior. No such person was ever produced.

Because Larry and I—as I called him in *Cures*, though that's not in fact his real name—because we were having several bumpy spots in our relationship, I presented myself, as the culture had ordered, to a supposedly competent psychotherapist in Cambridge, right off of Mt. Auburn St. I can still see his office. He made it quite clear from the very first visit that what was wrong with me was who I was sexually. And he also made it very clear from the very beginning that I had to end the relationship with Larry—and he meant completely. We were deeply in love; at that point we had been together for three years. But we had to end the relationship, because the going theory of the day was that homosexual "acting out" was how you discharged your anxiety, and until you stopped acting out, until you sealed off the hatch, the anxiety would not be able to accumulate to the point where you could actually look at it, analyze it, and cure it. That was the standard treatment: you stopped all homosexual activity.

And I tried. I had been that brainwashed by the society. I told Larry that we had to end the relationship, that as the analyst had made clear to me, my only hope for happiness was to change my sexual orientation. If I insisted on remaining homosexual, there was literally no possibility of leading a happy and a productive life. And I believed him, and I tried to end it with Larry, and I couldn't. We would go for two or three weeks without seeing each other, we were both miserable, we had to see each other, we'd get back together, we'd be passionate and happy with each other, and we'd be flooded immediately thereafter with panic and guilt. And back I would then traipse to the therapist's office for another round. This went on for a long time.

Then, finally, I broke with the analysis. I can't explain why, but I did. But this doesn't mean that I became liberated thereby—hardly. Psychiatry had poisoned that well. For many decades thereafter I would have fleeting affairs, always doubting myself and my partner, doubting our innate capacity for intimacy and commitment. It wasn't until 22 years ago, when I met Eli, that I finally found a real companionship and a solid, stable relationship. You see, for me gay liberation has always been something of a misnomer. Once you accept yourself and join a community, that isn't the equivalent of immediately establishing self-acceptance. I think it's an initial strategy whereby the process has a chance to begin. But by signing up for—wherever you place yourself in time—the Mattachine society or ACT UP, that doesn't bring with it

anything like self-acceptance overnight. But you've got to do it if there's ever going to be even the approximation of self approval. For me, the process, even in my advanced years, remains ongoing. Liberation is something that I'm certain will never be complete. On a daily basis I still have to grapple with a lot of what was done to me more than fifty years ago. I have to grapple with the scars, the deep, permanent scars that remain from having been a prisoner of what was then and is no longer a thoroughly homophobic profession.

That is why arriving from New York today, all I had to do was look outside at the cocktail tent and just see this gathering [of GLBT alumni/æ], and I thought, good lord, things have certainly changed. Fifty years ago there were, through those furtive trips to the two bars, three or four of us graduate students who got to know each other, were deeply suspicious of each other, as we were of ourselves, who formed a little group that met secretly. Of course we kept our sexual identities hidden from the outside world. Actually, that little group helped a lot. But to come upon this kind of a large-scale and elaborate gathering fifty years later is quite literally an astonishment. And it might bring out some genuine tears. It's truly remarkable—and I think instantly of Barack Obama—that while we are in many ways among the most conservative and conformist of nations, at the same time, nowhere else in the world is there a comparably multicultural society such as ours, nor one in which so much progress has been made over the last thirty years or so.

In closing, all I really want to say is that I'm thrilled and overwhelmed, not simply at the award, though at that too, but at the great distance that we have all traveled. And I toast you all for the contributions that you are all making to the continuation of this struggle. Thank you.