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## More than a gym



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Sexuality and spirituality merge in a history of the YMCA

**Take the Young Stranger by the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA.** By John Donald Gustav-Wrathall. University of Chicago Press. 265 pages, \$23.

By Jim Van Buskirk

"The YMCA is the biggest Christian whorehouse in the world."

Sam Steward, gay author, 1992

**HOW DID THE** ubiquitously mundane institution of the YMCA -- which we now take for granted as we work out, swim, take classes, or seek inexpensive rooming -- change from its beginnings as a source of spiritual sustenance into a place now better known for less sanctioned activities?

Independent scholar John Donald Gustav-Wrathall has chosen to investigate this complex transformation. "The story of how the YMCA went from celebrating to suppressing men whose emotional center was other men is also the story of how the YMCA acquired most of the characteristics that we today recognize as typical of the organization," he writes.

Choosing a thematic rather than strictly chronological approach, Gustav-Wrathall begins by recounting the 1844 founding of the Young Men's Christian Association in London by George

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Williams and his "friend and roommate" J. Christopher Smith. "Early meetings were mostly prayer groups and Bible studies whose focus was to win converts to Christ and encourage young men to live moral lives," Gustav-Wrathall writes.

Spread from London by American and Canadian tourists, associations were rapidly established throughout North America in the 1850s. "Emphasizing a mission of overall spiritual, social, moral, mental, and physical welfare of young men allowed the YMCA to fill a niche that seemed to harmonize with the churches rather than compete with them," he writes. Part of the physical education program included sex education to help combat the fear that a community of "unrestrained single young men would lead to widespread sexual immorality," a fear expressed in 1892 in the first YMCA publication addressing sex.

In the 19th century intimate emotional communities of young men, largely white and middle class, were formed under the auspices of the YMCA. The intimate nature of these communities was underscored by the organization's disproportionate number of secretaries -- "employed general executives of a YMCA" -- who were lifelong bachelors. Growing uneasiness with "celibate" leaders after the turn of the century led to changes in hiring policies, pro-marriage rhetoric, and marginalization of the unmarried bachelor secretaries by the 1920s. Extolling the necessity of segregated single-sex organizations, the YWCA was then formed as the women's alternative to the YMCA. Although barred from YMCA membership until 1933, women eventually became integrated into the organization's social fabric -- although that integration, in the beginning, at least, was marked by expediency and convenience.

Gustav-Wrathall goes on to show how the YMCA's programs, intended to shape and control men's sexuality, created an environment conducive to sexual encounters on YMCA premises. His revealing chapter on cruising is based largely on interviews with 19 older gay men, mostly in Los Angeles, with a few in San Francisco. The author also examines the impact of the devastating sex scandal at the Portland, Ore., YMCA in 1912, positing that "the YMCA's inability to positively integrate homoerotic yearnings, indeed its active warfare against such yearnings after about 1900, created weaknesses in the moral fabric of the organization which made YMCA staffs and traditional supporters ineffective in the YMCA's program of sexual vigilance."

Bearing the trappings of its origins as a University of Minnesota

doctoral dissertation, the book, which is part of the University of Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society, includes two brief appendixes describing the author's methodology, nearly 40 pages of notes, a 17-page selected bibliography, and a 10-page index. Still, the prose, despite occasional redundancies and repetitions, is remarkably readable. And if you're going to judge a book by its cover, this is the one to judge: the cover sports a reproduction of Paul Cadmus's lascivious 1933 Y.M.C.A. Locker Room, in which male figures are involved in all sorts of activities, few of them directly related to Christian spirituality.

The book's absorbing exploration of the sometimes schismatic, sometimes synergistic relationship between spirituality and sexuality is a fascinating addition to the growing body of social history that seeks to explore and elucidate the roles played by our cultural institutions in the context of modern lesbian and gay communities and identities.

As the Village People once extolled, "It's fun to stay at the YMCA."

**Jim Van Buskirk is program manager of the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center at the San Francisco Public Library, and coauthor of *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*.**

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