

A great high school book

Becoming Visible

celebrates the history of

US gay politics

by Gordon Brent Ingram

After many books and much scholarship, a high school or college student wanting to find historical facts about gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, the transgendered, and 'queers' will still find the pickings remarkably slim.

Most libraries do not have much attractive and positive material on sexual minorities let alone on the diversity of queer cultures and political activism. There are important, but too often dense and obscure, academic tomes that are largely not useful for most people starting out or parents and relatives trying to understand. Filling the gap for a good picture book, on a century of lesbian and gay life in the United States, is *Becoming Visible*, the follow-up to a landmark exhibition on the 25th anniversary of Stonewall at the New York Public Library.

Its archive houses one of the largest set of collections on sexual minorities of any public institution on earth. *Becoming Visible* is the first illustrated book from those collections and is a feast for the eyes. More importantly, *Becoming Visible* illustrates some basic



NOT-SO-ANCIENT-HISTORY: The Stonewall riot had opponents even within the homosexual community.

links between sex, repression, community, and political struggle. But there are few photographs that will offend anyone

Books

BECOMING VISIBLE:

An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth-Century America
by Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman
New York / Penguin Books / 1998

here: no topless lezzies publicly 'muff-diving' en masse; no men getting out of their leather jodstraps; no posters for

safer sex showing erections.

In fact, the major weakness with *Becoming Visible* is its editing

out of important images that just happen to generate controversy.



On the other hand, a brief and easy to read book, that sanitizes the sex in homosexuality, could be difficult to keep out of the libraries of Bible Belt high schools—at least in Canada.

Where *Becoming Visible* is weak on erotic culture, it is strong on gay and lesbian politics in New York City beginning in the 1960s. The photographs of political organizing, from the decade

before and after Stonewall, provide a powerful and little available record.

Unfortunately, for Canadians and residents of smaller United States cities, there is little recognition of the role of our communities in becoming visible and building queer national cultures. One of the most significant developments in lesbian and gay life over the last three decades has been the emergence of viable social, cultural and political spaces outside of Manhattan, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

In *Becoming Visible*, there is one mention of the Vancouver Gay Liberation Front (along with Spokane's that probably did not last as long) and virtually no discussion of the emergence of rural gay and lesbian networks. Alas, *Becoming Visible* is really about becoming visible in Manhattan—which has been a lot easier than in the rest of the continent.

Perhaps the greatest mistake, one that could confuse many, is in the authors' attempt to generalize about "America"—not that there is much mention of the rest of the country. Still for a few brief decades in the mid-20th century perhaps New York was the capital of the gay world.

The greatest pleasure in *Becoming Visible* is the details found in the numerous graphics. Beautifully produced, this book may provide the crucial introduction to the topic that so many people will continue to need.