



Recognizing Ourselves

Ellen Lewin

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In April 1993, as part of the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, hundreds of couples participated in "the Wedding," a symbolic commitment ceremony held in front of the Internal Revenue Service building. Part protest and part affirmation of devotion, the event was a reminder that marriage rights have become a major issue among lesbians and gay men, who cannot marry legally and can only claim domestic partner rights in a few locations in the United States. Yet despite official lack of recognition, same-sex wedding ceremonies have been increasing in frequency over the past decade.

Ellen Lewin, who has consecrated her own lesbian relationship with a commitment ceremony, decided to explore the myriad ways in which lesbians and gay men create meaningful ceremonies for themselves. She offers the first comprehensive account of lesbian and gay weddings in modern America. A series of richly detailed profiles—the result of extensive interviews and participation in the planning and realization of many of these commitment rituals—is woven together to show how new traditions, and ultimately new families, are emerging within contemporary America.

Just as the book is a moving portrait of same-sex couples today, it is also a significant political document on a new arena in the struggle for lesbian and gay rights. In a larger sense, Lewin's work is about the politics surrounding same-sex marriages and the ramifications for central dimensions of American culture such as kinship, community, morality, and love.

Lewin explores the ceremonies themselves, which range from traditional church weddings to Wicca rituals in the countryside, with portraits of the planning, the joys, and the anxieties that led up to the weddings. She introduces Bob and Mark, a leather fetishist couple who sanctified their love by legally changing their last names and exchanging vows in tuxedos, leather bow ties, and knee-high police boots. In an equally absorbing profile, Lewin describes Khadija, from a working-class black family deeply suspicious of whites (and especially Jews) and Shulamith, raised in a Zionist household. She tells of how the two women struggled to reconcile their widely disparate upbringings and how they ultimately combined elements of African and Jewish traditions in their wedding. These, among many other stories, make *Recognizing Ourselves* a vivid tapestry of lesbian and gay life in post-Stonewall United States.

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