Journalism History | Book Reviews
journalism-history.org/books

2022-02 | February 2022

Stoner, Andrew. *Dear Abby, I'm Gay: Newspaper Advice Columnists and Homosexuality in America.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021, 225 pp., $27.95 (Softcover). Reviewed by Carolina Velloso, University of Maryland, cvelloso@umd.edu.

In his lively and illuminating book, *Dear Abby, I'm Gay: Newspaper Advice Columnists and Homosexuality in America*, Andrew Stoner investigates how homosexuality has historically been addressed in American newspaper advice columns. Stoner, a professor at California State University, Sacramento, convincingly demonstrates that advice columns are an ideal medium through which to examine the evolution of societal attitudes. Advice columns are less about actually helping question-askers with their problems (due to the days or weeks it used to take for the columnist's answer to appear in print), but rather about offering readers a glimpse into the dilemmas of others. Advice columns thus function as a type of public forum in which hot-button issues are discussed, providing scholars a valuable window into these debates. The book features 13 chapters profiling influential columnists, while a fourteenth chapter briefly outlines other notable names. The chapters are organized in rough chronological order, starting with Ann Landers, who began writing in the 1950s, and ending with Dan Savage, whose column is still published today.

Stoner effectively traces the evolution of advice columnists' attitudes towards homosexuality. Esther Lederer (also known as "Ann Landers"), one of the first and most influential columnists, was slow to progress in her opinions on homosexuals. Lederer was kind and compassionate to her gay readers and supported certain legal protections for homosexual couples, but she opposed gay marriage for most of her life. "I cannot support same-sex marriage," she wrote in 1996, "because it flies in the face of cultural and traditional family values we have known for centuries. And that's where I draw the line" (13). On the other hand, Pauline Philips (also known as Abigail van Buren of the "Dear Abby" column), was quick to defend gay readers in her columns, perhaps in part to distinguish herself from Lederer, her twin sister and lifelong competitor. Philips was known for her short and witty defenses to readers' concerns about homosexuality and valued her role in helping to spread awareness of gay and lesbian issues. "The most burdensome problem a homosexual must bear is the stigma placed upon him by an unenlightened and intolerant society," she wrote (30).

Stoner also highlights the emergence of psychologists-turned-columnists who positioned their advice as medically based. On one end of the spectrum was Dr. George Crane, a conservative who considered homosexuality a mental illness brought about by an emotionally stunted childhood. "Homosexuality can be converted into heterosexuality if the victim is willing to rule his life by his brains instead of by his emotions," he wrote (74). By contrast, Dr. Joyce Brothers, who is credited with bringing psychology into the mainstream, leaned on her credentials to support a more tolerant view of homosexuality. She sought to educate her readers about homosexuality in her columns, even providing recurring true/false quizzes for readers to test their knowledge.

The dawn of the gay liberation movement in the late 1960s spurred a broad societal shift in attitudes towards homosexuality, which was reflected in advice columns. Margaret Whitcomb, for instance, was empathetic and understanding towards the gay and lesbian community, although she sometimes offered questionable advice, such as urging gay men to remain celibate amid the early AIDS crisis. Elizabeth Winship provided nuanced, judgement-free advice that helped those struggling with their sexuality come to terms with their identity. After referring a young reader to a gay hotline – becoming the first columnist to publicly promote a gay youth program – she told him, "you should get immense

relief if you discuss your problems with someone who understands, and knows how to cope with the loneliness and ostracism homosexuals feel in most parts of our society" (113).

A string of popular advice columnists beginning in the 1990s – including Carolyn Hax, the authors of "Dear Prudence," and Amy Dickinson – largely echoed the increasingly widespread acceptance of the gay and lesbian community. Dan Savage, the last of the book's major profiles, proves an apt bookend as the first openly gay advice columnist. "Savage Love," an irreverent column that, according to Savage, treats "straight people with the same contempt that heterosexual columnists traditionally treated gay people with," brought the relationship between homosexuality and advice columns full circle. As such, Stoner demonstrates that the columnists' viewpoints and the advice that appeared in their columns closely mirrored larger societal attitudes.

Each chapter is meticulously researched and features a wealth of examples of reader questions, columnists' answers, and reader reactions to columns. These columns are drawn from the archives of a wide variety of newspapers from all over the country. However, while the chapters are rich in specific details, they are quite self-contained and would have benefited from the inclusion of comparative analysis that better tied them together. For instance, were there differences in reader letters and reactions based on the gender of the columnist? Did geographic context affect how columnists responded to reader concerns? These and other questions might have been addressed with more comparison and contextualization.

Dear Abby, I'm Gay: Newspaper Advice Columnists and Homosexuality in America is an innovative and sharply written book that makes a significant contribution to scholarship on American journalism history, social history, and LGBTQ history. It would be a great teaching tool for courses that cover any of these areas. The chapters could be analyzed on their own, as separate case studies, or taken together to underscore the symbiotic evolution of attitudes towards homosexuality in advice columns and American society at large.