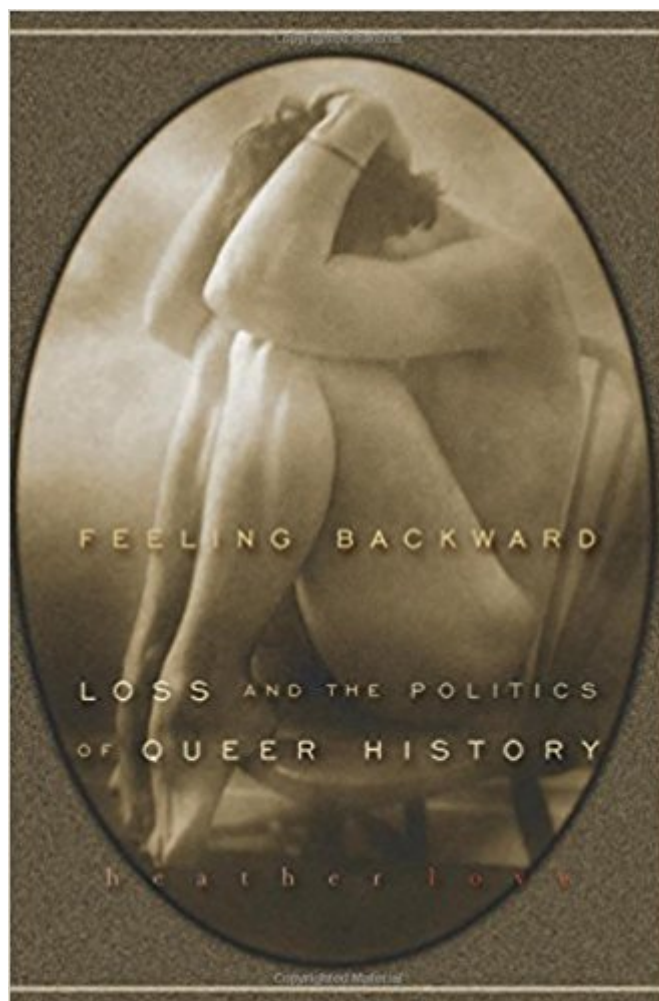


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# Feeling Backward: Loss And The Politics Of Queer History



## Synopsis

Feeling Backward weighs the costs of the contemporary move to the mainstream in lesbian and gay culture. While the widening tolerance for same-sex marriage and for gay-themed media brings clear benefits, gay assimilation entails other losses--losses that have been hard to identify or mourn, since many aspects of historical gay culture are so closely associated with the pain and shame of the closet. Feeling Backward makes an effort to value aspects of historical gay experience that now threaten to disappear, branded as embarrassing evidence of the bad old days before Stonewall. It looks at early-twentieth-century queer novels often dismissed as "too depressing" and asks how we might value and reclaim the dark feelings that they represent. Heather Love argues that instead of moving on, we need to look backward and consider how this history continues to affect us in the present. Through elegant readings of Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, and through stimulating engagement with a range of critical sources, Feeling Backward argues for a form of politics attentive to social exclusion and its effects.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In supple readings of difficult, sometimes disturbing, yet always fascinating texts and contexts, Heather Love demonstrates that if we are to seriously engage with the queer past we must welcome the shame, fear, loneliness, obstinacy, and indeed backwardness that we encounter there. For all that, Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History, with its beautiful prose, stunning theoretical sophistication, careful attention to detail, as well as a hard-headed respect for the artists and critics whom it treats, is a stunningly hopeful book. Throughout Love links her critiques of

celebratory queer criticism with a passionate concern for the opening up of progressive forms of intellectual and political life. (Robert F. Reid-Pharr, author of *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire and the Black American Intellectual*) Heather Love is the Marcel Proust of contemporary theory. Disappointed love and tormented desire find a compassionate commentator in Love, who turns to queer history's tragic, lonely, and despairing figures, not to sublimate or to save them, but to recognize and to respect them. A wise, worldly, and winning book. (Diana Fuss, Professor of English, Princeton University) Now that, in the latest twist of tolerance, gays are required to flaunt their well-adjustedness, *Feeling Backward* may feel backward indeed as it contemplates the pain, anger, isolation, and sheer crankiness, prominent in literary figures of our queer past. But it is harder than ever to pause for thought—and not simply revulsion or compassion—over these prickly and unwholesome feelings, which lead an increasingly closeted existence in ourselves. Heather Love is in astonishing possession of the negative capability required by her undertaking, and her analytic finesse proves well-matched to her ethical delicacy. This book—together with the constellation of work it gathers around itself—belongs to what may deservedly be called a new wave in queer studies. (D.A. Miller, University of California, Berkeley) Like Lot's wife, I like to look over my shoulder too much at salty scenes from the shameful past-- though I've yet to turn into a pillar of the community. The delightfully named Heather Love makes all that hankering after pre-gay sex on Hampstead Heath seem slightly romantic and illuminates why and how the queer past is not always about waiting for Stonewall and disco to happen. (Mark Simpson, Editor of *Anti-Gay*) What does it mean to "feel backward"? By turning to, rather than away from, the texts of shame, injury, loss and failure that populate a queer past, Heather Love manages to shift queer studies away from the straight and narrow and back onto the slippery slope of stigma and dismay. Love refuses the triumphalist accounts of gay and lesbian progress and she insists on the spoiling of identity and on the political importance of "bad feelings." This is a rigorous book, a brave book, a wildly original and unrelenting book. It will be a central text in the backward future of queer studies. (Judith Halberstam, author of *In a Queer Time and Place*) It seems to me this discontinuous book is a little bit like the stations of the cross. I mean if you like to stop, and most of us do. And sometimes the street was filled with us. All thinking about someone else. They are the past inside our present. He just put one in a cab. I like *Feeling Backward*... a lot. (Eileen Myles, poet) In this interesting study of modernist literature and the challenges of history, the author encourages readers to consider how early-20th-century moments once labeled embarrassing, troubling, and evil continue to have an affect. Drawing from the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, the Marxist philosophy of Raymond Williams, and other schools of thought, Love rereads the works of Radclyffe Hall, Walter Pater, Willa

Cather, and Sylvia Townsend Warner--often considered to turn away from an image of a brighter future for queer readers--in order to consider the "backward feelings" of shame, depression, and regret and describe how these texts have fallen into critical disrepute among queer theorists and scholars...This book is for those interested in the politics and history of emotion and sensibility. (J. Pruitt Choice 2008-04-01)Feeling Backward is a brilliant work...Love looks fearlessly at literature from the past in which circumstances related to gender tend to produce victims rather than heroines. She establishes that our literature has been affected by homophobia and demands that we consider the implications of this fact. Love contends that we need to look at history and social politics less like Lot's wife, who's destroyed by looking back, and more like Odysseus, who listens to the past but isn't destroyed by it. The past haunts us whether we acknowledge it or not; we may be "looking forward," as we like to assure ourselves, even as we're "feeling backward." (Martha Miller Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide 2008-07-01)Feeling Backward is a brilliant book that attempts the "impossible" and succeeds. Using Michel Foucault and Eve Sedgwick as theoretical touchstones, and incorporating Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling," Heather Love "feels backward" to reimagine and connect with aspects of a queer past that had been rendered invisible. In doing so--in risking (as she puts it) the fate of Lot's wife in turning back to revisit a painful past--she embraces the ruins, the "fugitive dead," the loneliness and failures and all the "negative affect" that need to be reclaimed as part of that history...Love moves bravely backwards to that murky time, the "queer life before Stonewall," and then crosses the modernist line backwards to feel what has been lost. In doing so she has made a profoundly imaginative and powerful contribution to queer history. (Rick Taylor Feminist Review 2009-07-01)

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