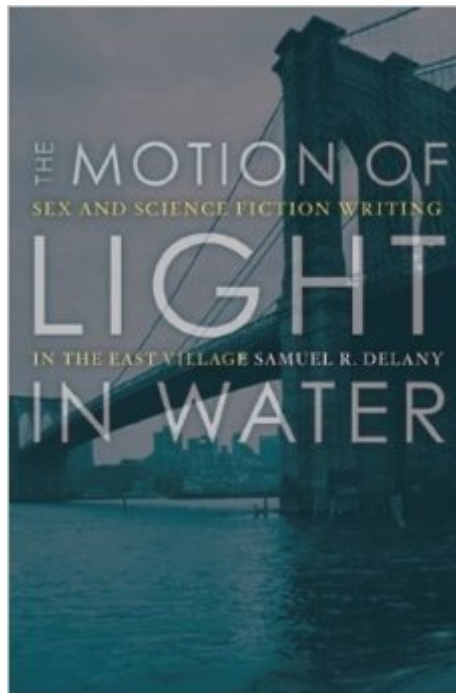


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The Motion Of Light In Water: Sex And Science Fiction Writing In The East Village



Synopsis

Samuel Delany is a science fiction writer, teacher and recipient of the William Whitehead Memorial Award for a lifetime's contribution to lesbian and gay culture. His autobiography focuses on his life in New York's lower east side in the 1960s and his development as a black gay writer in an open interracial marriage. The original edition, published

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Customer Reviews

This memoir of an important time in the life of Delany has a vivid sense of life being lived I find remarkable. I have read it half a dozen times over the years, not because I have all that much in common with Delany, because I don't, but because the very best memoirs share a quality of time passing, of the simple human desires to love and be loved and make something valuable of one's time. I see this memoir grouped with those of other African-American writers, or gay writers, or science fiction writers, and it's startling how this 'progressive' identification of human individuals with their groups comes off as some scifi nightmare world's typing of individuals by characteristics which are ultimately of limited use. Would someone who enjoys the work of Alice Walker enjoy this book because of Delany's skin tone? I think someone who enjoys Jack Kerouac would enjoy this book, not because Delany has much in common with Kerouac but because both were people who lived their lives outside the norm and who didn't try to tell others how to live and did their own things. That seems far more important when trying to categorize Delany than the gender of partner he prefers. I've gone off but not on a tangent, because that's the essence of this book. Delany doesn't

whine, doesn't list every wrong by every PC villain, but he isn't wishy washy about the life he led. Yet it was a joyful life, from glancing encounters with Bob Dylan and Albert Einstein, to a more substantial relationship with W.H.Auden. Delany's wife, poet Marilyn Hacker, is there on almost every page, and she comes across as very much her own person. There is a touch of sadness about their marriage, a sense that it will not last (something that could be said of some? most? all marriages), but Hacker's life is sketched in as well. I have no grand summing-up to end with. For all the political, sociological and gender stuff that could be said about this, it's just one of the those books that has given me great pleasure to read.

I am amazed that I'm the first person to write a review of this terrific book. It's a fascinating autobiographical portrait of 1960's bohemian - literary New York. Delany was in an almost unique position as a native New Yorker who grew up within the Harlem middle class. His family has become rather famous in recent years due to a play about his aunts. When you think of New York "Bohemians", you think White, if from New York probably Jewish. As a black gay man with an observant eye and real talent as a writer he brings something different and actually refreshing to our view of this particular milieu. His portrait of the development of New York's gay scene is also very interesting. You can profitably read Delany as a social historian. One thing you won't doubt after reading this book is that something was happening in early '60s New York which almost no one grasped. Bob Dylan's BALLAD OF A THINMAN is good companion piece to this work. By the way I find the tag suggestions for reviews of this book rather off. It deals at length with gayness but why consign a book this acute to a literary ghetto. It also deals with heterosexuality, blackness, art, culture and social change. This book functions on a number of different levels. It doesn't need to be pigeonholed and people shouldn't pigeonhole their reading.

Well, the detailed sex may shock you. But I bought the book to learn more about Delany's early days and how he wrote his first half-dozen mind-blowing science fiction novels -- Empire Star, The Einstein Intersection, Nova, Babel 17, etc. And I learned a lot. Black, bi-sexual Delany and his wife, white poet Marilyn Hacker, did not have an easy time in the early '60s -- they even had to go two states away to get married! And then things got even more complicated.... The intense gay-sex remembrances may put some readers off, but there's also a lot of detail about Delany's novel-writing. Overall, probably the most open and detailed autobiography I ever expect to read.

Admittedly I went into "Motion of Light in Water" not knowing what to expect, and I would reason that

is the case for most readers. Having read Patti Smith's transcendent "Just Kids" I somehow thought that "Motion.." would give me more insight into what it was like to live in NYC's bohemian communities back in the 1960s, which it certainly does to varying degrees. Smith came along a few years after Delany and much of what they relay here is the same...NYC was a much smaller, more community based place then, and it was surprisingly easy to meet and get to know luminaries like W. H. Auden, Albert Einstein, and others in Delany's case. Delany accepts but also questions labels that were appropriate for that era...black, gay, dyslexic, and others, that most people today would reject in favor of inclusiveness, but this is a recollection of an earlier time and place, hence more appropriate. What I found myself pondering here is the confusion people may feel entering into this realm as they likely came here for different reasons. Fans of Delany's science fiction wanting likely will read this wanting more insight into his growth and development as an author as well as the sources of his inspiration. Many of them may be put off by his recollections of his mildly graphic homosexual encounters, but perhaps not. LGBT readers hoping for insight into an under-recognized pre-Stonewall part of the community may find themselves bored with the passages relating to his science fiction work or disturbed by his promiscuous nature at the time. Indeed there is almost sort of a "Mad Men" era to everything here. Nothing is truly politically correct; Chip and Marilyn (his wife at the time) were both bisexual, poor, and trying to find their own way. That's what's most interesting...how these two very lost souls found each other, came to understand each other for all their faults and weaknesses, worked out an arrangement, pursued a life together flying in the face of societal norms, set out to find their own way, and ultimately came to accept and realize their own limitations and attributes. There are incredibly prescient points along the way and much of what Delany presents should prompt readers to contemplate the fluidity of sexuality and human nature, and the confines of monogamy and heteronormative society. This isn't easy reading to be honest and there's a lot here than can put readers off. That Delany is so willing to lay bare his soul is laudatory, and he does so completely in a way that is refreshing and shocking. Like most geniuses Delany is a mix of creative genius and madness. He owns up to his dyslexia but I cannot help but ponder if he also falls in the spectrum of Asperger's with his detached nature, tendency towards the obsessive/compulsive, tendency to obsess on particular points (his father's date of death in particular), and his awkwardness in social situations. He has certainly become an agent provocateur in recent times and perhaps that has marginalized his role and importance in the LGBT community. "Motion.." is certainly worth the read but be forewarned, it is a tough slog for many. I'm certainly intrigued to read his other memoirs and social commentaries now that I have a better sense of his writing style and perspective. "Motion.." likely is not for everyone and honestly I'm hard pressed to

say what its precise appeal may be. It certainly does capture NYC in a certain space and time and does give you insight into the creative process. While its likely not everyone's cup of tea it is an important book that deserves merit.

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