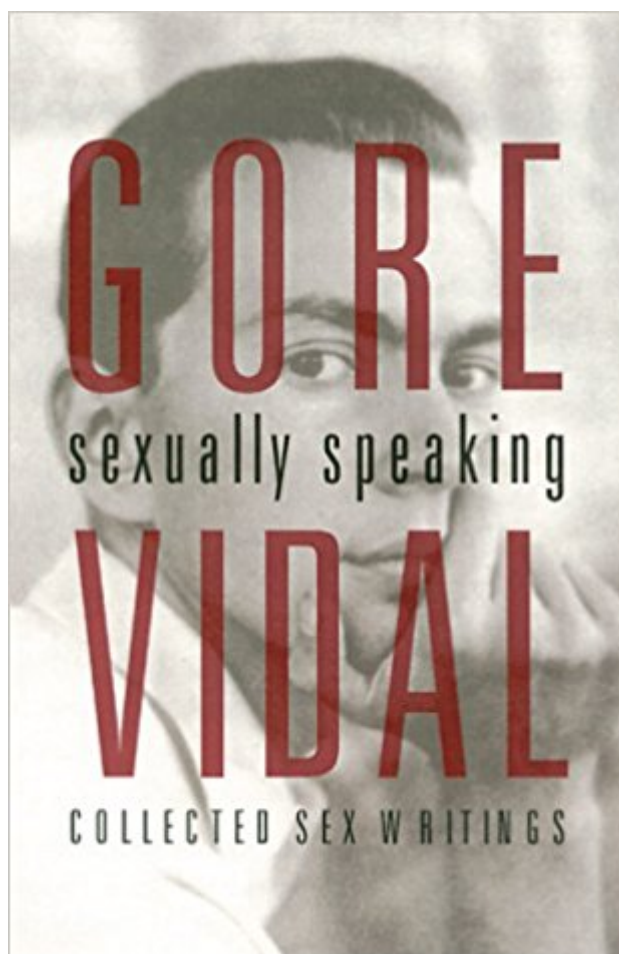


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# Gore Vidal: Sexually Speaking: Collected Sex Writings 1960-1998



## Synopsis

Gore Vidal: Sexually Speaking presents the author's often provocative and always engaging thoughts on sexuality. Here, fourteen essays and three rare, vintage interviews published over the past four decades tackle hot-button topics such as gay American founding fathers, sex and the Catholic church, gay bashing and the U.S. Congress, and bedding Jack Kerouac.

"Vidal's erudition, candor, and exceptional sense of humor shine."

—San Francisco Chronicle

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## Customer Reviews

From a delightfully caustic 1965 review of Henry Miller's *Sexus* ("Arcane words are put to use, often accurately") to a brief response to the homophobic torture and murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, *Sexually Speaking* brings together some of Gore Vidal's best essays on sex and sexuality. Although some of the essays are explicitly political, such as the 1979 *Playboy* article "Sex Is Politics," many seem to be included simply because they mention the sex lives of people Vidal has known. (One doesn't really need an excuse to republish his delicious reminiscences of Eleanor Roosevelt, Christopher Isherwood, or Tennessee Williams; the Roosevelt piece in particular feels somewhat wedged into the present volume.) There are also three interviews: two from the mid-'70s, although written for semi-underground gay magazines, touch upon a variety of political and literary issues; a 1992 conversation finds Larry Kramer practically badgering Vidal to admit that he's a homosexual. As he has throughout his career, Vidal refuses to be categorized on the basis of sexual acts: "I've never applied [these labels] to myself nor have I applied them to anybody else, even when they

have invited me to." Sexually Speaking is as entertaining as it is provocative, an interesting supplement to the more comprehensive The Essential Gore Vidal. --Ron Hogan

"Gore Vidal is renowned for his literary talent, but what makes him truly special is his ability to ignore the taboos, customs and norms of his time and look at contemporary society with the clear-eyed perspective of an anthropologist studying an ancient culture. This becomes quite evident in "Sexually Speaking," a collection of his essays on gender and sexuality, which have appeared in magazines and newspapers over the past few decades. "The sexual attitudes of any given society are the result of political decisions," he declares. "In societies where it is necessary to force great masses of people to do work that they don't want to do (building pyramids, working on the Detroit assembly line), marriage at an early age is encouraged on the sensible ground that if a married man is fired, his wife and children are going to starve, too. That grim knowledge makes for docility." Witty, acerbic and always original, Vidal knows how to stimulate readers intellectually with his daring mind. "Sexually Speaking" should make a nice companion piece to his much praised, star-studded memoir, "Palimpsest." -- Associated Press Book Review by Waka Tsunoda, October 10, 1999

Gore Vidal: Sexually Speaking contains some of the author's most challenging, thought-provoking, and controversial work, and also some of the wittiest--when asked whether his first sexual partner was a man or woman, Vidal replied, 'I was too polite to ask.' That remark speaks volumes about Vidal's attitudes toward sex and gender--as does the following, which sums up this brilliant collection: 'I think when it comes to writing about subjects like sex, people want reassurance. I'm not terribly reassuring.'" -- Thomas Fagan, Rain Taxi Review, October 1999

the package arrived in good order in fair state thank you very much. i will recommend you in the future

Gore Vidal's distaste for received opinion, and his joy in subverting it with fact-based, trenchant disputes, should inspire anyone who delights in a well-turned argument. With special panache and youthful vitriol, he excoriates the wrongly revered and those who hold ill-considered notions. This book collects Vidal's essays on various topics related to sex, and it's especially worth picking up. Take this: the Puritans left England to the New World, he maintains, not because they were persecuted "...for their beliefs, but because they were not permitted to persecute others for their beliefs." (p. 17) These zealots were so taken by the stern St Paul (and so lukewarm about Jesus' teachings) that they criminalized fornication and adultery on this side of the Atlantic - although they'd never gone to such lengths while in England. He has boundless admiration for good writing, such as

Oscar Wilde's (148), yet a mastery of words alone is not enough: Updike, he says, "...writes very well and he manages never to interest me" (268) For well-expressed political acumen, Vidal's matched by very few: Lewis Lapham, perhaps Christopher Hitchens. Here's his pithy encapsulation of what President Truman bred with what he terms "the garrison state" he created: it "...made us [the US] what we are today - broke and unloved and with our military out of control." (271) You may not agree, although this snippet is merely his obiter dictum on the matter -- one that still provides robust food to ruminate on the turns this notable democracy has taken since the Hitler war, and what was done at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Vidal can be screamingly funny too. Such as when he relates how Pope Pius XII visited a Dr Niehans in Switzerland, along with many celebrities, for injections of unborn sheep cells, presumably to restore his youth. Vidal reports that Pius arrived "...in a business suit and dark glasses ...an old man in no hurry to meet his Jewish employer." (165) A forthright gay long before it became prudent to avow his inclination, Vidal is defiant about the widespread ignorance of the complexity of human appetites, and denials that it was always thus. Yet even here, to his considerable credit, he can be comical. Such as when depicting a group called "...Gary Bauer's Family Research Council, where gays are compassionately demonized for having made 'a bad choice' in the cafeteria of sexual delights when, with a bit of therapy or prayer, they could change and become as wretched as those sad straights..." (186) For all his polemical strengths, Vidal could be prone to dubious conjecture. Take this: "...our own faith in psychiatry will seem as touchingly quaint to the future as our grandparents' belief in phrenology seems to us now" (21) Journalistic overstatement at best; at worst, bilge. In 'Hitch-22,' Hitchens denounces as questionable the sources supporting his view that Bush knew in advance about the 11th September 2001 attacks. The rightward-leaning Hitchens refused the disputatious mantle Vidal wanted to bequeath to him (Mind you, in the same book Hitch peddles the ludicrous claim that reliable sources revealed to him that Hussein \*did\* have Weapons of Mass Destruction - as if GW Bush would have concealed such exculpatory intel). Vidal also invests much ink on novelist Somerset Maugham, even after pointing out his tendency to melodrama, middling talents with dialogue, and his unwavering use of cliché's. Just what he found to redeem such lapses in Maugham I did not read on to find out. But the rest of the book was compelling and could not be put down until finished. Recommended with enthusiasm. \*\*\*\*

This collection of Vidal's essays (and a few interviews) on sex and sexuality is both timely and welcome, since, as he states, sex is never far from public consciousness in the ever-repressed U.S.A. Essays like "Sex is Politics" are as fresh today as they were when first published, and is

there another writer alive with a more authentic knowledge of American history and a more genuine understanding of American culture and political thought? I think not. Combine these assets with, as always, exquisite writing, and you have one utterly irresistible book. Contrary to what certain "gender absolutists" would have us all think, Vidal's opinions on sexuality are more trenchant than ever before at a time when more men and women are transgressing the false boundaries of gender to explore sex with whoever we please. This collection is a happy defiance of those who would try to neatly categorize all of us based on our sexual acts or even our preferences (a difficult feat indeed when one considers women like me, who perform with men acts that might be considered, ahem, decidedly queer...)

An excellent collection of Vidal pieces on sexuality which made for an interesting afternoon's read. Some reservations, however: why is a dry memoir of Eleanor Roosevelt included here when there is nothing within the essay that touches upon her sexuality? It is little more than a fond remembrance of a single meeting with the great lady (and Vidal has milked many a single and brief meeting with the famous for more than they were worth more times than can be remembered). Perhaps she was gay, but nowhere does Vidal suggest this or discuss it, so its inclusion seems pointless. Another reservation is that it is time that Vidal stop insisting that everyone is bisexual and that exclusive homosexuality does not exist when he himself has been exclusively homosexual for several generations. Rather than admit that he was wrong about this proclamation which he made back in the sixties, Vidal plows ahead, sounding more and more absurd each time he says it. Vidal's viewpoint on sexuality is pragmatic and free of guilt and superstition. He is very much in line with the rationalist/utilitarian school of Western philosophy.

Gore Vidal is one of my favourite USA writers, because we share some ideas, which is logical and it explains why he lives in Europe, USA is very rightish this years...But it is a country where critics to the system could be thought and published (think of Chomsky, for instance), and that's good, although I'm not sure if Gore Vidal has got many readers in his own country. Anyway, he talks about sexuality in USA, specially homosexuality, with a high sense of humour -very entertaining, indeed. And listen, the idea that there're not "gays" and "straights" is not his, you can also read it in Marvin Harris books: our Western society is the only one that qualifies somebody because of his/her sexual tendencies.

It is axiomatic that Gore Vidal has long been one of the more underrated American literary masters

of the 20th century. It is brilliant compilations like SEXUALLY SPEAKING that do battle with this oversight. Not often do books emerge that contain such wit, history and a chilling timeliness, that can be both enlightening and serve as a puckish summer read. The supplemental commentary is piercing, poignant and vulgar. This is the book that archeologists will dig up in two hundred years, to see how sexual identity in the 20th century was both confused and triumphant

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