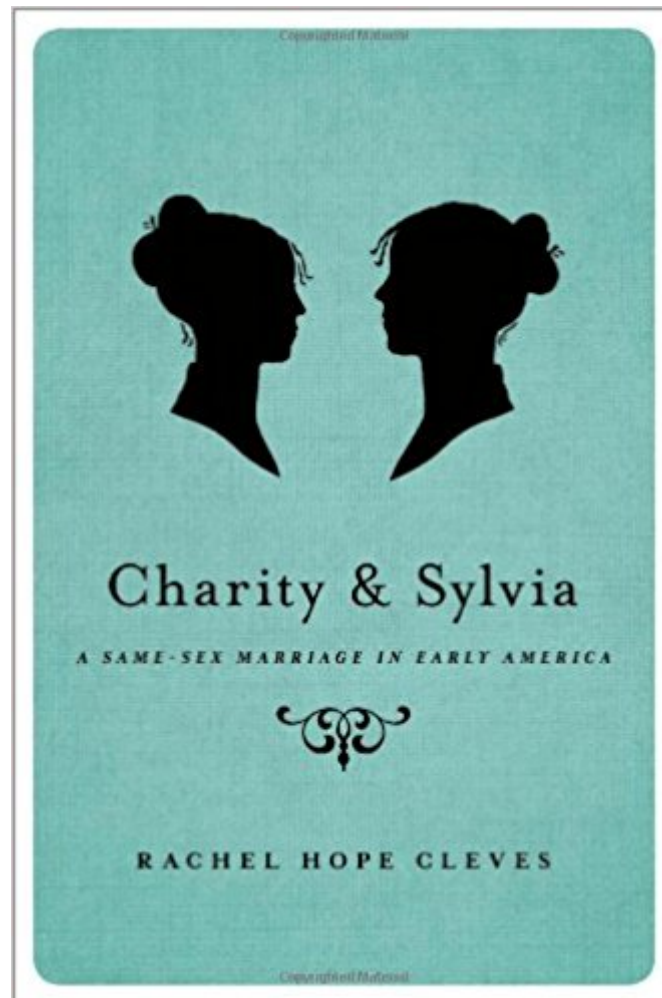




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# Charity And Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage In Early America



## Synopsis

Conventional wisdom holds that same-sex marriage is a purely modern innovation, a concept born of an overtly modern lifestyle that was unheard of in nineteenth century America. But as Rachel Hope Cleves demonstrates in this eye-opening book, same-sex marriage is hardly new. Born in 1777, Charity Bryant was raised in Massachusetts. A brilliant and strong-willed woman with a clear attraction for her own sex, Charity found herself banished from her family home at age twenty. She spent the next decade of her life traveling throughout Massachusetts, working as a teacher, making intimate female friends, and becoming the subject of gossip wherever she lived. At age twenty-nine, still defiantly single, Charity visited friends in Weybridge, Vermont. There she met a pious and studious young woman named Sylvia Drake. The two soon became so inseparable that Charity decided to rent rooms in Weybridge. In 1809, they moved into their own home together, and over the years, came to be recognized, essentially, as a married couple. Revered by their community, Charity and Sylvia operated a tailor shop employing many local women, served as guiding lights within their church, and participated in raising their many nieces and nephews. Charity and Sylvia is the intimate history of their extraordinary forty-four year union. Drawing on an array of original documents including diaries, letters, and poetry, Cleves traces their lives in sharp detail. Providing an illuminating glimpse into a relationship that turns conventional notions of same-sex marriage on their head, and reveals early America to be a place both more diverse and more accommodating than modern society might imagine, Charity and Sylvia is a significant contribution to our limited knowledge of LGBT history in early America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Rachel Hope Cleves offers a lyrical portrait of a same-sex marriage in this new book. Here completely assembled for the first time is the compelling story of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake and their forty-four-year (1807-51) domestic, romantic, and sexual union.... Through nineteen short, crisply composed chapters, readers are drawn into the intimate world of Charity and Sylvia.... Scholars of the history of sexuality and the general reading public alike - but especially those engaged in same-sex marriages in the twenty-first century - will appreciate the depth of research and the beautiful prose of this book. Charity and Sylvia would be proud." --Journal of the History of Sexuality"...Rachel Hope Cleves's Charity and Sylvia is an important contribution to the field. Finally, a historian has documented a long-term same-sex relationship in the early republic.... Charity and Sylvia is a compelling story that fills a long-standing void in the history of sexuality." --Journal of American History

"The book is the first to delve deep into the history of an early American same-sex marriage. Cleves sees Drake and Bryant not as an aberration, but as part of a larger history of same-sex partnerships that has yet to be written - one that now exists mainly as clues dropped in family histories and stories told in the archives of local historical societies." --Rebecca Onion, Boston Globe

"The moving true story of a same-sex couple who found an honored place in early 19th-century Vermont... Rachel Hope Cleves' new book, Charity and Sylvia: A Same Sex Marriage in Early America, is a slim, tender tribute to this marriage-in-all-but-law... Academic histories capable of bringing tears to a reader's eyes are rare, but Charity and Sylvia is one of them." --Salon

"In a year when same-sex marriages are being recognized, unrecognized and rerecognized in courtrooms around the country, historian Rachel Hope Cleves flies us back in time two centuries to a remarkable couple... Drawing on documents and letters, and occasionally reading between the lines and interpreting silences, Cleves meticulously reconstructs their lives together in Charity and Sylvia. She explores fascinating and difficult questions, such as how the two women squared their relationship with their religious community and whether this was a sexual union." --Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

"In telling [the story of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake], Cleves has written more than a work of recovery of a lesbian past. She offers an intriguing inquiry into the language of letters and poetry. Her close reading uncovers hidden meanings to reveal the private coded words of the same-sex female lovers." --Journal of Interdisciplinary History

"Charity and Sylvia is undeniably smart - a devastatingly handsome contribution to our understanding of the history of gender and sexuality in the United States and the history of the early republic and antebellum period generally." --The New England Quarterly

"In this beautifully written and utterly absorbing love story, Cleves (The Reign of Terror in America) explores the lives of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, two ordinary

middle-class women who serve as a window on historical constructs of marriage, gender, and sexuality in late 18th-century and early 19th-century America... Meticulously researched and brilliantly argued, Cleves has crafted an important work of history that resonates with one of today's most public debates." --Publishers Weekly (starred review)"[A] remarkable story of which [Cleves] tells with equal parts rigor and sensitivity... Charity & Sylvia is an absorbing and perspective-shifting read in its entirety, chronicling the lives of these two pioneering women, the multitude of challenges, personal and social, they overcame to be together, and the depth and richness of their lifelong love." --Brainpickings "Starting with the birth of the woman on whom author Rachel Hope Cleves focuses most, this book opens with a slice of life during the Revolutionary War. We then move back and forth in narrative, but Cleves never lets us forget the time and space that her subjects inhabited, the social mores, the historical aspects, nor the seemingly-inconsistent attitudes toward romance and sex that our forebears held and that which we've been led to believe they had. I found that deeply fascinating and highly entertaining. I think that if you're a fan of history (LGBT or otherwise), this is something you'll relish. With chaste retelling and its abundant details, Charity & Sylvia is your grandmother's book - and yours, too." --Washington Blade "With Charity and Sylvia Cleves has stitched together a coherent, captivating account, one filled with vibrant details, and she offers a provocative conclusion: however astonishing their story, it might not be that uncommon." --The Gay & Lesbian Review "An extraordinary book" -- The Historian

Rachel Hope Cleves is Associate Professor of History, University of Victoria

Full disclosure: I had the pleasure of interviewing the author for a podcast. I found both Rachel Hope Cleves and her book to be exceptionally articulate, intelligent and engaging. It's not often I read a biography and find myself turning the pages as if it were a suspense novel. The attention to historical and personal detail in the lives and times of Charity and Sylvia is very impressive. (I did not know what an 'acrostic' was until I read this book!). It takes us into their time in a very visual, sensual way, and it's fascinating. The friendship romances women had with each other, the importance of poetry and subtlety in their lives, and the roles they were expected to play, which both Charity and Sylvia found ways to break out of. It's also an insightful examination of what exactly constitutes 'the closet,' and how it often involves the unspoken approval and awareness of the communities people live it (which I think is still the case, especially in some communities where everyone knows someone is gay but doesn't 'know' it in the form of public acknowledgement). Anyway, this is a fabulous book about two women who determined to live lives on their own terms,

and to live them together. Oh, and I love all the names people had back then, which came as another of the book's many surprises: Silence, Charity, Idea. I'd love to meet someone named Silence today. Very highly recommended.

Had a very hard time getting through this book. It was tedious reading and I would not recommend it for a book club, which I read it for. Maybe I would never have read it unless it was for a book club.

This is a written documentary about a lesbian couple who were partners for over 50 years in a small town. It is full of facts and history to support the fact the residents were aware and accepting of their relationship. Fascinating facts of the late 1800's

In this very readable and engrossing book, Rachel Hope Cleves uses a wide variety of evidence to help us understand how Charity and Sylvia, a presumably lesbian couple in early 19th century Vermont, may have experienced their lives. I found particularly interesting her analysis of the order in which Charity and Sylvia added rooms to their house as they had the money to expand, and how the increase in privacy and eventually the greater capacity for entertaining made possible by those additional rooms changed their relationships with their families and the people they knew in town. Cleves uses genealogy not merely for the obligatory introduction on her subjects' ancestry but as a way of showing how deeply interconnected New England families were and how names were passed down as a legacy of friendship and respect. She looks at land documents and discusses what is implied when a woman instead of a man held title to the land, and at how poems and hymns could become a symbolic language in a culture where these texts were common currency. As a church organist I understand the latter very well and have no quibble with the premise though I'd like to see the evidence for "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" as a wedding hymn. In this day and age, it is more likely to show up at funerals. Cleves discusses clothing as well, especially the relationship between tailoring and plain sewing in the hierarchy of trades. I wonder if any hints in the letters might suggest masculine forms in Charity's clothing or the wearing of spencers, habits, or habit-shirts, or later, pelisses or redingotes, for example. These were all widely worn by women and would not have caused comment yet might have helped express Charity's masculine persona. This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in women's history, in early 19th century New England, and in how an intelligent and imaginative use of many kinds of evidence can provide new ways into history.

Relating history is so often dry and boring, as if seasoned with the dust of the libraries and archives in which it is held. Not so with *Charity & Sylvia*. Rachel Hope Cleves brings these strong women to life and includes the reader in their circle of confidence. Historical accuracy is spot-on (or as near as it can be), which is hard enough to achieve with more recognizable figures. That Cleves has achieved it with two ordinary women, and at that, two women who lived what we imagine to have been a taboo life together, is a credit to her research abilities and her tenacity. But an accurate story can still be dry and boring, and the author avoided that pitfall beautifully. The reader can feel the life and vitality emanating from *Charity & Sylvia*, which makes their story all the more real, and relevant to today. Love is timeless, and love is not gender dependent, is a message that comes through the years loud and clear. I am happy that I was able to contribute in my small way to the telling of this story, and intensely proud that the blood of Sylvia Drake's family flows through my veins. This book is a must-read for anyone with a social conscience and anyone who needs to develop one.

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