

Personal Stories of “Coming In” and Coming Out of the Closet

Tony E. Adams: Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, 2011, 214 pp

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There are books that engage us intellectually. There are books that we read for pleasure and emotional involvement. And then there are books that compel us to read with our hearts and minds. In *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction*, Tony E. Adams strikes that delicate balance between meticulous academic study and compelling personal narrative. *Narrating the Closet* critically examines and humanizes the struggles that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer persons face both in and out of the metaphorical closet.

An emerging scholar in communication and queer studies, Adams explores the complexities of “entering the closet, being closeted, and coming out” (p. 8). Taking up an autoethnographic perspective, Adams uses his life experiences to explore theoretical conceptualizations of the closet and same-sex attraction. Additionally, he incorporates stories from fifteen interviews, informal conversations, memoirs, film and television to compose a multifaceted framework of the closet as a relational entity that is enacted continuously through talk and everyday interactions.

Adams provides heartbreaking stories of the secrecy, rejection, and pain that many LGBQ individuals must confront. The most sorrowful tale is the death of Brett, Adams’s ex-lover, who the author speculates took his own life after coming out to his father. Brett’s death becomes the stirring exigency for Adams to reflect on and write about the closet. In the chapter “Coming Out Matters,” the repetition of the words “Brett’s death motivates me to write” becomes a powerful call to readers to feel the emotional, psychological, and physical violence that surrounds LGBQ lives. Adams depicts a haunting metanarrative of the closet through presenting consecutive examples of harassment, hate crimes, suicides, and social injustices.

As an autoethnography, Adams opens up his life as a kind of case study for exploring the painful world of living in the closet. He provides detailed reflections—from his first childhood same-sex attractions to years of wrestling with internalized

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homophobia to his abuse of alcohol in coping with his closeted identity. While some may find the sexual narratives Adams presents too explicit, his honesty and openness in sharing his secrets, his unapologetic representation of his life, and the rawness of his emotions ultimately create a vivid and complex picture of the closet. As readers, we accompany Adams on his personal journey into and out of the closet. These intimate stories allow Adams to open a theoretical door into the closet—the psychological harms of living in the closet, the relational impact of coming out, and the dangers of being in or out.

To guide readers through the process, Adams presents central research questions such as “How is same-sex attraction discussed and lived?” and “What does it mean to come out of—and, consequently, stay in—the closet?” (p. 27). Additionally, he clearly explains terminology such as “sex,” “gender,” and “sexuality.” To facilitate students’ understanding of the nuanced practices of qualitative research and autoethnography, Adams also devotes an appendix to methodology, where he usefully defines various qualitative research terms (e.g., ethnography, autoethnography, fieldwork, life writings) and details his research practices. Moreover, in addressing ethical concerns of privacy and disclosure, Adams reflects on the writing process. For example, he explains how and why he uses different points of view (first-person voice, second-person voice, and third-person voice) throughout the book.

With each chapter, Adams identifies aspects and contradictions of entering, being shrouded, and coming out of the closet. In the chapter, *Learning the Closet: The Time of “Coming In,”* Adams proposes different conditions for the closet to exist: one learns not to talk about one’s same-sex attraction; one recognizes one’s stigmatized identity; one knows that one harbors a secret. The closet is about hiding one’s sexual identity from others, of publically denying one’s same-sex attraction. Significantly, Adams conceptualizes the closet as a relational entity that is communicatively enacted, one that is negotiated through self-concealment and disclosure. Indeed, Adams extends Petronio’s (2002) privacy management theory by examining specific lived circumstances in which people withhold and disclose private information.

“Coming out,” then, means explicitly confirming one’s sexual identity, verbalizing and saying “I am gay.” Even so, for LGBQ individuals, coming out is a continuous act. One constantly must decide if and when to disclose one’s sexual identity to friends, family, and strangers. There are definite risks and consequences involved with revealing and concealing one’s sexual identity. The fear of exposing one’s sexual identity has real and imagined repercussions. There are stories of being kicked out of one’s home, of parents disowning their children, of family and friends completely ostracizing the “out” individual. And there are challenges once one is out of the closet, such as the dismissal of one’s sexuality by others or their insistent denial and disconfirmation of one’s same-sex romantic partner.

The burden of the closet is one that many LGBQ individuals live with every day—pretending to be heterosexual, lying to parents, denying a core part of one’s identity. However, the closet is not a permanent entity. Ultimately, Adams’s message is one of hope—that gay and straight individuals alike can work together in transforming the closet, for “the closet, coming out, and same-sex attraction are *shared* responsibilities, ones we must all negotiate *together*” (p. 140). Indeed,

Adams offers strategies at the end of the book for LGBQ individuals to use in negotiating the “interactional paradoxes” of the closet. For example, Adams observes that one technique of reworking the closet is through “innocently manipulating the frontstage” (p. 135) whereby “a person can intentionally but unobtrusively manipulate conditions, premises, and paradoxes of the closet” (p. 137). Here, Adams gives the example of how after hearing a cashier call a customer a “flaming faggot” behind his back, Adams wrote out a check that identified him as working for LGBQ rights. This elicits an apology from the cashier for his homophobic declaration.

Grounded in storytelling, *Narrating the Closet* convincingly models personal vulnerability and academic integrity. Adam’s narrative style has a poetic rhythm and cadence, inviting the reader to trust him as a narrator. While scholarly in nature, *Narrating the Closet* is accessible to a variety of academic and non-academic audiences. Scholars interested in gender and sexuality studies, queer studies, communication studies, and qualitative research will find *Narrating the Closet* a beneficial edition to their collection. Adam’s book extends the boundaries of qualitative research and encourages scholars to utilize their lived experiences as a site for critical inquiry. *Narrating the Closet* also provides advocates with insightful stories and information that can be used to tackle bullying, harassment, and LGBQ suicides. *Narrating the Closet* is an affirmation of LGBQ identities that reminds young gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer individuals that they are not alone.