

RICHARD CANNING

The Fight Goes On

The Pink Line: The World's Queer Frontiers

By Mark Gevisser

(Profile 544pp £25)

The Australian academic Dennis Altman has long contested the Anglo-American, northern hemisphere consensus that have grown up around marginal sexual identities. He has pointed out how fundamentally unapt they are when applied to parts of the world separated from the West not only by race, religion and politics but also, critically, by health and sanitary conditions. Altman's 2001 book *Global Sex* was a rallying cry. However, it was not a comprehensive response to the imbalances and cultural insensitivities often seen in LGBTQ studies. In *The Pink Line*, the South African author Mark Gevisser takes up the challenge set by Altman: radically to rethink the circumstances facing a set of communities (certainly not one 'community' at all, ever) around the world. He approaches this task with bravura, care and deliberation, leaving their diversity and individualism fully intact.

Gevisser's aim, as he puts it, is to tell the stories of people across the world 'who have found themselves on what I have come to call the Pink Line: a human rights frontier that divided and described the world in an entirely new way in the first two decades of the twenty-first century'. There are obvious parallels between attitudes to gay rights and responses to the coronavirus pandemic. The same authoritarian regimes that have sought to suppress the realities of the tragedy now unfolding have long been hostile to LGBTQ populations and the rights of sexual minorities. That, however, is not the whole story. In the West as well, injustices remain: the relaxation of laws concerning gay male sex acts has not ensured equality in the sphere of public health. A man in the USA who has had sex with another man at any point and in any way since 1977 still faces a lifetime ban on donating blood. A straight man is considered less of a threat to national blood supplies, even if he has been treated

for syphilis, gonorrhoea or genital herpes within the past year.

Gevisser admits that presenting the diverse tapestry of LGBTQ lives across the world in one book is a crazy ambition. Yet a virtue of *The Pink Line* is his determination to let individuals speak for themselves and, critically, to respect the labels they choose. He opens with an account of a 2009 engagement ceremony between a man and a trans woman in Malawi, which seems, at first, an unexpected sign of optimism. However, it soon leads to a media witch-hunt, the intervention of the authorities and the long-term imprisonment of the female-identifying partner, Aunty, ending in her enforced emigration to South Africa. The author reflects on his own marriage to his male partner the same year, their idyllic Cape Town lifestyle and how markedly these contrast with Aunty's hand-to-mouth existence selling beer on the Cape Flats.

Throughout this book, Gevisser focuses on the language of frontiers and borders. He looks at the myriad ways in which societies try to ring-fence and police sexual behaviour and gender. He finds the case of Ukraine exemplary. The country's queers find themselves caught in a struggle between a Europe-facing, democratically inclined youth and those

who continue to look east, welcoming Putin's restless interventions. Homosexuality has long been used by Moscow to strike fear into the Ukrainian population (as well as its own) and keep the country within its sphere of influence. In 2013, the Kremlin backed a campaign in Kiev of posters showing two stick men holding hands and bearing the slogan 'Association with the EU means same-sex marriage'. On Russian-language television channels, this was more crudely rendered: 'The way to Europe is through the ass.'

In the same year, Russia passed its notorious law forbidding 'gay propaganda' ('Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values', in Kremlin-speak), words that echo Section 28 of the Thatcher government's Local Government Act, a strange homage indeed on its twenty-fifth anniversary. As Putin sought to ramp up nationalist feeling at home, his government manipulated facts, fears and fantasies about sexual minorities with one aim: to identify those belonging to them as an 'enemy from within', hostile to Russian values and in hock to the West.

Inevitably, much of what Gevisser investigates isn't pretty. Physical attacks on queers are frequent and all too often expected or condoned. Discrimination at work seems ubiquitous. Rejection by family or friends is commonplace. 'I live my life inside,' weeps one Egyptian lesbian. It's not the sole story, clearly, but the weight of evidence presented here is a startling, essential corrective to the 'gaytopia' view of the world common in the West, where an emphasis on lifestyle choices, assimilative behaviour and what might be termed 'ease of transition' between multiple versions of the self has supplanted a concern for rights. Yet there is solace too: when the American journalist Dan Savage reacted to the suicide of a gay teenager by promoting the message 'It Gets Better', the phrase travelled the planet. It has, Gevisser shows, helped to sustain, motivate and empower the isolated and sexually marginalised. The frontiers and borders of sexual mores are shifting and changeable, Gevisser insists, but they hardly ever straightforwardly go away. For too many LGBTQ people, simply holding the pink line is often the best that can be hoped for.

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