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# Intimacies



## Synopsis

Two gifted and highly prolific intellectuals, Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, here present a fascinating dialogue about the problems and possibilities of human intimacy. Their conversation takes as its point of departure psychoanalysis and its central importance to the modern imagination—though equally important is their shared sense that by misleading us about the importance of self-knowledge and the danger of narcissism, psychoanalysis has failed to realize its most exciting and innovative relational potential. In pursuit of new forms of intimacy they take up a range of concerns across a variety of contexts. To test the hypothesis that the essence of the analytic exchange is intimate talk without sex, they compare Patrice Leconte's film about an accountant mistaken for a psychoanalyst, *Intimate Strangers*, with Henry James's classic novella *The Beast in the Jungle*. A discussion of the radical practice of barebacking—unprotected anal sex between gay men—delineates an intimacy that rejects the personal. Even serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer and the Bush administration's war on terror enter the scene as the conversation turns to the way aggression thrills and gratifies the ego. Finally, in a reading of Socrates's theory of love from *Plato's Phaedrus*, Bersani and Phillips call for a new form of intimacy which they term “impersonal narcissism”: a divestiture of the ego and a recognition of one's non-psychological potential self in others. This revolutionary way of relating to the world, they contend, could lead to a new human freedom by mitigating the horrifying violence we blithely accept as part of human nature. Charmingly persuasive and daringly provocative, *Intimacies* is a rare opportunity to listen in on two brilliant thinkers as they explore new ways of thinking about the human psyche.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ã¢ "In this fascinating and disturbing book, two writers with prose styles and intellectual styles that are at once famously identifiable and intimately personal celebrate the possibility of relationships that defy identity and undo personality. Braiding together brilliant psychoanalytic reflections on fiction and film, on the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer and the invasion of Iraq, on suicidally unsafe sex and SocratesÃ¢ " theory of love, Bersani and Phillips at once dream of shattering the ego and, in their own distinct voices, display its miraculous, tragicomic persistence.Ã¢ • (Stephen Greenblatt, author of *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* 2008-01-11)Ã¢ "This tremendous accomplishment showcases the talents of two agile, wonderfully erudite minds. As they weigh our desire for intimacy and explain why it so often fails, Bersani and Phillips grapple with issues as weighty as aggression and state-sanctioned violence. Every facet of the subject is handled with impressive care and intelligence. *Intimacies* is often lyrical, even occasionally elegiac, but for a book about impersonal narcissism I found it surprisingly poignant, personal, and affecting.Ã¢ • (Christopher Lane, author of *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness* 2008-04-11)Ã¢ "Intimacies is a very incisive and gentle exchange between two writers who have thought and rethought psychoanalysis in powerful terms for contemporary culture. The dialogue enacts the kind of relationality it seeks to know, moving beyond the traditional narcissism of authorship, probing the important difference between being a psychological subject and finding a way to be present to another person. Psychoanalysis is moved beyond the theory of the ego and developmental norms, returned to primary questions of how and why pleasure is often at odds with self-preservation, and how such enduring tensions are presented in visual media, sexual practice, dialogue, and clinical exchange. Practiced here is an intimacy that explores the regions of impersonal co-existence where losing the self expands the capacity to love.Ã¢ This a beautifully crafted book, one that underscores how the social life of the psyche is a matter of risk, wager, suspense, excitation, bodies, talk, and all manner of things both dangerous and sustaining.Ã¢ •Judith Butler, author of *Undoing Gender* (Judith Butler 2008-04-11)

Leo Bersani is professor emeritus of French at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the

author or coauthor of numerous books, including *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art and Homos*. Adam Phillips is a psychoanalyst, visiting professor in the Department of English at York University, the general editor of Penguin Modern Classicsâ€”Freud translations, and the author of twelve books, including *Going Sane* and *Side Effects*.

This collaborative effort by Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips extends the theoretical work of the former in important ways. Those familiar with Bersani will know that he is one of the most eloquent voices in queer theory, psychoanalysis, and the history of aesthetics writing today. This pithy volume, running at exactly 125pp., presents three chapters written by Bersani and a fourth by Phillips. Taken together, Bersani's contributions draw from Freud and Lacan to theorize intimacy beyond the self-satisfying pleasures of self-/ego-preservation; Phillips, in turn, assesses Bersani's work in view of what it might mean to forge "impersonal relationalities" in our world. It should be noted that Bersani is building on previous work here: that is, it takes some familiarity with the psychoanalytic literature in order to appreciate fully the force of his critique. Moreover, Bersani's prose is characteristically dense, perhaps even more so in a book so short in length (note that the margins are wide and the 12-point font is easy on the eyes) yet so powerful in theoretical acumen. With those caveats, readers might take up *\*Intimacies\** for advanced study in: aesthetics (Chapter 1, on Henry James's *\*The Beast in the Jungle\** and the French film *\*Intimate Strangers\**); queer theory (Chapter 2, on the culture of barebacking); and social theory (Chapter 3, on the problem of "evil" in our contemporary moment). While Chapters 1 and 3 cover familiar terrain for longstanding readers of Bersani, Chapter 2, I found, opens up new directions for theorizing sexuality. In his account of barebacking, Bersani turns to "pre-modern" expressions of religious piety -- namely the Quietist practice of "pure love" -- to explain how the putative "self-destructiveness" of unprotected gay male sex bespeaks something more radical: the ascetic discipline of ego-indifference, a kind of "pure" impersonality. Without "celebrating" barebacking as such, Bersani wants to acknowledge that there is something valuable in its mode of relating to others precisely through "self-divestiture." Chapter 2 is the most insightful, and original, work in queer theory I've read since the much-debated turn to "gay shame" took place in the field with the publication of Lee Edelman's *\*No Future\**. I find Bersani here to be a more convincing theorist of the limits of relationality than Edelman. I also think his attempt to craft a theory of love (in Chapter 3) through the notion of "impersonal narcissism" is more supple and engaging than Edelman's repetitive missives against heteronormative reproductivity. The one reservation I have about this book is that the self-described "dialogue" between Bersani and Phillips isn't executed to great effect. Phillips is an able respondent to Bersani, yet I couldn't shake

the feeling that their exchange was a little uneven. After following Bersani patiently construct his theoretical lattice from Chapters 1 through 3, I found Phillips's response to be a bit of a distraction, if not an "anticlimax." No doubt Bersani would have fun with my feeling of being let down (i.e., "Could it have been any other way?"). Still, I think the book could have been stronger as a monograph, with Bersani composing a longer Conclusion and integrating certain of Phillips's points into the text of his critique. A final note: Bersani bases much of his discussion of barebacking on Tim Dean's research on the topic. Dean has just published his book on barebacking, titled *\*Unlimited Intimacy\**, with the University of Chicago Press. I haven't read this book yet, but I imagine it will prove a useful analogue to *\*Intimacies\**.

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A friend asked me to find this book for her - no problem, item exactly as described. Thanks!

Leo Bersani, with some interspersed comment by Adam Phillips, continues his theme of the shattering of the traditional psychoanalytic ego in limit experiences. Bersani has been developing this line of thought for a number of years and presents it with an always interesting combination of erudition (here an analysis of Henry James' "Beast in the Jungle") with contemporary gay issues (here "barebacking").

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