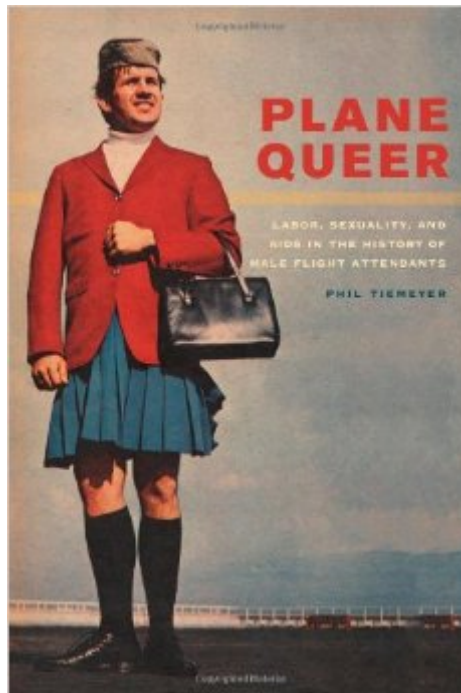


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# Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, And AIDS In The History Of Male Flight Attendants



## Synopsis

In this vibrant new history, Phil Tiemeyer details the history of men working as flight attendants. Beginning with the founding of the profession in the late 1920s and continuing into the post-September 11 era, *Plane Queer* examines the history of men who joined workplaces customarily identified as female-oriented. It examines the various hardships these men faced at work, paying particular attention to the conflation of gender-based, sexuality-based, and AIDS-based discrimination. Tiemeyer also examines how this heavily gay-identified group of workers created an important place for gay men to come out, garner acceptance from their fellow workers, fight homophobia and AIDS phobia, and advocate for LGBT civil rights. All the while, male flight attendants facilitated key breakthroughs in gender-based civil rights law, including an important expansion of the ways that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act would protect workers from sex discrimination. Throughout their history, men working as flight attendants helped evolve an industry often identified with American adventuring, technological innovation, and economic power into a queer space.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I'm worried that tenure boards could say, "Well who cares about gay stewards?! No tenure for you!" However, this book is so amazing and thoughtful, it boggles the mind. I simply looove this book and applaud the scholar for making it. This was such a profound mÃ©lange of history, gender studies, gay studies, inter alia, that it boggle the mind. The book's title has a double meaning. A gay steward is the "queer" on the plane. Moreover, they may perform a role in which they make the

plane or plane staff or plane trip non-normative i.e. "queer." (Btw, I don't think the author ever mentions that they former Nirvana member played the role of a gay steward in one Foo Fighters video.) The author never mentions Dr. Christine Williams, as far as I remember. She has written several books about the experiences of workers in professions that consist mostly of people of the opposite gender. Thus, she has studied female engineers, but also male nurses and librarians. I think of this author's book as a continuation of Dr. Williams' pioneering efforts. For those who doubt the cultural importance of gay stewards, the author emphasizes two things. First, the Patient Zero of Randy Shilt's "And the Band Played On" was a foreign, gay flight attendant. This caused a hysteria. However, a few years ago, the press covered a flight attendant who jumped out a plane on the slip-n-slide slide with two bottles of beer. Instead of being reviled, that steward was seen as a working-class hero. The author has explained how so much has changed in the past 70 or so years of flight. To the author's credit, he doesn't leave other identities at the table; this does not just deal with sexual orientation.

"Plane Queer: Labor, Sexuality, and AIDS in the History of Male Flight Attendants" is an outstanding social history by Phil Tiemeyer about flight attendants and their challenges since the beginning of air transportation. He argues that these individuals were a distinct, highly-visible, uniquely-skilled workforce whose actions were very much the stuff of popular culture. The male flight attendants looked to their profession as something more than a job; it was more like a calling, and it required sacrifice to carry the mission forward. Although the first stewards/flight attendants in the pre-World War II era were largely male, with the coming of war this profession became filled with women. In the aftermath of the war stewardesses entered the popular culture as a glamorous profession for young, attractive, single women who wanted to see the world, meet wealthy and handsome men, and expand their lives beyond anything they had known in America. The coffee, tea, or meal meme emerged in the 1960s at almost the same time that men sought to reenter the ranks of flight attendants only to find them shut out by industry policy. Lawsuits resulted and eventually the first male flight attendants began work. Just as famously, the cultural mindset identified these men as largely gay and assigned to them gender-based, sexuality-based, and AIDS-based discrimination. Many were gay, Tiemeyer suggests, but not all. Regardless of sexual orientation they facilitated key breakthroughs in civil rights, helping to reinterpret Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act protecting workers from sex discrimination as a means of breaking into the all-female flight attendant corps.

I read this book because the author has been my neighbor. I learned about the book when I

encountered him at a local dog park. I was interested because I did a lot of flying back in the glory days of flying; back then flight attendants had time to talk to the passengers and I learned so much that I'm often asked, "Are you sure you didn't fly?" Phil's references to the good old days, with airlines like Eastern and TWA, brought back a lot of memories. Then, as an academic, I was involved in social science research. I was impressed with the depth of the research and analysis that went into this book, as well as the writing. As a female who remembers overt sex discrimination all too well (as compared to the covert discrimination that's still with us), I was particularly fascinated by the relationship between discrimination based on sex and based on sexual orientation. It's horrifying to read arguments supporting the need for female flight attendants - their "charm" and ability to comfort the passengers. These actions reinforced the notion of stewardess as object of male fantasy, calling in turn for stewardesses to wear short skirts and remain unmarried. Recent news stories reveal that United and El Al Airlines now require flight attendants to wear high heels during take-off and descent, although they may wear flatter shoes during inflight service. These rules seem to reflect the persistent stereotype associating professional dress among women with wearing of heels, the higher the better, even when these shoes might be a safety hazard. That's the subject of another study.

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