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**THE FLIGHT FROM COOL:  
American Men and Romantic Love in the 1950's**

**Jonathan Zimmerman**

Jonathan Zimmerman, a writer and historian, found a cache of love letters, three hundred of them, written to his mother in the 1950's by various suitors, all Jewish except for one. Using as primary sources not only the letters themselves but also popular novels and films of the period, he was able to find common characteristics in the way in which men expressed themselves in love.

Zimmerman was able to make sweeping generalizations about his subject and then to find myriad secondary sources which substantiate those findings in the context of the cultural history of the period. He also was able to find sources which might shed a light of understanding on the particular dilemma raised in some of the love letters.

For example, in seeking to explain the ardor of one suitor, Murray Schechter, he looked to European as well as American writings. European scholars described a gradual “informalization” of emotional constraints after the Victorian era, only to be followed by a more formal period in the 1940's and 1950's when there was more restraint in personal expression. On the other hand, American scholars write of a “general dampening of emotions across the entire twentieth century,” as over against a more open display of strong feelings in the nineteenth century. One of the sources spoke of the crucial shift which came in the 20's and 30's, when major changes in work patterns and in families led to a “detached, dispassionate style.” Yet, as witnessed in the letters of Murray Schechter, the 1950's seem to have opened the door to “deeper emotional patterns that would continue.”

Another example of a conclusion drawn by Zimmerman and supported by secondary sources is on p. 35. "...separating sex from sentiment was a staple of interwar youth culture." He lists no fewer than three sources for that one statement.

Zimmerman, then, uses his secondary sources not only to flesh out the context of the period and the preceding periods and their cultural attitudes toward issues he raises, he also uses them to help understand the young men whose love letters he is holding, the intimacies each was able to articulate to his beloved. In a way these men become like characters in a novel, each vying for the hand of the same girl. I found myself rooting for one over the other because of his passion. Strangely, Jonathan's father did not seem (at least in the letters shown) to be the most passionate. Perhaps he was simply confident of the mutual affection.

Viewed from another perspective, the study of the love letters and the subsequent research led to a broader understanding of trends in male personal expression as found in society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in Europe and in America.