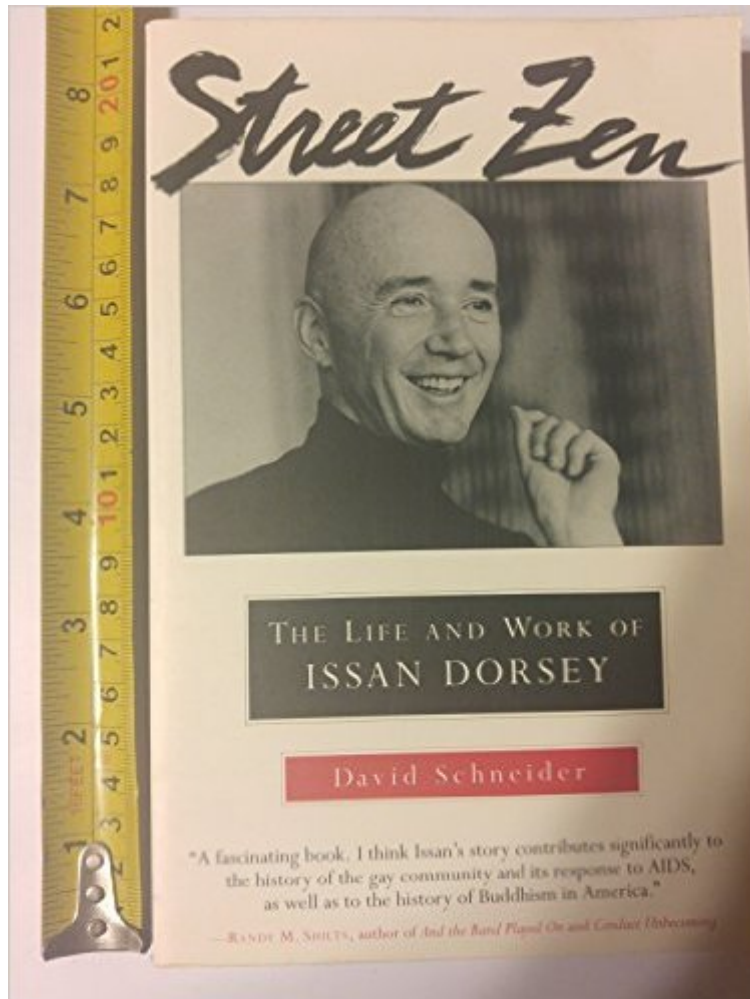


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Street Zen: The Life And Work Of Issan Dorsey



Synopsis

Founder of San Francisco's Maitri Hospice for AIDS patients--where he died in 1990--Dorsey practiced Zen for 20 years, after leading an outrageous existence as a drag queen, prostitute, junkie, and commune leader. "Issan's story contributes significantly to the history of the gay community and its response to AIDS."--Randy Shilts. Photos.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I can appreciate that folks who knew Issan Dorsey found this watered down. I, however, didn't, and I loved the book. It's a great counter to the prissiness that tinges most zen literature. This was the first thing I read that made me think, "Well, if he was a zen teacher, maybe zen is something I want to explore." For those who knew Issan and studied under him, please write books! He is an important teacher for the messiness and reality of this world, rather than the cozy sterility of a monastery, and I would love to know more about him.

I read this book because I heard about a renowned Buddhist named Issan Dorsey at a dharma talk. I'm gay myself, and hearing that Issan Dorsey was also a gay man made me interested in finding out about his life. So, I popped his name into a search engine, and ordered this book from . Up until recently, my relationship with religion in general has been a bad one. The tendency of Western religions to preach hate toward my kind has made it all but impossible for me to participate in any of them. Legislators on both sides of the political aisle have used religion as a vehicle for either

passing laws to restrict my freedom or turn a blind eye to these efforts, for fear that any support for my community would render one 'unelectable'. None of this has made for a very good advertisement of religion for my community. Buddhism struck me as being fundamentally different, and when I read this book, I realized just how different it was. Issan Dorsey was from my side of the tracks, and instead of preaching self-loathing to him, Buddhism taught him how he could make a major difference in the lives of those who needed him the most. I'm pretty inspired to give this Buddhism thing a try now. I've never heard of a religion that doesn't judge people before. Maybe this is the one for me.

Issan Dorsey was a wonderful man, with a heart full of compassion and fun. I heard him give a Dharma Talk once, and I was howling with laughter. That playfulness, that joy and zest for life, are evident everywhere in this book. I felt at home right away. So what if he was a drag-queen in Chicago? So what if he was gay? He was an inspiring Zen teacher and a compassionate leader during San Francisco's AIDS crisis, turning part of Hartford Street Zen Center into a hospice for dying AIDS victims. Naturally, this caused tension in the community, and that is documented in Street Zen. But Zen is not some musty practice of "don't bother me, I'm meditating." It is a way of living, a way characterized by compassion, and there is no doubt that Issan Dorsey was full to the brim with compassion. The other reviews, and some of the comments, seem to feel the need to either justify Dorsey's homosexuality or to wave it away, as if it was somehow not appropriate for a Zen teacher to be gay. Well, I am a straight man who has been sitting Zen for 45 years, and I don't care whether Issan was gay, straight, queer, bisexual, or just plain confused about it all. That is NOT what matters. What matters is that Issan is the kind of man I would have loved to have hung out with, a teacher I would have been proud to study with, and a human being I admire. Most books on Zen are, let us be frank, a bit boring. Buddhism is complicated and very counter-intuitive; explaining it is cumbersome and sometimes tedious. Street Zen is neither. It is a romp; it is a comic portrait of a sterling figure in American Zen; it is an expression of joy in a sometimes gray world.

I agree to some extent with some of the earlier reviews, I felt the author wrongly at times treated Issan Dorsey's homosexuality as somewhat of an exotic freakshow. But over all the author did a wonderful job of portraying the heart and nature of Issan. My only criticism would be sensationalizing Issan's sexuality. The earlier criticism one reviewer made that the book was flawed because a heterosexual was writing about a homosexual is extremely simplistic.

This work is so important to both the Buddhist community and anyone who has any inkling of how to create community. Issan Dorsey was an example of the best teachings of Jesus and the best promises of Buddha. Kudos to David Schneider, et. al, for their exhaustive work and beautiful tapestry. -TJ, Santa Fe, NM, USA

I didn't know Issan Dorsey, but reading this book made me wish I did if only because he seemed a terribly interesting person and the course of his life is...well...amazing. I highly recommend it. As a gay man with an interest in Buddhism, this book was like a door opening.

I found this book extremely inspiring. The life of Issan Dorsey is a must read for anyone who has ever felt dragged down, left out, and mentally or physically ill. That should include everyone!

My impression from this book was it was a story of a present day Bodhisattva. A story of a man whom lived life fearlessly. Who lived as a Herman Hesse's Narcissi but in reality not between book covers. In this book I felt was a true betrayal of the concepts of the Bodhisattva. Issan seems to have had spontaneously. Earlier statements of cheapness is sad. Value statements betray a judgment and lack of Bodhisattva sentiment. Was Milarepa's story a cheap story? The fact that murderer he was? Or is it part of the story of that Bodhisattva's life? I find Issan Dorsey's life neither cheap or over blown. I have known others with similar lives so the fellow whom judges this book as "straight" has a "bent" view. Again cheapness ...well it saddens me to hear a student of Dharma make such a statement.

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