



Cool Gray City of Love: 49 Views of San Francisco

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A runaway *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller, *Cool Gray City of Love* is a one-of-a-kind book for a one-of-a-kind city. It's a love song in 49 chapters to an extraordinary place, taking 49 different sites around the city as points of entry and inspiration—from a seedy intersection in the Tenderloin to the soaring sea cliffs at Lands End. Encompassing the city's Spanish missionary past, a gold rush, a couple of earthquakes, the Beats, the hippies, and the dot-com boom, this book is at once a rambling walking tour, a natural and human history, and a celebration of place itself—a guide to loving any place more faithfully and fully.

Cool Gray City of Love: 49 Views of San Francisco Details

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From Reader Review Cool Gray City of Love: 49 Views of San Francisco for online ebook

Leslie says

I've been reading this book off and on for a few months, mostly on BART rides. Each chapter is essentially a standalone essay about a corner of San Francisco, which makes for ideal subway reading. The topics of the chapters and the history they cover are wide-ranging, from an overview of the Pleistocene forces that shaped the landscape to an ode to a specific neighborhood Kamiya once lived in. I've learned a lot of very interesting tidbits about San Francisco (and not only - Kamiya is clearly very well-read, and makes abundant reference to literature, philosophy and art) from this book. Even the "boring" parts have stuck with me, as I found on a recent hike where we happened to encounter the site of Portola's discovery of the bay.

However, I'd hesitate to call the book more than okay, because I'm just not that enamored of Kamiya's writing style. I don't know much about him except that he's worked for various periodicals, and his prose shows it badly; grand pronouncements about humanity and half-baked metaphors stacked three deep might be okay in a thirteen-inch column, but chapter after chapter of them gets wearying quickly. Kamiya also has a tendency to introduce the central conceit of a paragraph as the closing sentence of the paragraph before. I'm not sure if that comes from newspapers, but it is disorienting until you get used to it.

There's also something very dudely (maybe dad-ly?) about his writing - present in his affectionate tribute to Herb Caen's "skirt-admiring" ways (is that a more genteel form of skirt chasing?), his glib characterization of "junkies, drunks, transvestites, dealers, thugs, madmen, hustlers, derelicts, prostitutes, and lowlifes" as the "radioactive core" of the Tenderloin, and his self-indulgent tales about his wild younger years. It's just not my style.

In short, I'll probably keep this on my Kindle as BART reading, but I won't feel any qualms about skipping around.

Dan says

Anybody who has talked to me about books in the last few weeks has heard me rave about "Cool Gray City of Love." This book has everything I've wanted from a San Francisco book in the last year. It's chock full of fascinating historical tidbits. It's also a veritable walking tour of the city. In fact, that's Kamiya's main conceit here. He set out to walk the whole city and write about his experience. Mission accomplished!

I try to avoid marring my books, but I couldn't resist dog-earing this one like crazy. It seemed every other page had some curious treasure I wanted to save. For example, the following passage depicts the hyper-inflation the Gold Rush brought to the city (comparisons to the current tech boom are apt):

"Rents and real estate prices were exorbitant. A shack with a primitive fireplace rented for \$800 a month, a store for \$3,000. A building on Portsmouth Square that before the Gold Rush had rented for \$10 to \$20 a month now rented for \$75,000 a year. A lot on Portsmouth Square that sold for \$16.50 in 1847 sold for \$6,000 in late-spring 1848. Before the end of the year, it sold for \$45,000."

IN MID-1800'S DOLLARS! I have trouble even fathoming what that must've been like. There's another

anecdote that relates the cost of laundry. Apparently, it was cheaper to ship dirty clothes to Hawaii than it was to get them washed in SF, so most people (and it's important to note that the vast majority of the city's inhabitants at the time were young men—again apt comparisons) just bought new clothes and tossed the soiled garments onto the streets. I could go on, but you should just read the book.

It's not all phenomenal prose, though. Kamiya is a former newspaperman, and his prose sometimes dipped into the kind of civic boosterism I associate with someone like a Carl Hiaasen, only with markedly less cynicism. At one point when waxing poetic about the Golden Gate Bridge Kamiya writes: "So the bridge returns San Francisco to the comforting, pre-Copernican center of the universe." Still, I give it 5 stars because I can forgive a little purple prose—Kamiya's earned it: he's got deep roots in the city—and because I drank the Kool-Aid long ago.

If you liked this, make sure to follow me on Goodreads for more reviews!

Michelle Welch says

I probably wouldn't have loved this book as much if I hadn't picked it up shortly before leaving on a trip to San Francisco. I didn't finish it before going, and only saw a fraction of the sites discussed. But the book gives such a wonderful view of the city - its neighborhoods, its history, even its geology - that I feel I now know it much better than I do.

The other thing that appealed to me so much was the author's literary bent. As a reformed English Lit snob, I'm all over this book's structure: numerous short essays that are about the author's insights and epiphanies as much as they are about locations in the city. It was a book that made me sigh at the end of every chapter, and eagerly count the days until I can go back.

Eve says

Bay Area native and former cab driver Gary Kamiya speaks early on about 'doing the knowledge,' or the driver's requirement of knowing a city inside and out. He's taken a lifetime of living and curiosity and turned it into a book whose prose is as big and sparkling as the city itself. But this isn't the San Francisco most people (including the locals) know; it's a micro and macro analysis, highly affectionate and jawdroppingly examined in terms of history (including prehistory), geology and sociology—and it's never boring. You will never think about the City by the Bay the same way again. Five stars.

Jan says

A must read for all San Franciscans!

Dan says

Living in a city can be done in two ways; first, you can merely co-habitate with it. Sure, the city is part of

your address and you can find the nearest grocery store, but that's about it. The other way? You don't just live in a city — you live in that city's community. Which way do you live in your city?

From the very first pages, Kamiya's love for the community of San Francisco sets the tone. San Francisco isn't just where he lives, it's an important part of who he is. As described in the introduction, Kamiya sets out almost on a whim to explore each square mile. His epic-scale exploration of a community isn't just the buildings, roads, and shores (though there's plenty of that!) — more importantly, it's the people, history, and cultural context that shape the places we visit every day.

While I was expecting something more block-by-block — I'm a literalist — the end result is richer and more stimulating. Kamiya provides a lively history of the city, each chapter tying events and historical figures to specific places and modern anecdotes. His own history in the city is scattered throughout, adding more personality and smoothing the tone. A handful of stories were weaker, generally those where Kamiya espoused his own views; however, Kamiya's beliefs are typical of the long-time San Francisco residents I know. In hindsight, perhaps the book was all the more valuable thanks to the flashes of local insight Kamiya includes.

I can't speak highly enough of this book for anyone wanting a deeper understanding of San Francisco. City-lovers across the globe may also be inspired in how they think about their own cities; if only every city had an introductory book of this caliber. If you want to live in a city's community — not just within the city limits — this is the book for you.

Alia S says

The first problem I had with this book was that its title/sub combination caused me to keep referring to it as "50 Shades of Gray" (...). The second problem was the writing, which suffers from a bad case of unnecessary analogies: Kamiya will spend several paragraphs transporting you into the Pleistocene and then abruptly snap you out of it by comparing something to a Midwestern bowling ally on a Saturday night. It's kind of annoying. And for my taste the attempts at one neat little conclusion per chapter are in places strained. Sometimes an interesting building is just an interesting building and not a metaphor for man's inhumanity to man. Like, it's OK -- I would have still read the chapter.

However: Well researched, genuine, and genuinely interesting, full of fun stories. The blend of natural and human history is enjoyable, and Kamiya's skill as curator of miscellany more than makes up for the writing.

Linda says

To paraphrase a clever criticism, As a writer, Gary would make a good cab driver.
I knew in the first paragraph that I couldn't read this book. The third sentence had six modifiers, as did the

fourth. The fifth had ten!

Michael Krasny's jacket blurb comparing him to Herb Caen is the finest example of the art of the blurb!

Following the classic creative writing directive to write what you know, Kamiya did that and the result seems mixed. I read 6 chapters. Some I found interesting. I liked The Haunted House and accounts of racial disparity and ebb and flow of ethnic groups. The Lost City, the creek and the decaying houseboats. The Western Addition.

Some left me incensed. The "topography of the peninsula and the city was oddly unimpressive" as you approached the Golden Gate from the West. He preferred the Bay Bridge approach and the lights of the city! In one chapter he tells us that the land where SF is now was ugly wasteland until the city was built. Pardon? As ugly as it is above the city which is now a National Seashore it's so magnificent? And below the city with its golden hills?

I had to read some Carl Sandberg when I put this down!

Helen says

I learned a lot from this book, but I definitely did not love it. Here's why:

1. Gary Kamiya relies too heavily on external, unrelated references to describe atmosphere. I feel I missed much of the mood of the book because of this.
2. Kamiya is good at the overarching, big-picture world view insightful conclusions we learned to do after every essay in high school. They're really beautiful individually, but as he does this at the conclusion of every one of his 49 chapters, it gets to be too much.
3. Kamiya is fond of using the same words and phrases repetitively, especially when he slips into deep nostalgia. It gets really boring to read. In general his style is so slow I ended up having to skim to get through it all.. Lest I fall asleep.
4. Kamiya skipped the Richmond. Like seriously? So rude I could puke.

Despite those points, this book was pretty digestible and well researched. It's definitely enhanced my everyday experience of living in the city and that's invaluable.

Spiros says

A lovely valentine to the City, from the natural grandeur and isolation of the Farallones to the artifice of George's Log Cabin, which straddled the County line and was thus able to serve alcohol after 2:00AM, on the Burlingame side of the establishment. Kamiya explores the City's geography, nature, climates, prehistory, history, and current social issues, all in an intensely personal voice. This book feels like what Peter Ackroyd has been doing with his series of histories of an infinitely vaster and more historical city, London.

Christopher Newton says

For a native San Franciscan such as myself, pure delight. Gary Kamiya wanders through the City starting about 12,000 years ago when mastodons and sabre teeths were scrimmaging on the sand dunes, on through the native Americans and the Spanish Presidio, the Califorino ranchos and the Sidney Ducks, blue collar WWII San Francisco, Beatnik San Francisco, Hippie San Francisco, the Castro during the AIDS epidemic, the earthquakes ('08 and '89) -- just a delight of a read in all its immensity.

Kathleen says

After 24 years of living in SF, I am still smitten with the city, so its great to read a book by someone who is equally smitten, especially by someone from the Bay Area. There is lots of history that I either didn't know, had forgotten or had heard a different angle on. Lots of us could write 49 chapters on SF - kudos to Gary Kamiya who actually did it.

Mark Field says

In the closing paragraph Kamiya writes "I have spent much of my life exploring San Francisco. But perhaps it is better not to see everything." It sums up what he set out to achieve in this book, it is a highly personal and intimate portrait of his city from his perspective. He covers every inch of the city and its neighborhoods, but the stories he tells are selective, they are his personal reflections and memories and what he regards as important. It is a wonderful book, an allegory of memory and of place that embraces nature, history and of course politics. His love for San Francisco is undeniable and he tells the city's stories with a passion and enthusiasm that is unequalled. A delightful read!

Steve Sarner says

I could not put this book down yet it took me "forever" to read. Sound counterintuitive? Read on to see why.

First, I must disclose that I love this cool gray city so I am naturally biased about Cool Gray City of Love.

As soon as I saw the title I knew it was going to be about San Francisco. Then I saw it was, appropriately, 49 stories (views) by Gary Kamiya, co-founder of Salon.com.

That sealed the deal for me – it was a must read.

Second, I really enjoy history and particular history of great cities so I am further biased with my 5 star rating.

Each of the 49 stories is captivating and well written, however, if one is not interested in California history in general, or San Francisco in particular, the book may not be satisfying.

And that brings up an important point. While billed as a taste or views of various neighborhoods this is not a

“travel guide” in any sense. The focus of the book is really on the history of this 7X7 section of land. And a well-told history it is.

Ranging from when the Bay was a giant valley with mammoths and sabretooth cats and one could walk to the Farrallon Islands (I never knew that) through the Spaniards and Russians missing the “gate” for hundreds of years, Kamiya covers the gold rush, quake, war, beatniks, hippies and up to the tech “takeover” today.

Now, to the question on why it took me so long to finish the book. It’s similar to exploring San Francisco itself. It’s very easy to become distracted and lost in wishing to discover more. What kind of shops are down that strange Chinatown alley? Where does this path lead to in Fort Mason, an even better view? Kamiya kept leading me down new alleys and paths to discover in every chapter.

This started, appropriately, at the start. The book’s introduction is where I learned of the poem that inspired the title. Written in 1920, by George Sterling, a contemporary of Jack London and Ambrose Bierce he was an “original” Bohemian.

So I was curious to learn more about this George Sterling character. What are some of his other poems? And off I went in search of more info that lead to pathways of further discovery and more questions and deeper down the alley. The introduction is 3 ½ pages and it took me a week to get past it because I was curious about so much of its content, people, period and places, alone.

And that was the start of a true reading adventure. Kamiya’s tales took me to prehistoric SF and “digging” deeper into the science of the geology of today’s town. Through the Native Americans and first new settlers and many other notable people in history there was a fun distraction with every page turn. The book also introduced me to the people many of our current day streets are named after, including Alfred Spear whose street I work on today. It also reveled the namesakes of many other well known places and events today, such as The Outside Lands festival.

If you are interested in the history of California, the Bay Area and especially San Francisco – this is a must read. It’s cool; I loved it and, no doubt, will enjoy it many times over as I gray.

Amar Pai says

Five stars if you love SF

This guy is a kindred spirit!

I related to a LOT of this book, esp. secret stair ways, the mania for covering every square inch of the city, the appreciations of its myriad beautiful spots and romantic infatuation w/ the city as a whole. He has the cojones to claim Land’s End is the best urban walk in the world. I call it 2nd best in SF! (First is Philosopher’s Way in McClaran. But agree Land’s End is sublime)

illustration from sf cool gray city of love, chapter 27. kamiya calls this larsen peak but gmaps says it's grand view park. regardless of what you call it, the stairs are amazing!

Chapters I would add to this book:

- 50. Public art
 - 51. Sidewalk chalk lines
 - 52. The walk around the city
 - 53. Philosopher's Way
 - 54. Mori Point
-

Joe Angiulo says

Not a lot of new material here for serious students of SF history, but Kamiya's personal insights and thorough exploration of the city are worthwhile. This would be a fine introduction to the span and depth of local history; his bibliography is quite good, and will be influencing my own reading list for quite a while! An excellent companion piece to his erstwhile colleague's "Season of the Witch."

S says

This book took me about 6 weeks to read, which for me, is a VERY long time but I did not drag this book out because I found it dull, it is just that it lends itself perfectly to being read along with another book, because the book is split up into 49 short chapters. The subtitle of the book is "49 views of San Francisco" and so the author has dedicated a short chapter to a small section of San Francisco. He then delves into the history of each area he is discussing, going back sometimes several hundred years to the first inhabitants of San Francisco and the Peninsula, the Ohlone Native Indians.

If you are a person, like me, who has lived in this city for almost 20 years, loves to walk and explore different neighborhoods, parks and hillsides and is more in love with this city now than when I first moved here, then this is the book for you. I cannot imagine anybody that is not a long time resident of San Francisco reading this book since he talks about areas that you would have to know about in order to have any interest when reading about, or so I personally think.

An extremely well researched book which forever changes the way I now look at certain neighborhoods in San Francisco, like the Western Addition, the Geary Highway that separates it from Japan Town. The history of the city's attempt at razing the Western Addition to wipe out the blight that existed and reversely creating another larger problem was very interesting and educational.

Joseph says

I bought this book a couple days before I left San Francisco two weeks ago, but I wish I had read it beforehand. This is a marvelous introduction to the city, written by a journalist who has some good chops for telling history and discussing everything from politics to history to geology and beyond. If you're planning a trip to San Fran anytime soon, pick this up as an unusual guidebook. I know I'll be returning to SF some day with this book in tow.

Kasa Cotugno says

Wonderful. This book could only have been written by someone who has had a lifelong love of the place, enough to research in depth its geological and human pasts, and write about it so eloquently. Myself, I lived in the City for 10 years, during which time I walked many of its streets, appreciating the variations in architecture and mood provided by each neighborhood. Kamiya's chapter on the two earthquakes (1906 and 1989) was beautifully handled - everyone who was there has their own story (I was at Candlestick, waiting for Game 3 of the World Series to begin and remember the eerie ride home on a MUNI bus through streets devoid of traffic lights). Probably, this would appeal more to those with knowledge of the city than others.

Sarah Dubel says

Do you think you love San Francisco? Reading Cool Gray City of Love will make you will fall in love with this enchanting city even more. This is a real treat of a book. The writing teases you to engulf every last word in one sitting, yet to do so would be to cheat yourself of its literary excellence. The prose is lyrical and playful, honest, and yet mildly mysterious—you can only imagine what he will say or where he will go next.

Cool Gray City of Love has a bit of something for everyone. Anyone interested in anthropology, geology, oceanography, culture studies, LGBT issues, World War II, and more will enjoy this work. Even if you favor learning about certain time periods, Kamiya will bring others to life with intrigue and entertainment. Not only did he undoubtedly relentlessly research all of his subjects, he morphs the golden nuggets of anecdotes into a narrative that nearly transcends non-fiction. He doesn't sugarcoat history, and shares his experiences, just enough that you hope you may run into him at a cocktail party. It is a well-rounded biography of a city, never lingering too long on any one subject. The narrative doesn't run chronologically, thus allowing you to make virtual twists and turns through the city's history.
