

Question and Answer with John F. Marszalek III, Author of *Coming Out of the Magnolia Closet*

Tell me about *Coming Out of the Magnolia Closet*.

Coming Out of the Magnolia closet challenges the stereotype that same-sex couples would not choose to live in a place like Mississippi. It challenges the belief that rural and small-town southerners will not tolerate same-sex couples living among them. It is not as simple as that. In this book, same-sex couples reveal a complicated relationship with their communities, families, and religion.

To learn about their lives in Mississippi, I interviewed lesbian and gay couples throughout the state. As I wrote the book, one of my goals was for readers to feel as if they were sitting in the couples' homes and hearing their stories as I interviewed them. The stories, both heartbreaking and hopeful, come through in the dialogues between the couples and me about meeting and falling in love, marriage, and their experiences with their families, communities, and churches. They explain why they stay in a state that resisted same-sex marriage and continues to resist equal protections for same-sex couples. Along with the couples I interviewed, I share my own experiences as a gay, married man living in Mississippi. I also comment on the major themes that emerge from the couples' stories, explaining how they relate to couples in other areas and times.

What is the *magnolia closet*?/How did you come up with the title?

The *magnolia* is a symbol that represents Mississippi. It is both the state tree and flower. In fact, on one side of the U.S. Mint's bicentennial commemorative quarter for Mississippi are magnolia blossoms with the official state nickname, *the Magnolia State*.

Coming out of the closet is a common metaphor for people revealing to the world (or at least to one person) that they are, in the case of the couples in my book, lesbian or gay.

The magnolia closet, therefore, is the closet out of which LGBTQ Mississippians reveal themselves to their families and communities. It also symbolizes the closet that the state promotes through laws that allow businesses to refuse service to same-sex couples and the lack of protections against housing or employment discrimination.

I say more about the symbolism of the magnolia closet and how I chose the title of my book in my author blog: <https://johnmarszalek3.com/blog/f/what-is-the-magnolia-closet>

Who should read *Coming Out of the Magnolia Closet*?

I intentionally wrote the book so that it would be relatable to both general and scholarly readers. I think it will provide readers with a glimpse into the lives of same-sex couples living in the rural and small-town south. It will help them understand the complicated relationship between same-sex couples and southerners. Same-sex couples, their families, and their friends will recognize aspects of themselves as they read the stories in this book.

Of interest to scholarly readers, in each chapter I review writings from southern and rural queer studies, history, sociology, and psychology to provide analysis and context to the couples' experiences. Most oral histories in queer studies are comprised of interviews with individuals. I interviewed couples, enabling readers not only to hear from individuals but also to observe the interactions between two spouses/life partners. Because I interviewed couples both before and after *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the Supreme Court ruling that same-sex couples have a right to marry, the oral histories included in the book cover a unique period in the history of same-sex couples.

Tell us about yourself and why you wrote this book.

I grew up in Starkville, MS, which is the college town of Mississippi State University (MSU). My parents, though, are originally from the north. Growing up in a college town was different from other small towns in Mississippi. I grew up with native Mississippians but also with people who had moved here from all over the country.

After I came out as gay in college, I wanted to live in cities with large gay communities. In 2005, I was living in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. I evacuated back to Mississippi days before it hit. My life in transition, I debated whether to return to New Orleans, move to another city, or stay in Mississippi. I talk more about the push and pull between a small town where one has roots and a large city with a diverse gay community.

During that time, I met my husband in Mississippi and was surprised to discover that there was parts of living in a small town that I enjoyed. I wondered what it was like for other same-sex couples who were living in Mississippi. I wanted to know what their lives were like, how they were treated in their communities, and why they stayed. My own questions led to my desire to travel across the state, meet other same-sex couples, and hear their stories.

Over the years, I have worked as a licensed professional counselor in private practice and a college professor in clinical mental health counseling master's degree programs. An important part of counseling is asking clients to help you understand the stories of their lives. It was a natural transition for me to ask same-sex couples about their experiences as I interviewed them. I think that couples trusted me, because they knew about my background as a counselor and because they knew that I am gay and married myself.