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**Daring to be bears**

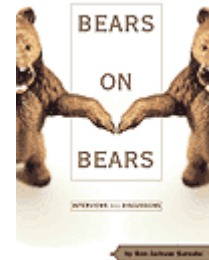
Hefty, hairy men of the bear subculture, previously shunned by mainstream gay society, are feeling sexy and ready for their close-up

By Larry Flick

From *The Advocate*, August 20, 2002

Mike Occhipinti smiles when he recalls the first time he heard another man seek his attention on the street by yelling, "Nice beard, buddy...woof!" The 39-year-old New Yorker says, "It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. I remember feeling an intense rush of excitement in that moment. I'd been publicly acknowledged as the type of man that I wanted to be seen as—a bear. I felt like I'd arrived."

Indeed he has. In the grand scheme of queer culture and all of its many fetish-driven subsections, being a bear is no longer an act of rebellion against the gay male standard for beauty and social acceptance. The once-ornery movement of so-called outsiders has morphed into its own increasingly powerful paradigm—a paradigm that is rooted in equals parts unbridled



**Resources for bears**



**Bears on Bears** at Alyson.com)

sexuality and heightened self-esteem.

“It’s about our sense of liberation,” notes Matt Johnson, 30, of Chicago. “When you’re a bigger guy who is surrounded by men who find you attractive, it’s like being set free.”

Wayne Hoffman, 31, of New York, agrees, adding, “Being a bear is about many things: self-image, masculinity, camaraderie, social acceptance. The bear community is not about sex only, but without sex as a motivating factor, would all these guys be buying bear-themed baseball caps, going to bear bars, and tattooing bear paws on their butts? I don’t think so.”

The plethora of bear-emblazoned caps, bear-friendly nightspots, and other assorted phenomena are among the ways in which bears have come into prominence in the mainstream gay marketplace. And while bears gradually find their way into general-interest publications and other media, bear-specific skin magazines, videos, and Web sites have become such big business that even companies like Falcon have begun dabbling in images of furry, husky physiques.

“Seeing images of myself in the media is validating,” says Denver Smith, 46, of Albuquerque. “When you leaf through a magazine and consistently see one type of image—and it’s not yours—it’s natural to start feeling like you’re less than everyone else. So it’s nice to now walk into a Barnes & Noble bookstore and see books about bears. You feel included.”

Others consider this to be just the beginning of bear representation in the media. Ron Suresha, author of *Bears on Bears* (Alyson Books), a compilation of interviews with bears, says some progress has occurred but not enough:

“The bear image is still largely confined to being appreciated by the homo-masculine gay populace.”

He also points out that there’s a “radical difference between incorporating bear body image into the fabric of gay consciousness and producing works which serve a segment of the community.” While there are still strides to be made in both areas, he asserts that the increase in visibility and acceptance of bears is “definitely a step forward.”

Identifying what exactly constitutes being a bear has become a growing source of contention. For some, it’s as simple as having a hypermasculine demeanor, a hefty physique, and facial hair. For others, it’s far more complicated, as smaller-statured men and muscular men also strive for inclusion. There are now even bear subsections, like cubs (the category with the most controversial definition, though it generally indicates smaller, often younger men), grizzlies (extra-large, extra-hairy guys), daddy bears (bears who are either mature or dominant), and polar bears (silver-haired seniors), among others. There are even other animal tags for bear lovers, like wolves and otters, which usually describe thin, hairy men who enjoy the company of bears.

“It’s pretty comical how important it has become for some people to so carefully delineate who fits where and why,” Occhipinti notes. “Why can’t we all just be bears and get over it?”

As with any group that evolves from underground movement to full-fledged cultural phenomenon, the desire to enforce such sharp delineation has begun to cause dissension within the ranks. “It’s not the healthiest thing to be happening for bears, but it was

inevitable," says Craig Stevenson, 29, of Long Beach, Calif. "Prejudice and individuality will always be present in any group. But if it's not nurtured, then it takes a lower position on the list of priorities."

And Dave Wilson, 29, of Dallas, believes there's one key difference between bears and the rest of the queer world. "In the end, we accept all people into our community," he says. "It's not just about a particular look, age, size, or appearance. No one is ever left out."

*Flick is senior talent editor of Billboard magazine.*

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