



The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men

By David Nimmons

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This surprising and thought-provoking book begins with the obvious fact that Stonewall happened 30 years ago, and the perhaps less obvious fact that in the 30 years since an enormous number of social science studies have been done on gay men. Dave Nimmons proceeds to synthesize that information to reveal a number of unseen patterns of gay male behavior, truths about our lives we feel instinctively but have not named.

For instance, countless studies show that gay men have developed a culture in which public violence is almost non-existent, which is notable when you consider that violence in this society is almost entirely a male phenomenon. Even in intensely over-crowded gay bars and discos, with alcohol and testosterone saturating the atmosphere, fist fights are virtually unheard of. On in the area of volunteerism, study after study shows that gay men volunteer at a much higher level than any other segment of the population (and, very interestingly, our volunteerism is about evenly divided between gay and non-gay causes, as are our charitable contributions). Our patterns of intimacy and friendship are much more diffuse and extended than heterosexual patterns; sexual jealousy and exclusiveness are extremely different, as are our relationships with women and our pursuit of playfulness and sexual bliss. Altogether, these gay social innovations have no parallel in modern American culture; they describe a new kind of public ethics, one with deep implications for gay men and for the larger society.

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The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men By David Nimmons Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2300057 in Books
- Brand: St. Martin's Press
- Published on: 2002-05-28
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 10.60" h x .99" w x 5.72" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 272 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Gay men are mindlessly hypersexual, unethically promiscuous and ceaselessly narcissistic or so the worst stereotypes would have it. Rather than refute these charges by painting a portrait of male homosexuals as just like heterosexuals (except for one small detail), Nimmons, president of New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, radically reinterprets gay sexuality, intimate relationships and self-image. Using a wide range of scientific surveys, anthropological studies, philosophical inquiries and personal observation and anecdotes, Nimmons argues that gay male culture is arranged around highly ethical behaviors that value the needs and health of both the individual and the community. These values, he argues, are enacted through a wide range of sexual practices and unconventional couplings (from one-hour tricks to open long-term relationships), and are manifested in the community-building that has accompanied the AIDS epidemic, as well as the broad range of mentoring relationships between gay men. Noting that "gay relationships are distinct from heterosexual relationships in that they are frequently based on expectations of equality, reciprocity, and autonomy," Nimmons also examines how gay men's relationships with women could present a model for heterosexual men as well. While "the bitchy queen and her cousin once removed, cynicism" are endemic to some realms of gay culture, Nimmons is careful to place these effects in a context of socially generated self-hating. The book is at its best, and most challenging, when Nimmons makes his case with statistical data his survey of the lack of violence in gay male public spaces and relationships (as opposed to heterosexual male spaces) is a model of social science but these segments dovetail nicely with his original and powerful sociological and philosophical arguments.

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From Library Journal

In this fascinating and provocative study of the gay male experience in America, Nimmons, a writer and past president of the New York Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, boldly challenges the libidinous, body-conscious stereotype of the typical gay American male. With an irreverent, almost conversational tone that belies an embarrassment of statistical riches, Nimmons redefines gay men's contributions to a newly evolving public ethos revolving around the central theme of care and service to the community. Academic studies and the author's own research indicate that gays have the lowest crime rates of any demographic, that they most often choose occupations in the health and public service fields, and that they maintain higher levels of community volunteerism. More interesting, and perhaps more daring, is Nimmons's argument that gays, America's only openly polyandric tribe, may offer constructive new paradigms for the institution of heterosexual marriage now suffering from high divorce rates and the destructive breakup of the family in order to create a happier, more stable environment in which to raise children. This may well be one of the most important books on gay culture for the new millennium and certainly one of the most daring and original. For all gay studies collections. Jeff Ingram, Newport P.L., OR

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Review

"Provocative and sure to be controversial....An exhilarating ride." *The Washington Post*

"Fascinating and provocative...may well be one of the most important books on gay culture for the new millennium." *Library Journal*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Bernice Hicks:

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Gerald Conway:

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Amanda Bernard:

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