

Chasing Adonis: Gay Men and the Pursuit of Perfection

Tim Bergling

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Gay, straight, or otherwise, anyone who picks up a fashion magazine or flips on the television once in a while is probably familiar with the “mainstream” gay male prototype: stunningly handsome, always fashionable, and eternally youthful. In short, he’s an Adonis.

But how realistic is this stereotype, and what is its impact upon the very men it is meant to market to and represent? The author, a Washington, D.C.-based journalist, television producer, and author of *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* and *Reeling in the Years: Gay Men’s Perspectives on Age and Ageism*, explores these questions and many more. He surveyed more than a thousand gay men via the Internet, telephone interviews, and in person, about their personal experiences with the seductive and problematic ideal of male perfection. Beneath the perfectly sculpted surface, he found that though the ideal itself seems ubiquitous, if only thanks to Madison Avenue, its effects upon the lives of real people are wide-ranging and multi-faceted.

Bergling himself is the first to admit that his research wouldn’t pass formal scientific scrutiny. Still, the attitudes and opinions of these real men represent a broad spectrum in terms of both tastes and cultural and self-awareness. Thanks to the relatively informal nature of the process itself (and the safety and anonymity of the Internet), their answers are not only compelling as data, but also as entertainment. Take Ryan, who consents to a disastrous three-way with a woman because he’s in love with his straight best friend, or the fact that twenty percent of respondents date only men who look like themselves.

From the brazenly shallow to the deeply moving, *Chasing Adonis* is crafted from the first-person accounts of gay men from across the country and around the world, from adolescence to late middle-age, from “twinks” to “bears” and everything in between along the sub-cultural spectrum. In addition to survey responses, it also draws on the expertise of professionals like San Francisco relationship counselor and psychotherapist Michael Bettinger and popular cartoonist Joe Philips, creator of such illustrated books as *Boys Will Be Boys* and others, who weigh in on issues from whether attractions are learned or genetic, to coping with rejection, to the personal costs of pursuing perfection.

To be sure, this book will appeal to its target audience of gay men who are chasing their own versions of Adonis; but it is also an engaging read for those who, as friends, loved ones, co-workers, and neighbors of these men, could only benefit from a deeper understanding of the less obvious challenges they face. Bergling’s approach is accessible and his prose engaging. Including anecdotes from his own life, as well as some scathing (and often hilarious) criticisms, he draws the reader in to the heated pursuit of perfection. The passions recounted in *Chasing Adonis* may be illusively varied, but in the end it turns out that beauty is more than just a myth.

COURTNEY ARNOLD (April 10, 2007)

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