

# What's a nice person like you...

Gay bars have been in existence in one form or another for over a century, but only in the last decade have they come to approximate their straight counterparts in appearance and mode of operation.

Straight bars have always been a place where a non-homosexual could go to show off his new glad rags, cut loose, relax, or look for a partner. And one didn't have to hunt for them either. Their tacky flashing neon signs and boisterous crowds were usually hard to miss. Twenty years ago a person could literally trip over a gay bar and not recognize it. At that time they were owned by enterprising heterosexuals who were out to maximize profits while doing as little as possible for their clientele. If a customer dressed too outlandishly he could be denied entrance at the front (or most likely) back door. Once inside he could expect to have his actions closely monitored by the staff. Handholding was not allowed, lip-kissing was out of the question, and dancing had to be very prim and proper at all times. This kind of surveillance was deemed necessary for the club's survival, lest an undercover cop in the crowd use "unbecoming behaviour" as a pretext for closing down the place.

Today gay bars are as uninhibited as straight bars, although the clientele of each differ in a number of respects. First of all, the gay crowd often seems to be somewhat younger than the patrons of straight watering holes. It is not uncommon to see a balding head or a matronly figure among the crowd at a straight bar. But it must be emphasized that both types of clubs are by their very nature guilty of a latent form of ageism. The younger ones often find the atmosphere of the bars more attractive, and little attempt is made by club owners to become better acquainted with the concerns of their older clientele.

Secondly, I've often noticed that at straight bars women usually do the cruising and looking while the reverse is usually true at a gay bar. On a typical Friday evening at a downtown straight bar, it is now unusual to have the composition of a club change within an hour as it is suddenly packed with

... doing in a loud, superficial, ageist place like this?

Gay bars, like their straight counterparts, are essentially a response to a negative predicament



Denise Whalen points out the differences - and similarities - between gay clubs and straight bars

secretaries and office staff who have just finished work and are looking for someone to share the evening with.

Gay bars, in many ways like their straight counterparts, are essentially a negative response to a negative predicament. In a society which is still very conservative and homophobic, it is hard for gay people to meet. Bars provide a place where the gay person can "let down his or her hair." Unfortunately, gay clubs in Edmonton have done little to make themselves different or better than the straight bars. Sometimes one would swear that the music level at these clubs could easily surpass the noise of a B-1

bomber flying directly overhead, and the limited number of gay bars in Edmonton make them very crowded places on a weekend.

Superficial and unimportant qualities take on added significance at any bar where single people predominate, gay bars not excluded. If you are deemed to be good-looking or have the gift of the gab, you would probably have a better chance of being asked to dance by a stranger. Gay men and women who are just coming out of the closet often go to the bars in the hope of finding spiritual sustenance or friendship. But, again like many straight clubs, any one

entering a gay bar would soon notice the existence of "islands" or pockets of people who seem to pay little attention to strangers or those who don't belong to their group. It is unfortunate that gay bars have perpetuated many of the shortcomings of the straight clubs. But with a lack of social or recreational groups for gays to join (there is a gay volleyball and gay basketball team which people speak very highly of) and the tendency of some social groups to resemble closed fraternities ("clubiness" is not just a bar phenomena), it looks like the bars will continue to remain the hub of gay social life in Edmonton.

## Good gay lit

by Gilbert Bouchard

For something to be real it has to be written about. Places like New York or London are far more real to the average Canadian than local metropolises like Toronto and Montreal simply because the former have been made actual in fiction.

The same goes for the experience of gays and lesbians. Gay and lesbian lifestyles are a mystery to most, because even people who have homosexuals acquaintances are apt to know precious little personal detail about those friend's lives out of shyness or embarrassment. Couple this with societal pressures on gays and lesbians to not "flaunt" their sexuality, there is an environment of ignorance and silence where myth and misinformation thrive.

That's where good gay literature comes in. Gay and lesbian literature and accurate gay and lesbian depictions in general literature can be a positive and non-threatening educational experience for someone who's curious about the gay subculture.

*The Boys on the Rock* by John Fox and *Job's Year* by Joseph Hansen are two sensitive and realistic novels about very human and very sympathetic gay men. *The Boys on the Rock* in particular is engrossing reading: once you start reading you just can't put it down.

*The Boys on the Rock* is the story of Billy Connors, a young gay high school student coming to grips with his sexuality in the early 60s. Billy falls in love with Al, a 20-year-old politician who eventually spurns Billy in order to pursue a political career.

Set in the early years of the decade that spawned the sexual revolution (both straight and gay) *The Boys on the Rock* explores the issues of coming out against the backdrop of an entire nation about to come out. The sexuality of America in those turbulent years was penned up under the surface just as Billy's own homosexuality was simmering waiting to burst.

The novel also explores the lying that closeted gay people have to go through. Not only do most gays have to lie to people around them, they also lie to themselves. In the novel Billy, who's the narrator of the work, "lies" to the reader on several occasions. In fact, it is only after a certain point in the narration when Billy's character is more confidant with his homosexuality that he admits to his lies and promises readers not to lead them astray any farther. A particularly clever way to illustrate the lying that most gay people are forced into just to be accepted in heterosexual society.

While *The Boys on the Rock* looks at coming out and the life of a young gay man, *Job's year* looks at the other end of the spectrum. The protagonist of *Job's year* is Oliver Jewett, an aging movie star coming to grips with growing old.

While I can't help but admire the writing in *Job's Year* and can't fault the story or the characterizations it was boring. It drags on forever. While it's a more mature work than *The Boys on the Rock*, *Job's Year* is just too calculated and lacks the emotional punch of the former.

Hansen's characters are rounded and ring true but as a whole his work lacks soul.

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