

Wishful Thinking, Sloppy Research

REVIEW:

The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men
by David Nimmons
St. Martin's Press

BY LARRY RUDIGER

David Nimmons wants to highlight the positive in some gay men's social institutions, which, in his opinion, have been unfairly criticized. The case he makes in *The Soul Beneath the Skin* was strong when he presented a few surprising observations about urban gay bars, including the fact that they have little brawling and mayhem — an inevitable feature, it seems, of comparable, straight-identified establishments (to the degree that such comparisons are possible or mean much). Nimmons also noted the sustained commitment some gay men have brought to various causes, as volunteers and donors, particularly in response to the AIDS crisis (while ignoring lesbians' role therein — ouch!). He thinks this dedication doesn't square with our so-called reputation for being selfish, self-interested, circuit-party boys.

He might have a point. But after noting that urban gay bars and pride celebrations are docile and practically crime-free when compared to similar, ostensibly straight events (think St. Patrick's Day), Nimmons's source data thinned out (or at least his use of what's available). Later chapters of this ambitious but underpowered (and under-edited) book had few references to other work, and they suffered accordingly. For example, Esther Newton's oral history of Fire Island might have helped his take on gay-only vacation destinations, which was little more than a cheery celebration of sex on the beach.

He also failed to detect the really relevant psychological research on the motivations for helping (or altruism), leaving him vulnerable to some dubious speculation, mixed in with pretty basic work from 30 years ago. Similarly, he doesn't seem to know much about potent and interesting research on physical attractiveness, some of which has been done on gay men. And for someone exploring one minority community, Nimmons seems to know — or at least communicates — practically nothing of any other.

The Soul Beneath the Skin may, for a popular work, have a lot of footnotes. It wasn't enough. Without strong theoretical moorings, Nimmons's far-ranging observations seemed little more than a defense of things he clearly loves — affectionately yammering descriptions of how his social set spends off-hours and vacations, along with occasional, superficial digressions into things like

vogueing — remember vogueing? Vermont's Radical Faerie contingent also got put into the service of love. Nimmons seemed to like them, at least to the degree they seem to fit his world: all gay men, all the time, who might freely offer each other massages (sexual and not) and sex (massage optional) yet never evoke jealousy and envy. But he is, at best, a window-shopper in their truly radical world.

Nimmons' defense was particularly detailed on the topic of circuit parties (and no, I've never been to one). Okay, I can relate to the downsides of rationalizing an unpopular hobby: I adore opera, which, it seems, not even many gay men admire these days — oh well. But failing to do the math on the fraction of circuit boys, Nimmons never gets it: they're literally one-in-a-million. Wait, they know that.

Yet in championing what is controversial (particularly full-throttle circuit parties, but also sexual non-monogamy and recreational drugs, among other allegedly misunderstood, hot-button issues), Nimmons offered a lot of feel-good speculation and never delivered as promised on why these things express an admirable ethical framework. Sounds like a bunch of gay men having fun, and that's about it. So his descriptions did not ultimately bolster his prescriptions, which he introduced toward the end. Those are detailed on a website and in how-to seminars, which Nimmons now conducts in order to foster the growth of groups of like-minded men.

The book's underlying but unspoken subtext, though, seems to be a rebuke, but not a well-reasoned retort, to Larry Kramer's writing. Love or hate the man, Kramer's pungent, often bitter observations about gay men are hard to take. Yet Nimmons didn't mention Kramer by name and only indirectly addressed the content of Kramer's critique of gay male culture. Instead, Nimmons waved it away, refusing to dirty his hands with the tough issues. This comes off as arrogant and passive-aggressive. Behind the strained smile, he basically sounds insulted (pissed off, really) by his coterie's harshest critics.

Time will tell, but Nimmons did not convince me that his affable, palatable message contains much truth, just lots of wistful affection for his buddies and near complete ignorance of the rest of us — gay, straight, whatever. Writers who followed Kramer's themes (notably journalist Michelangelo Signorile) came in for some catty, slightly more direct swipes. In noting that Signorile may have been showing off his gym-plumped arms on a book cover, Nimmons asked how could he then write critically about gay men's obsession with appearance? Signorile did, musing about his own deep ambivalence on the subject: did Nimmons read that part of the book, or just look at the cover photo?

More bothersome, though, was Nimmons's lurid retelling of historian John Boswell's popular media

debut in the early 1980's. Boswell's boyish face appeared on the cover of the groundbreaking, though flawed *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*. That photo was not, as Nimmons asserted, a practically nude display of beefcake: we're talking about three buttons on a dress shirt. What is it with this guy and other authors' publicity shots? And after trashing Boswell, the (now dead) pinup, he took issue with gay authors who sell books with sex by putting semi-naked men on their dust jackets. It's just a bit weird to notice that Nimmons' book cover also featured, yes, a naked, shapely male torso and youthful, strong jaw.

My big problem with his work is his opinion on gay men having unprotected sex, which is now, by most accounts, about one-third of the time. This shift from the mores of the late 1970s represents either the worst failure or greatest behavior change in the history of public health.

By now you might guess Nimmons' rosy view, which he goes so far as to call a 'magical' ratio of

risk-to-safety (okay, I just about lost it at this point in the book: what the hell makes that magic?). I can understand how, for those on the front lines of sex education (he used to work for Gay Men's Health Crisis), declaring victory and going home has huge appeal. Safer sex all the time may be an unrealistic goal. But making men feel good about 'playing safe' sometimes (hey, most of the time) won't help them much when unprotected sex leads to disease transmission. Fact, still: the more sex men have with each other, assuming that sometimes it will be unprotected, the more likely they're going to spread disease because of it.

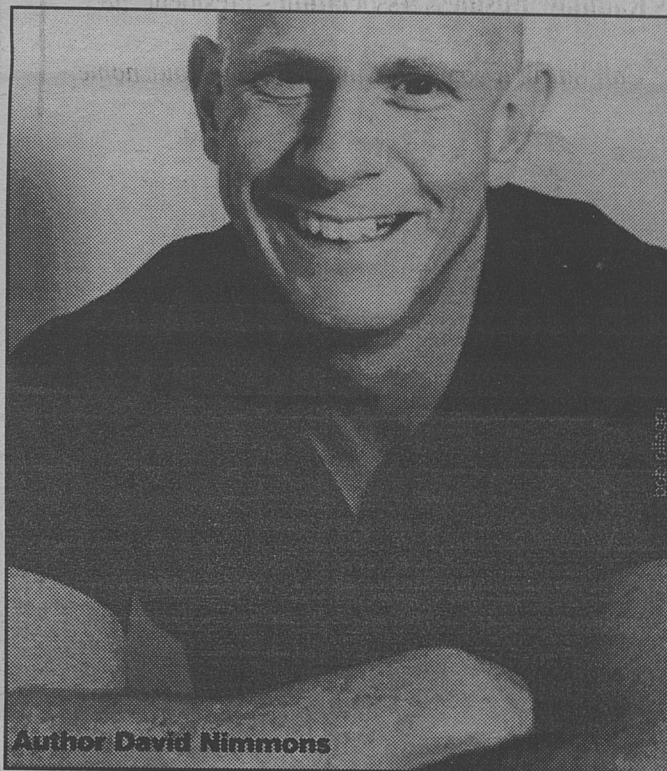
Yeah, it's a downer. I'm too young for pre-AIDS, no-consequences sex: I may not know what I'm missing. And I must claim complete ignorance of the sexually complex social relationships Nimmons describes and, it seems, lives. In pointing out the relative infrequency of sexual monogamy among gay couples (only about a quarter of us), Nimmons is in a frisky, non-monoga-

mous majority that's being scolded and misunderstood by moralists inside and out of the tribe.

His advice for facilitating the complex webs of sexual, social relationships he favors (if you overlook disease and other downers) was basic: be nice, particularly when you need to tell another man that you don't want to have sex with him. But he got to this in a cutesy, annoying fashion, by conjuring and finally damning "The Queen," the high-hair, high-maintenance avatar of cutting, cruel, camp sensibility (Oscar Wilde got his licks, too — yes, that Oscar Wilde, of whom Nimmons clearly knows practically nothing).

I wondered, maybe if gay men were spending less time figuring out whom they were going to bed next (and rehearsing some firm-yet-gentle ways to say, uh, no, but thanks all the same), then there'd be fewer wounded, rejected bitter queens in the first place. ▼

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Author David Nimmons

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"A way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. To be 'gay' is ... to try to develop a way of life" — Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life"

Soul Beneath the Skin may change forever how you think about gay men. It is the first book to reveal the unseen ethical patterns at work in gay men's lives — our "way of life."

Drawn from sociology, anthropology, epidemiology, public health, social psychology, and gay men's own stories, it shows how gay men have created a profound, invisible set of social experiments:

- ▼ We have built the least violent public culture seen among any men (Chapter 2);
- ▼ Our patterns of altruism and volunteering are seen in no other communities of men (Chapter 3);
- ▼ We caretake more consistently in our sexual relations (Chapter 4);
- ▼ We build intimate relationships not just in couples, but in webs (Chapter 5);
- ▼ We enjoy the world's richest, most elaborate, innovative sexual cultures (Chapter 5);
- ▼ We pioneer powerful new norms of communal intimacy, support, and brotherhood (Chapter 6);
- ▼ We craft whole new ways of being men with women (Chapter 7);

Our innovations have no parallel in modern times. Caregiving, volunteerism, service, non-violence, intimacy, friendship, community, gender peace — all are shared experiments in love.

Soul Beneath the Skin suggests that we are present at the creation of a radiant new public ethics — a lived spirituality — with deep implications for gay men and for society.

From www.manifestlove.com, David Nimmons's web site