

Nearly Straight; Gay Men in Mainstream Media

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Forty years ago any reference to a gay man in 'main-stream media' was rare. And all such references were negative and heavily judgmental. Anyone who was 'that way' was limp-wristed, 'effeminate', sex-crazed, without personal power yet supposedly able to corrupt 'pure youth' and bring socialism to fruition in the United States. While it may seem that current portrayals of gay men are more positive and varied, such portrayals still tend to be narrow and superficial in many ways. Is it enough that modern media contain examples that vary from neurotic lawyers to catty designers of woman's wear? Does presenting a wide variety of dysfunctional stereotypes indicate significant progress, or just that some gay people are less threatening, and thus more acceptable to others?

Often hailed as "*ground-breaking*" and "*enlightening*" the broadcast television series *Will & Grace* had not one, but two gay male main characters. Will was a neurotic lawyer who dated a few people over the run of the show but was never secure in any relationship other than with Grace, his best friend and equally-neurotic straight woman. Will found solace in 'the sweater department of Bergdorf's' or a Broadway musical. On the other hand Jack, his oldest gay friendship, 'dates' many men at once, judges everyone's worth based on their physical appearance or stock holdings and is the male version of a 'dizzy blond'. While it's true that Jack's best friend Karen is a lush who married for money and also judges others harshly, over the run of the show I saw much greater depth in both main straight characters than in the two gay men.

As limiting as, perhaps, a 22 minute television episode can be there is no doubt that providing nuance in a 30 second television commercial is a challenge. Yet an advertisement produced specifically to be aired on a cable network marketed explicitly to

gay men should have an advantage. The recent advertisement *1 Girl 5 Gays* reduces gay men to their sexual practises. The ad features the host asking questions such as “*spit or swallow?*” along with panelists' responses (US Promo). While it is considered a truism that 'sex sells' that is usually used to justify a well-defined or curvaceous body, rather than five men 'dishing' on each others sexual abilities or equipment.

Modern television seems overflowing with 'reality shows'; from contests to find 'the next top chef' to pseudo-biographical shows that present the somewhat real life of a celebrity (or pseudo-celebrity). One such show is *The Decorating Adventures of Ambrose Price* featuring a young man from Newfoundland (the maritime equivalent of 'fresh from the Nebraska farm') attempting to begin a career as a professional decorator in Toronto. The hook is that young Mr. Price has no formal training, and he doesn't know whether he wishes to be an Interior Decorator, Floral Arranger, Cake Decorator or some other 'design superstar'. Each week we watch him take lessons from a professional in a different design category and then try his hand with a real client. I must admit I watch the show, and not just because it is filmed in my home town. Ambrose Price is cute and charming and the situations inevitably humorous. But he does remind me of a character description in Snyder's novel; “*all I want to do is go to parties and buy new clothes and have a good time. I'm not all that bright but sometimes I say the cleverest things.*”(265)

A current example of media portrayal of gay men which is much more positive, is Kevin, one of the brothers in “*Brothers & Sisters*”. While he is a lawyer, and as neurotic as Will (of “*Will & Grace*”) it is presented as almost a genetic trait that his siblings share. A viewer might chose to see Kevin's sexual orientation being the same as Justin's being an alcoholic, Sarah's feeling the weight of being first-born or Kitty's being the only

Republican in a very Democratic family. A closer look at Kevin suggests otherwise. He is in a long-term, committed relationship with Scotty, who we meet in the show's second episode. Rather it is Kevin's rush to assume everyone sees him first and foremost as 'the gay brother' that informs much of his character, just as Sarah being a single mother after a messy divorce is the major source of her angst.

As much as Kevin Walker can be seen as a positive presentation of a gay person, he is nonetheless a very sanitized character. The growing tolerance, if not acceptance, of 'nearly-straight' gay people has unquestionably made life easier for many gays and lesbians in the United States. It is progress of a sort. But at what cost?

The desire to settle down with one person in a committed relationship and, perhaps, raise children (or pets) is very common, but it is not the only lifestyle that people dream of. Surely a group that hungers for acceptance of their preferred relationship can understand the equal hunger others feel for relationships of a different sort? It would seem that many gay men who desire, and struggle, to have their monogamous relationships respected are quick to offer up “*the camp, the bitchy humor, the diva worship, and the other facets that defined 'gay' for so long*” (Weinstein qtd. in Jervis) in exchange. Perhaps the modern American view of society as a 'melting pot' in which everyone strives to become a 'typical American' as opposed to the traditional Canadian view of society as a 'vertical mosaic' that celebrates and encourages diversity is too engrained in the modern American gay man to accept that leatherfolk, drag artists, radical faeries and polyamorous relationships should also be accepted.

Stereotypes are based on actual examples; in fact their resilience lies in the grain of truth wrapped in “*prejudiced attitude or uncritical judgment*” (Merriam-Webster). The

'Short North' district of Columbus is home to a number of bars, restaurants and shops that cater to the gay community. Visiting it on a recent evening, I observed a number of same-sex couples holding hands and plenty of men calling each other "*girl*" while discussing clothes, the famous and the 'tragic'. Not everyone who considers themselves as gay frequent these bars, or any bar for that matter. Plenty of gay folk find that behaviour politically unproductive and unsettling, if not downright offensive.

So long as significant numbers of gay men condemn others who exhibit the behaviours on which stereotypes are based the struggle for true freedom is not complete. So long as 'nearly straight' gay folk are seen as having acceptable dysfunctions, the battle for acceptance of all (consensual) sexual permutations is still to be won.

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