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**BOOKS**

**Revenge of the nerd**

Peter McCusker goes *From Dweeb to Adonis*

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

**P**eter McCusker is a dweeb. Or at least he used to be and now is on a mission to defend men against dweeb-dom.

The 48-year-old Medford resident has written a self-help book called *From Dweeb to Adonis*, which announces it's "unlike other self-help books because it tells you how to avoid the problems in the first place." Broken into chapters such as "External Beauty," "Physique," "Relationships" and "Sexuality," McCusker's book abounds with "tips and tidbits of advice men can use to better their life."

McCusker came to dweeb-dom naturally. The book explains he was a "shy, four-eyed, bed-wetting (until age 20) only-child nerd born to eighth-grade educated parents in an asexual Catholic environment."

By adulthood, he was "exercising at various gyms and trying to put on muscles," but he wasn't accomplishing the kind of results he wanted. From there he began an intensive learning process, reading anything he could find about body building and weight training.

In 1994, however, his kidneys began failing him and McCusker, who has AIDS, had to give up body building. He also went on disability leave from his job as a postal clerk.

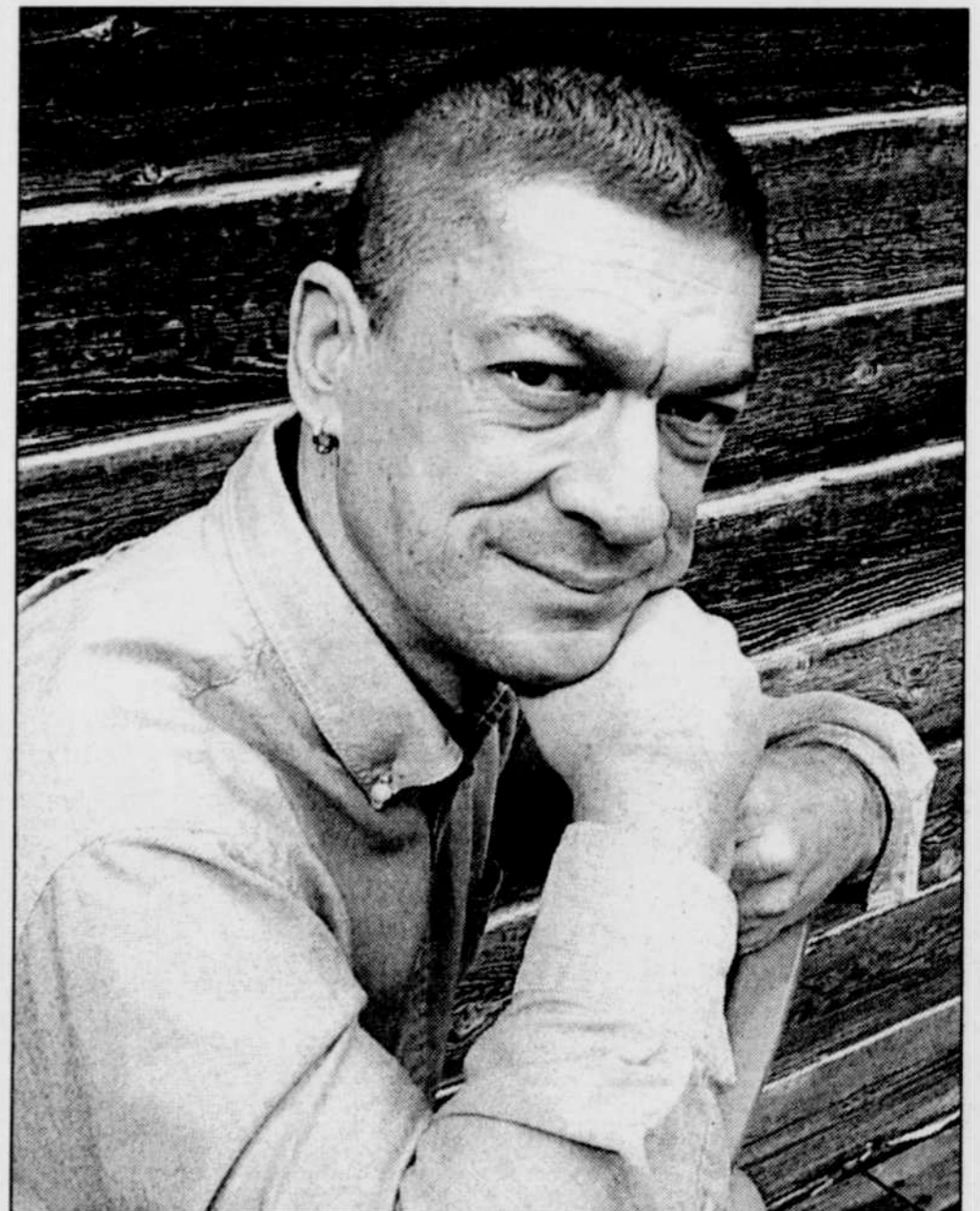
"I'll now never know how muscular I might have been," he laments. "Needless to say, I was bitter and angry."

He began taking part in several men's discussion groups about personal issues and learned that men often live with low self-esteem, poor body image and unsatisfying relationships or loneliness. "Because of my health," he says, "I, too, developed a poor body image and angrily wished I had known how to get buff when I was younger and healthier."

But McCusker was determined "not to wallow in the resentment of my life's bad luck," and he threw his energies into writing his book, which he says "not only let me vent my frustrations but also let me use the insights of my life as a teaching mechanism for others."

It occurred to him "that many people probably miss out on doing the best in their lives because they don't know how to do it." Therefore, much of *From Dweeb* "is what I didn't know 20 or 30 years ago about how a person can look better, develop their physique, develop a relationship, express their sexuality."

Perhaps most controversial is McCusker's emphasis on physical appearance and what he calls "lookism." He explains: "People put down the



Peter McCusker says his new book will help guys achieve that "all-American wrestler's look"

idea of trying to look good as being shallow and outward...and in conflict with caring and compassion. But I don't think they conflict...because looking good makes us feel good."

According to McCusker, fairly or unfairly we judge and are judged by our appearance. So to help men develop his ideal of male beauty ("I would call it the all-American wrestler's look," he says, "exuding qualities of youth, virility and health"), he presents suggestions on hair length, skin care, forehead wrinkles and surgical implants.

"All men desire self-esteem, intellect, good looks, a healthy body, romance and satisfying sex," the author says. "However, society does little to teach us how to acquire these qualities, and it often discourages us from trying our best."

His book even offers advice for parents to ensure they don't contribute to a future dweeb. "The shape of a head is largely determined by how an infant is placed when laying down," he explains. "Parents should be aware of this...and alternate their positions."

McCusker and his partner of 20 years, Mark Macdougall, live in a log house in the foothills south of Medford. He is a regular volunteer at Ashland's Abdill-Ellis Lambda Community Center, the only queer community center in Oregon. There, he runs a gay men's discussion group that focuses (not surprisingly) on relationships, intimacy, creativity and dating. "My own experiences in life," he says, "have made me an expert on these topics."

Admitting that he has "no psychology background" and that most of what he knows comes from reading and his own "keen insight into human nature," McCusker says his book is meant to "encourage people to think for themselves and to develop insight into their own wants and desires." □