

BOOKS

Exposing the exes

Wayne R. Besen goes from
Gay and Unhappy to Anything but Straight

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

The seed for *Anything but Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth*, Wayne R. Besen's studious, fact-centered, fascinating history-cum-exposé of the ex-gay movement, was planted by a memorable, traumatic personal experience.

He opens the book with an anecdote from 1988—related with surprising good humor—in which his parents react with dismay when their son comes out to them, going so far as to purchase him a self-hypnosis cassette titled *Gay and Unhappy*.

Looking back on the incident, Besen says, "I spent the ages of 9 to 17 trying to deal with the fact I was gay or trying to 'change.' I finally accepted myself and the first thing my parents say is, 'Have you tried to change?'"

As Besen became a bona fide gay activist—in the late '90s he worked for the Human Rights Campaign as associate director of communications—he saw that many families of queers are opposed to ever "coming around" and that an increasingly politicized ex-gay subculture existed to reinforce their intolerance and misunderstanding.

"I was working at HRC to combat the 1998 right-wing ex-gay campaign," Besen says, referring to that year's newspaper ads featuring "cured" gay men and lesbians. "I was inspired to write *Anything but Straight* as an activist."

Besen began to be aware of the need for an in-depth, complete resource on the very dangerous movement. "In 1998, there was not much of a track record on exposing these groups," he says. "There was information, but it was scattered, not easy to access. I wanted to put all this information in one place."

Writing the book was no working vacation. With all the research and preparation, it was 4 1/2 years in the making. It "took an enormous amount of discipline and made it more difficult to date or make new friends," he shares. But creating the book offered its own intrigues, as infiltrating the ex-gay underground often requires researchers to do the espionage thing.

"Infiltrating these ministries is total acting," explains Besen. "One must go undercover to see what they're truly about. When a reporter or activist announces who they are, the ex-gays basically lie about how happy and 'cured' they are. When you go undercover, you can see that these folks are miserable and in a great deal of pain."

Because most ex-gay ideology exploits the religious faith of its victims, Besen proposes that the queer community, particularly our spiritual leaders, be aggressive in addressing the burgeoning contingent of disillusioned ex-gays seeking affirmation.

"I think it's important to have churches like Metropolitan Community Church and also to

reform primarily hetero churches," he asserts. "As society becomes more accepting, the lines will blur a little. But we have a long way to go to get to that point."

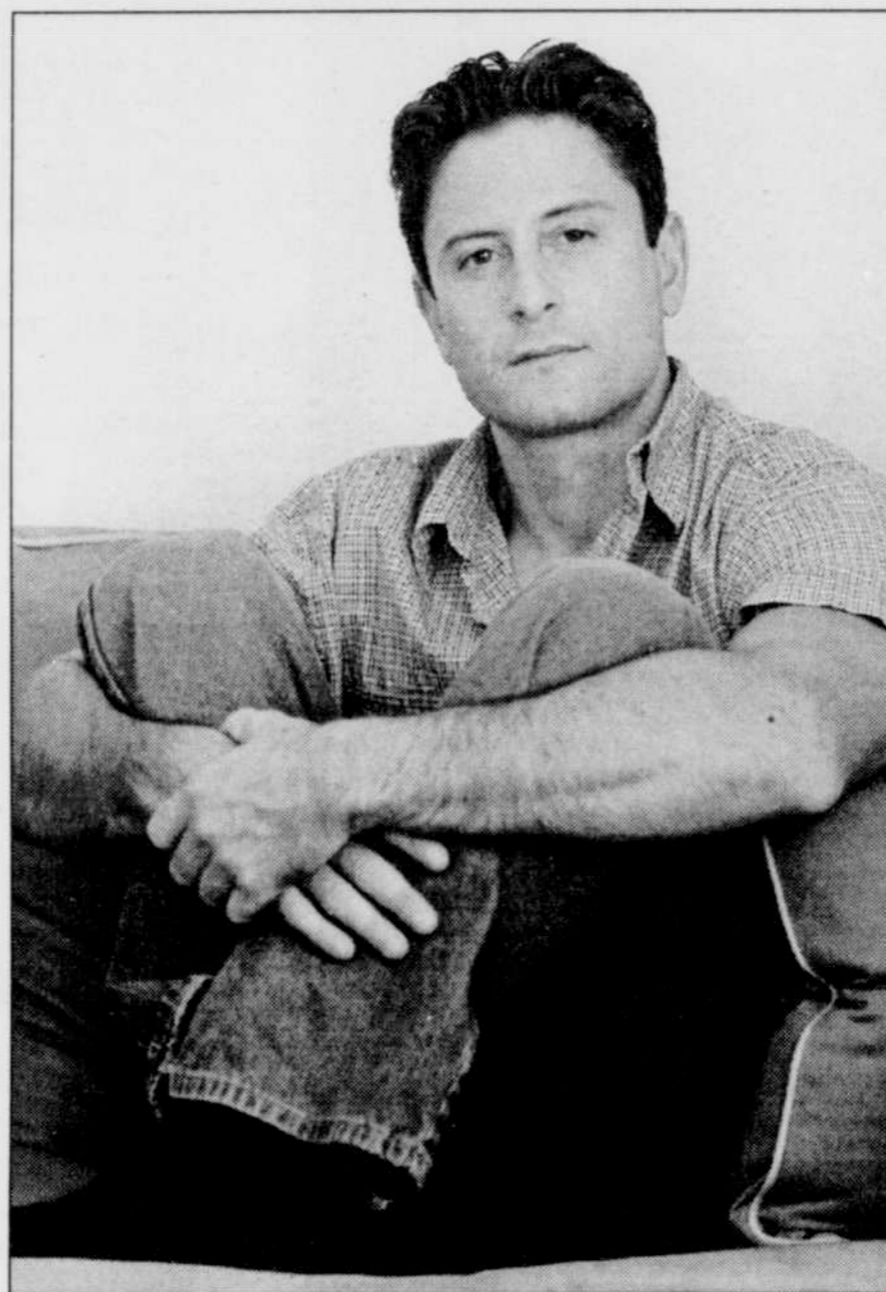
Though Besen hints in *Anything but Straight* that ex-ex-gays, many from conservative-religious backgrounds, may feel intimidated by their prospects of fitting into a community that in turn has its ambivalence toward religious conservatism, he doesn't see intra-community religious disagreement as the principal barrier to finding a place in the community and defeating ex-gay propaganda.

"The real problem is not divisions but apathy," he says. "Gay people—very much like heterosexuals—are mostly uninvolved in the political arena. While most straight people can afford this apathy, we can't. We have to make every effort to pull more people in our community into the political process."

While Besen became an activist and a writer, his mom and dad took some steps, too. Noting that parents "have expectations [and] sometimes create a story line for their kid...beautiful wife or husband, beautiful wedding, beautiful kids," he explains that "coming out...forces parents to readjust their story line. It took my parents two years to come around; now they're PFLAG parents who are as accepting as possible."

As Besen's book tour, which includes Portland on March 7, nears its end, he's pondering the direction his career will take next. He plans to get into fiction writing and has "an idea for nonfiction that I'm keeping secret for now—but will be even more controversial than *Anything but Straight*."

Currently a nomad, Besen will be looking for



Wayne R. Besen reads from his tell-all book about the ex-gay movement March 7 at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland

a new home once he's done promoting the book. "When the tour is over, I'll likely move back to D.C. or New York. Who knows, maybe I'll fall in love with Portland and move there. I've never been before, but I hear it's lovely." □

WAYNE BESEN reads from *Anything but Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth* 9 a.m. March 7 at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway. Check the March 5 issue of *Just Out* for possible other appearances.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN, also *anything but straight*, lives and writes in Seattle.

REVIEW

ANYTHING BUT STRAIGHT: UNMASKING THE SCANDALS AND LIES BEHIND THE EX-GAY MYTH
by Wayne Besen; Harrington Park Press, 2003; \$19.95 softcover

For anyone committed to understanding the fullness and complexity of human sexuality, the concept of propagandizing queers into altering their sexual orientation might seem like something of an easy target.

In a culture that thinks and speaks clearly about sex and sexuality, the notion that heterosexuality is morally superior to homosexuality (or the association of homosexuality with pedophilia and sex addiction) would seem laughable.

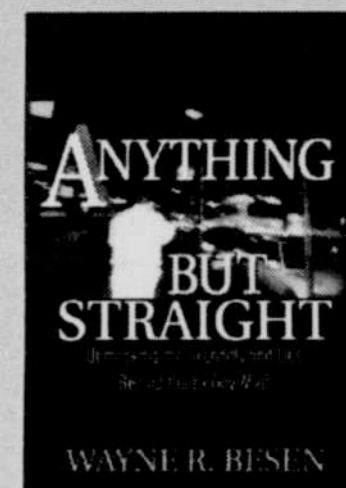
Anything but Straight, a detailed chronicle of ex-gay "ministries" preying upon queers whose insecurity with their sexuality or unrelated addiction and mental health issues make them easy targets, amply demonstrates that we don't live in such a culture.

Wayne R. Besen offers an in-depth ex-gay timeline, accessibly explaining the methods and ideologies of the current network of heterosexual conversion groups that have coagulated under the well-known Exodus International organizational umbrella and had their germ in the '70s, when the fledgling gay rights movement provoked a reactionary response from religious fundamentalists that continues in various mutations to this day.

We're introduced to an array of ex-gay "trailblazers" and the tactics (from the punitive, shame-based approach of the earlier years to the falsely optimistic soft-pedaling of today's PR-savvy version) they've employed in the name of saving queers from their basic human desire for sexual expression and romantic fulfillment.

If Besen's tone is sometimes incongruously conversational for the subject matter, it doesn't undermine the rich, thoroughly researched information in *Anything but Straight*. As a lie-by-lie, distortion-by-distortion rebuttal to a destructive social force aimed directly at us, this book has a place on the bookshelf of any conscientious queer.

—CM □



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