"What storytellers, and what stories!" a man in Nebraska wrote to me after reading *Farm Boys*. Although he had grown up in a small town on the North Carolina coast, he wrote, "the emotional experiences these guys describe sound very familiar. Their crushes and loneliness and hobbies I can easily relate to. It's fascinating to me that while some of them enjoyed working outdoors and others were more drawn to housework, except for one or two they all hated basketball! Me too!!"

As I awaited publication of *Farm Boys*, I was a little concerned that some readers might object to my generalizations about "the gay farm boy." What if there had been great bias in the composition of my group of interview subjects, leading me to create a portrait that was lopsided or incomplete? Although I did not intend this work to be definitive, I did not want it to misrepresent.

It has been a pleasure to find that every response I have had from "gay farm boys" affirms the general portrait. "That's my life you're talking about!" is something I have heard from many readers. "It's strange," a man in a small town in western Pennsylvania said, "but even now, so many years away from my farm days, it is still reassuring to know that that bewildered, scared, goofy, gawky kid was not so strange after all."

A man in Seattle who grew up on an Iowa farm in the 1930s and 1940s wrote:

I identified with nearly every case history you presented, in one aspect or another. The book recalled my own feelings of confusion, and the utter lack of anything gay to which one could relate. Most of my friends grew up in some kind of urban situation where they eventually made contact with other gays. They find it difficult to understand that I had no idea of what being gay meant until I went into the Army in my mid-twenties. I know that young gays just coming out today have problems they have to face, but they have no idea of the kind of isolation that I felt.

After immersing himself in *Farm Boys* over a long weekend, a man who grew up on a farm in Indiana wrote:

On almost every page I found myself thinking, "That was me!" How I wish I could have found a book like this years ago. I am a Roman Catholic priest, the pastor of a very large parish. For twenty years, I was the Catholic chaplain at [a midwestern university]. I had many occasions to
counsel young men in the course of my work. As you can guess, I was not open about my own orientation, but I'm sure there was little doubt in the minds of most. I pray that I was able to be of help to some. In fact, it was partly through talking to the students that I came to be accepting of myself. I am still not open with most people, but I think I have arrived at a healthy understanding of myself and am very comfortable with my orientation. It has not been an easy journey.

A Nebraska farm boy now in Seattle wrote:

My memories are not as bad as those of the man who was bound and flogged by his father, nor are they as good as those of some of the farm boys who had many playmates and a life full of FFA and 4-H activities. I did notice that almost universally the farm boys saw their religious experiences as being harmful to them. With that I can certainly identify. I would be hard pressed to think of one positive memory from my Catholic and Catholic school background. After graduating from college in Omaha, I lived in Germany for six years and didn't even return to the States for a visit during all that time. I came out there. In a very real sense, I went to Europe to get away from Nebraska, from the narrow social control of the people whom I knew.

“Really, these stories are all of our stories,” said a gay man who grew up Jewish in Chicago. A man in Minneapolis said that many of the experiences of gay farm boys resonated with his ethnic urban upbringing. It has become evident to me that, except for the often greater social isolation of farm life, city boys growing up gay in tightly knit ethnic communities have much in common with these farm boys. As a man in Chicago wrote:

I'm sure it wasn't any easier for my boyhood friends and me to come to terms with our homosexuality on the conservative northwest side of Chicago. Our city was settled by the Yankee and German stock you mentioned, but we had the added trauma of our ethnicity (Italian, Irish, Polish) and the wonderfully progressive Catholic church to contend with as well.

I do agree that openness leads to the smashing of stereotypes. I continue to reside on the northwest side of the city. Like the farm boys who feel disconnected from urban life, I feel a certain discomfort in Boys’ Town [a gay neighborhood in Chicago]. A nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there, much to the chagrin of some of my dearest friends. As a teacher at an all-male secondary school, I find it heartening that my students feel comfortable “coming out” to me. I could never imagine, in our generation, displaying that kind of self-confidence and courage.

Besides enhancing self-understanding for many men, Farm Boys has
opened a window on men’s lives that has been illuminating for others. A woman in Milwaukee commented that *Farm Boys* helped her to better understand how her husband’s farm background had likely delayed his sexual development; their sexual relationship was his first, at age twenty-eight. Another woman wrote to me after attending my *Farm Boys* slide show in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

My late husband and I were married in 1970 because it seemed to be the thing that society expected of us. Neither of us were really aware of our sexual orientation at that time. As time went on, I began to acknowledge my attraction to women. My husband had a difficult time with this, and also with acknowledging who he was sexually. He was an extremely unhappy man, full of rage, and terribly addicted to religion. The stories you shared have helped me to understand my husband more and have brought healing to me.

A man who spoke with me after the slide show in Bloomington, Indiana, told me that he was gay, married and in the process of coming out. I was to do the presentation in Indianapolis the next evening, and he said that he was going to ask his wife to attend with him. They were both there that night, in the front row, two of about forty in attendance. He had brought a notebook for taking notes. She thanked me afterward and said that the presentation was very important for her.

“I have just finished laughing and crying myself through your book,” declared a man who grew up on a farm in Mississippi and now lives in a small town in that state. The emotional effects of the stories in *Farm Boys* are as diverse as readers’ lives. “If there is one emotional reaction I’m experiencing, it’s a renewed anger at Christianity,” wrote a man in California, “when I read again and again the feelings of isolation, pain, fear, even terror, and the accompanying denial these brought about.”

A man in New York City said that, growing up, he had been eager to leave Iowa, which he did thirty years ago. Now he felt torn between the two places.

I have just read *Farm Boys* and found it a great joy, even though at times tears were flowing when reading of the lives of these wonderful men with whom I could relate totally. Although I didn’t grow up on a farm, I did live in several small towns throughout Iowa, some no larger than a hundred people. The schools were made up of about ninety percent farm kids. I always marvelled at how hard they worked on a daily basis, work I also did on occasion when trying to make extra money. How I love those simple yet wise people who grow and cultivate our food on land that is as true and constant as they are.
Farm Boys has stirred some men in especially distressing ways. This was apparent following several slide shows when men with rather stricken expressions came over to shake my hand and say, “Thank you,” unable to say much more. And there was this earnest letter from a man in Iowa who asked me to help him connect with other men in his area, and to forward his letters to two of the men in Farm Boys.

I have read your book twice in the last three weeks. It has occupied my thoughts continually and caused me sleepless hours at night. To realize there are guys out there that I so identify with. I have lived a straight life, always being so good. I have been married thirty years, have children and grandchildren, and am a good provider. But I remain alone and apart. I have never had a friend. Absolutely no one knows me. Because I live one life on the outside and another on the inside, the mental turmoil, depression, and loneliness are constant. That’s what so terrible. To keep living like this. Maybe your book will give me the impetus to do something about it. Or maybe I am too old to hope. I can’t change my situation and abandon my life as it is.

Because these stories are able to illumine, to affirm, and to stir, many people have found ways to put the book to use. A minister’s wife in Indiana suggested that it would be important to get Farm Boys into both small-town public libraries and seminary libraries. A man in upstate New York, whose sister gave him the book as a Christmas gift, wrote, “I have never in my life so far received such a special, thoughtful gift from one of my family members. I will treasure it as long as I am on this earth. If I had had a book like this sixteen years ago, I could have saved a truckload of angst and hours of time in a therapist’s office.”

A woman in Wisconsin gave Farm Boys to her thirty-eight-year-old brother-in-law. “He struggled a lot before he figured out that he was gay,” she said. “He has shared this with some of our family, but not all. He has gotten some great support and some really awful reactions.” She also gave a copy of the book to the twenty-year-old brother of a woman friend. “He just came out to her last night and is struggling with how to confirm his mother’s suspicions. He is very creative, lots of fun, and a wonderful uncle.”

A college English professor in Missouri wrote to me about a male student in one of his classes who had written a poem about his twenty-two-year-old friend, Jeremiah, struggling with his sexuality in rural Missouri. “He must be retaught his loveliness,” the poem concluded. The professor gave the student his copy of Farm Boys, to give to Jeremiah. “I’m talking about utility here,” the professor said, “and what more useful thing can a book do than save a man from suicide?” Through this book, he said,
“Jeremiah might rediscover his loveliness. He might discover self-worth, affirmation, useful labor, and hope. He might be encouraged to go on.’”

It was this kind of impulse to *Farm Boys* evangelism that provoked Stan, who grew up on a western ranch, to spread the word about the book. From the midwestern college town he has long called home, Stan distributed *Farm Boys* bookmarks, and newspaper articles about the book, to scores of people on his university campus, around the city, and beyond. “I am telling the professors in our department that if a male student comes out to them and is having a hard time dealing with his sexuality, point him to the book, especially if the student is from a farm,” Stan said. “I am only doing this because I really believe in the book, and that it will help rural youth.”

Many men who have encountered *Farm Boys* have been stirred by a desire to tell their own stories. Several have sent autobiographical manuscripts for me to read. Others have asked me to keep them in mind as interview subjects if I should do another book. In a note expressing his interest in being interviewed, a man in Wisconsin confided, “I got my sex education at the early age of eleven or twelve from the sixteen-year-old hired hand, in the convenience of a bunk house on the farm. I’m gay and still in the closet in this small river town. But I do enjoy male sex, if the opportunities present themselves. I told my minister friend that I could write a book about my experiences. He said, ‘Yes, but you’d have to leave town.’”

The desire to make rural connections—with the land or with gay men from farm backgrounds—has been evident in some letters. One man wrote to me after attending the *Farm Boys* slide show in Chicago:

Hearing the stories you tell validates my experience of isolation and shame as a gay farm boy from New York. I can now look at my own past compassionately and know I’m no longer alone.

I’m now as certain as I can be that I’m moving back east next spring to live in the country. I came to college in Chicago and haven’t left yet. I haven’t liked being here for a few years; the city is noisy, crowded, ugly, and stressful. But I haven’t been ready to leave until now. What makes me ready is my plan to seek out and rely on the support of my twelve-step recovery programs, whatever welcoming and affirming church I find, and the community of other gays and lesbians. By “community” I mean honest and intimate friendships; I’ve always been at ease with the conspicuous forms of “gay life”—bars, clubs, gyms, cruising, promiscuity.

I plan to live near a small city that has a reputation for being gay-friendly, and where people are out. I’ll be visiting Ithaca, New York, Burlington, Vermont, and Amherst, Massachusetts, to see what they’re like. The bottom line is that when I move to the country my support will continue to be God, in the forms I have mentioned.
“Reading stories of other farm boys has reminded me of the importance of my own childhood on the farm,” said a man in Washington, D.C., who grew up in Nebraska. “I only wish I had men in my circle who were also from farms. Maybe I’d finally fall in love!”

A shared musical passion prompted a man in Chicago to ask if I would help him make a pen-pal connection with one of the men in Farm Boys. “It would be a great pleasure to correspond with Dave Foster, who seems to be fond of Opera but has no friends with the same inclination. I have attended more than four hundred opera performances and have heard all the great singers of the past sixty-five years. My favorite opera is Verdi’s La Forza del Destino, which I have seen eight times, including a performance at La Scala in Milan fifteen years ago.”

A photographer in San Francisco sent me samples of his work celebrating men’s bodies and enclosed a brief note: “Enjoyed your book tremenously. How do I get to know a farm man? If you are ever in San Francisco, I would love to photograph you.”

After reading Farm Boys, the owner of a gay resort in Iowa got the idea to host a “Farmers & Cowboys Round-Up” during the Iowa State Fair. “In the evening we will gather around a campfire on the banks of the river to reminisce and tell our stories,” the brochure said. “We are providing a place and a time for farm boys to make a real connection with each other and to celebrate our gay heritage.”

After my Farm Boys slide show in Cincinnati, one of the men there offered to give his old Future Farmers of America jacket—dark blue corduroy with gold decoration. During my talk I had mentioned that I had never had a FFA jacket, and that its colorful embroidery had a certain charm. I had also commented that the FFA emblem had inspired the “Fabulous Farm Boys” design on book-promoting apparel.

This generous farm boy’s old FFA jacket arrived in my mailbox a few days after I returned home, and I have made it a part of book-related events since then. His letter said that he had been a state 4-H president and a FFA regional vice-president. “One of my first loves was my state 4-H vice-president. Truly a story of fabulous farm boys,” he said. “As young men whose whole lives were centered around agricultural activity, being gay was not easy. I hope that this jacket serves some meaningful purpose in your efforts to broaden the world’s perspective of who and where we are.”