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The confusion: We're not gay!
image: Courtesy Be Beautiful

spends a lot of time mooning over his partner and wondering if Dee likes men or women or both. "An in-joke in the *shounen-ai* community is that protagonists are never gay," says Tokyopop senior editor Jake Forbes. "If they were gay, it would take away a lot of the story's appeal, the confusion and anguish they feel at being romantically involved with another man." *Shounen-ai* is not for or even about gays, as fans are quick to point out; the stories are female-scripted fantasies about idealized homosexual relationships. *Fake* is about as close to typical gay porn as most lesbian erotica is to the "hot girl-on-girl action!" in many men's magazines: Make Dee a woman, erase all the instances of sexual harassment, and you've got a perfectly serviceable Hollywood romantic comedy.

The first *yaoi* titles will hit the country in August, when A18, a division of New York's Central Park Media, releases *Kizuna: Bonds of Love* and *Kin No Cain* ("Golden Cain"). Traditional *yaoi*, like American "slash," is fan-written fiction that takes well-known characters from pop culture and places them in homosexual situations. In slash, Kirk and Spock are lovers; in *yaoi*, it's the warriors from *Dragonball Z*. Anti-*yaoi* forces are legion, as one might expect, filled with Trekkies and anime fanatics who prefer their heroes heterosexual (or, at the very least, asexual). The two CPM releases, however, will feature original characters—no Gundam Wing pilots making cow eyes at each other here. *Kizuna*, a romantic epic about high school kendo, will have several graphic sex scenes, as will *Kin No Cain*. "I believe we are the first company to publish this kind of explicit genre, so it's a big gamble," says CPM co-founder Masumi Homma O'Donnell.

The upcoming releases were big news at last year's Yaoi-Con in San Francisco, which drew readers of both *shounen-ai* and *yaoi* (in the U.S., *yaoi* has become the blanket term for both genres). Over 700 fans, mostly women, went to last year's convention, where they bid on pretty boys at the *bishounen* auction—last year's top "bishie" brought in \$1,000—and attended panels like "Foods Corrupted by *Yaoi*" and "Male-Male Eroticism in Edo Japan." Fashions ran from dog collars to Harry Potter cloaks. Because *yaoi* can be about nearly anything as long as there are two or more guys involved, the convention draws an eclectic crowd. "Some like bondage, some like fluffy, happy stories, some like horror," says April Gutierrez, an organizer of the 2003 Yaoi-Con. Gutierrez's tastes are more simple: "Me? I like the beautiful men."

YEARNING JAPANESE

BY ROBERT ITO

In the world of yaoi Manga, it's all about girls who like boys who like boys

In the 1940s and '50s, before American comics became the primary province of beefy men who could twist metal in their bare hands or fire death rays from their eyeballs, publishers did a brisk business producing funny books for teenage girls. Steamy titles like *Hi-School Romance* and *Rangeland Love* were big sellers, but when superheroes took over comics racks, female readers fled in droves.

Not so in Japan, where women constitute a huge portion of the manga-reading public. Ladies there love the love stories, particularly those that feature *bishounen*, or "beautiful boys," improbably gorgeous boy-men with willowy figures and long flowing locks. If one *bishounen* is good, artists and fans reason, then two or three must be even better, all of which goes a long way in explaining the popularity of *shounen-ai* and *yaoi*, two genres that feature randy *bishounen* hooking up with other like-minded men. Written by women, for women, the all-male love stories have been adored by Japanese teens and office workers for over a decade. *Shounen-ai*, literally "boy's love," is the tamer of the two genres, loaded with stolen kisses, longing glances, and tons of unresolved sexual tension; think Archie comics, if Archie and Betty and Veronica were all guys, and all living in Osaka. *Yaoi*, its more explicit cousin, often contains nudity and graphic sex scenes. This year, publishers are bringing a handful of the most popular titles to the U.S., hopeful that fans of Pikachu and Sailor Moon will also embrace the translated exploits of characters like Dee and Ryo, "two New York City cops with an attraction for action—and each other!"

Dee and Ryo are the lead characters in *Fake*, a *shounen-ai* series published by L.A.-based Tokyopop. In Book One, the two cops investigate a kidnapping and share their first kiss; by Book Two, they're vacationing together in the English countryside. They eventually return to New York, but it's an American city captured with a Japanese lens, a town where girls with eyes the size of pancakes hang out in the Plaza and spiky-haired detectives go on stakeout at the St. Regis.

In *shounen-ai* relationships you're either a *seme* (the aggressor) or an *uke* (the pursued). Dee and Ryo rarely stray from their assigned roles: Dee, the older, repeatedly tries to grope Ryo, who



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