

all about gus

*(What New York City's Most Popular Bear
Can Teach The Rest of Us)*

BY WENDY DURIT



When I first met Gus at the Central Park Zoo bookstore last year, he was gracing the cover of "What's Worrying Gus: The True Story of a Big-City Bear" by Henry Beard and John Boswell (Villard/Random House 1995). Thanks to artful computer imaging and witty writing, we see Gus reclining on a therapist's sofa with the city skyline behind him. On a crumpled paper we see his diagnosis, "bi-polar" disorder, and his prescribed cure — one million milligrams of Prozac per day.

In the book — which is very loosely based on the famed and beloved Central Park Zoo polar bear whose odd behavior made headlines a few years back — we find Gus leaving the North Pole and making his way south to New York City. He takes taxis, seeks sublets and tries to break into show business, but instead ends up waiting tables. He is refused entry to Planet Hollywood on account of wearing "real fur." And just when he thinks he has landed a good job — an "advertising position" on Madison Avenue — the beleaguered bear finds himself working as a porn shop pitchman, and is arrested for it.

The judge offers to commute Gus' sentence if he will agree to community service — entertaining children at the Central Park Zoo. And then we see him swimming, swimming, swimming and swimming... All the while dreaming of book and movie deals.

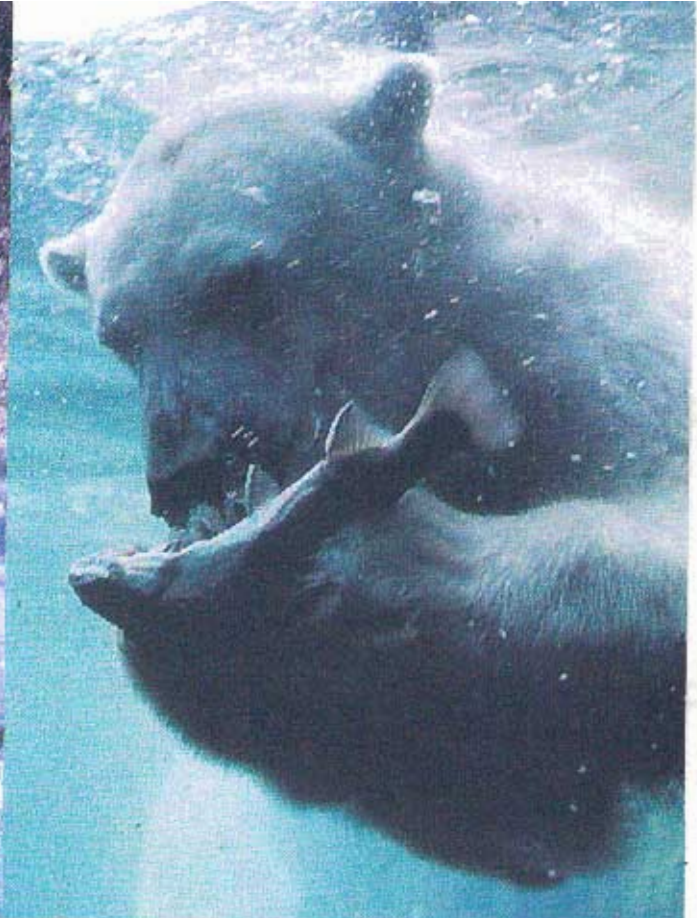
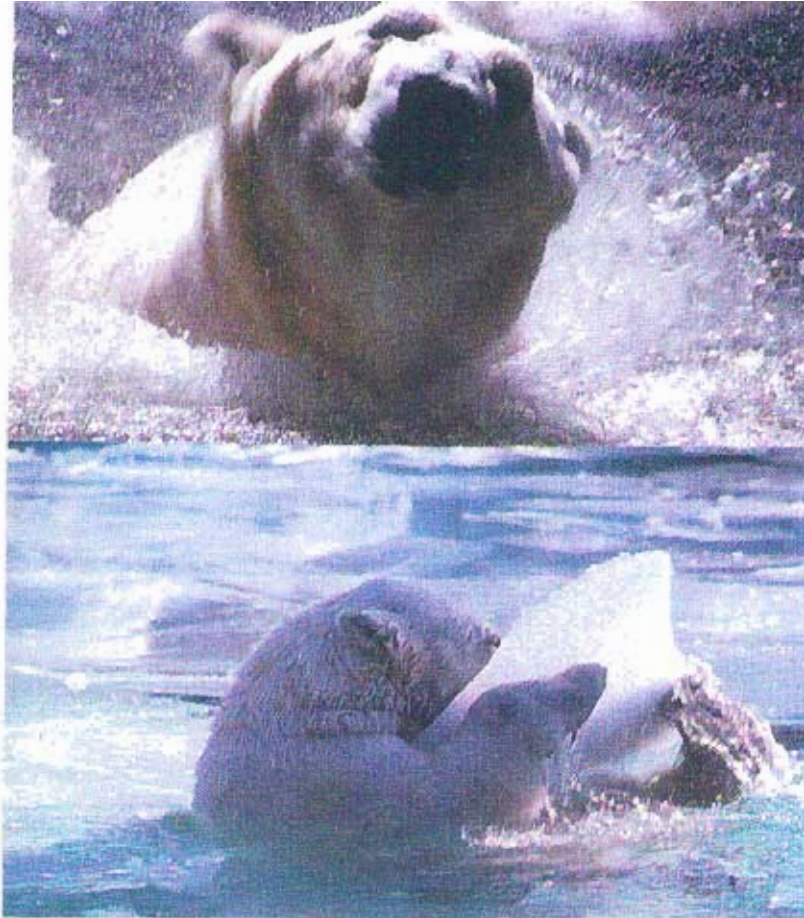
I laughed out loud, bought countless copies of the book for family and friends (some of whose pets really are on anti-depressants), and was intrigued enough to propose an article for this magazine.

And then I met the real Gus, who, though not so dramatic as his book self, has much to teach us.

The real Gus was born in Toledo, Ohio in December of 1986. He came to Central Park Zoo in 1988 as part of its post-renovation opening, and was joined by female companions Lily and Ida soon thereafter. Everyone got along amicably for a while. But soon Gus began acting oddly....

According to Don Moore — animal curator for Central Park Zoo, co-chair of behavior for the Wildlife Conservation Society, and a member of the Bear Taxon advisory group — Gus began exhibiting "stereotypical" behavior, which entails carrying relatively normal behavior to apparently pointless extremes. Gus' problematic behavior took the form of excessive swimming — back and forth, on and on, usually unaware of his companions and occasionally even ignoring his food. So the Zoo called in Tim and Gail Desmond — animal behaviorists and therapists par excellence — and commissioned \$25,000 of behavior therapy for Gus.

Did Gus suffer from depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive or other disorders? It is not clear. Was he prescribed Prozac? Definitely not. But he was bored,



Not that the zoo hadn't gone overboard (far beyond the minimum standards for wild animals in captivity) in building rugged rock outcroppings linked to a big pool by waterfalls and streams. Not that Gus didn't have air conditioning in his den and two friends. But he apparently needed and wanted more. And he got it.

Enter the "enrichment program." Polar bears in the wild forage and hunt for food. They live a life of love, fear, surprise, friendship and romance. In short they have an inner life and social circles remarkably similar to our own. (Don Moore sees bears and humans as being inextricably linked, and says it is no coincidence that the bear is such a totemic animal in Native American cultures.) Gus needed action and challenges.

The Central Park Zoo responded by investing in a huge ice machine for the bears. Strawberries and blueberries or fish would be frozen inside big blocks and the bears would claw for them. (Ida was the first to realize that submerging the frozen chunk in water helped it melt faster, and she went on to teach the others this art.) Sometimes their stream would be stocked with a very swift-swimming variety of small trout that would keep the bears entranced for days. They were given gifts for Christmas and pumpkins at Halloween. Toys were introduced to their habitat, including a large plastic log to roll and float on and cones and buckets to play with.

Thanks to bear keepers Celia Ackerman and Mark Hall, Gus and the gang started spending significant amounts of time each day in deep, challenging, and ever-changing play

According to Don Moore, this is just what you would do for your children — ensuring that their lives abound with engaging, appropriate and energizing activity.

As an added benefit of the bears' enrichment program, behaviorists and keepers have learned a lot. Many animals — including people — exhibit neurotic tendencies when not being true to their own unique natures. For example, border collies without actual work to do have been known to try herding cars on busy highways, with often annoying and occasionally tragic results.

Now, thanks in part to behavior research and the highly publicized story of Gus, most animals in the Central Park Zoo, and increasingly in other zoos, have enrichment programs tailored to meet their specific needs.

As for Gus, he still has his good and bad days. On a recent visit, he spent more time swimming than making meaningful eye contact. But gone are the mindless laps and blank stares. He's been eating well, and his coat looks healthy.

And while the story of the real Gus is not as humorous as the highly recommended book about him, it bears lessons that hit home in a deeper way. It reminds us that we can work through our problems, rise to our challenges, grow through our play...and be true to our own highest natures in this way. 🐾