“Of Beards and Men”

On one level, Of Beards and Men, a brilliant new photo book by photographer and designer Joseph D.R. O'Leary, is just what it says it is—photographs of 140 men with beards or other facial hair. Yet the book is also so much more, on so many levels. It's a photographic essay on contemporary masculinity. It's 140 individual character studies. It's a stellar photographic project; a series of rich and luminous portraits by a photographer (himself a bearded gentleman) who possesses a keen eye for color, mood and detail, and a polished sense of design that allows him to present the photographs in a beautiful and elegant setting.

In this book we meet these 140 men and get to know them. We also meet and get to know O'Leary, because the book is his creation and he did almost everything necessary to create it. He rounded up the models, spent hours taking photographs, selected the best ones for the book, designed every aspect of the book, set the type, laid out the pages, dealt with the printers (personally checking the printed pages as they came off the press) and the bookbinders (even folding the dust covers and shrink-wrapping books himself). This is an artisan's book, an inspired work of art and a concrete realization of O'Leary's vision spread over a 212-page canvas. O'Leary has been taking photographs since he was a boy and has run a design firm called Veto Design since 1992, so he is well qualified to produce such a beautiful book.

The book exists because of a Kickstarter campaign. (Readers of this column may remember reading recently about another book created with the help of a Kickstarter campaign, American Nudity, by New York-based photographer Barbara Nihle.)

The world—literally—has noticed O'Leary's efforts. Both O'Leary and the book have gotten press coverage all over the world and exhibitions in New Hampshire, Virginia, Florida, Colorado, and the Netherlands.

O'Leary found his bearded subjects in several ways—distributing postcards announcing and publicizing the project, social media and word of mouth. His bearded subjects ventured out to O'Leary's photo studio, which is in a remodeled barn on the farm where he lives with his partner. O'Leary's subjects were instructed to bring a few changes of clothes and objects that they felt expressed them "professionally, physically or spiritually.

The photo shoots were long. "I was enjoying the conversation so much," says O'Leary. "We had great conversations." O'Leary says he felt really got to know them as he photographed them: "I felt like, in a way, these guys have all become my brothers." Because the photos are supple-

(Above: Joseph D.R. O'Leary self portrait. Book cover.)

Images from the book, Clockwise from top: Chris, Nalla, John.
mented with capsule biographies, readers feel they get to know these men, too. (In fact, you already might know some of the guys in the book if you spend any time at the Minneapolis Eagle.)

The book also includes essays by art critic George Slade, photographer/educator Douglas Beardsley, Twin Cities arts writer Andy Sturdevant, and author and photo historian Vicki Goldberg.

O'Leary is pleased with the way the book turned out and pleased with the Kickstarter campaign that enabled him to create it. He feels the book is for everyone—male or female, straight or gay.

Of Beards and Men was printed and bound in Minnesota. A limited edition of 1,250 books have been printed and are available in three formats: softcover, hardcover, and hardcover with slipcase. Copies of the book are available at the author/photographer's website, www.otheardsandmen.com, or at www.amazon.com/shops/otheardandsandmen.

(Special Online Extra: Visit Lavender's website for an exclusive interview with Joseph D.R. O'Leary conducted by your humble columnist.)