

Blood and Lightning: On Becoming a Tattooer

Dustin Kiskaddon

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Dustin Kiskaddon's memoir *Blood and Lightning* details the ins and outs of working in a tattoo shop.

The book covers every facet of being a tattoo artist, including the intimacy of the relationship between a tattooer and their client: the tattooer learns a client's body, monitors their reactions, and asks for consent, all while they breathe the same air. Good artists, Kiskaddon says, can tell if a client is going to pass out based on the smell of their sweat.

Throughout the book are photographs of Kiskaddon's work—a bumblebee riding a unicycle, cherubs holding machine guns, a traditional rose—as well as snippets from the field notes he kept during his apprenticeship. He also shares anecdotes about the ethical decisions tattoo artists face, like refusing to tattoo the word “heartbreak” on an eighteen-year-old's forehead. Complex discussions about skin color, race, and sexualized body parts are also handled with grace: Kiskaddon considers whether his Instagram feed of mostly white skin alienates people with darker skin tones.

Blood and Lightning is an illuminating peek behind the doors of a tattoo shop, digging into the realities, ethics, and philosophy of altering the bodies of strangers.

ASHLEY HOLSTROM (January / February 2024)

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