

G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire

Katherine Frank

Duke University Press (December 2002)

\$23.95 (368pp)

978-0-8223-2972-5

Publishing data show that Americans willingly buy books about how to get, have, and do sex, particularly when the text is engagingly illustrated. In addition, video rental and website data indicate that for millions of Americans, images of sexual and pseudo-sexual activity result in satisfied nocturnal secession: if you can't drop in, you can drop out and simply imagine stellar performance.

Given the foregoing, it is understandable that books about sex without the action have a tough row to hoe. The author, an assistant professor of cultural anthropology and writer of four fiction books, hoes it enthusiastically and vigorously. Her book is no lightweight romp among the scantily clad; she analyzes strip clubs and their regulars from a serious ethnographic viewpoint: why do men go to clubs and what satisfaction do regulars get?

In a nutshell, strip clubs are "designed to appeal to customers on a sensory level, not limited to the visual but also including the tactile, olfactory, and auditory." However, "dynamic individualized exchange" is strictly limited; the clubs are "venues where contact and sexual release are prohibited." Thus, after the necessary semantic additions and subtractions, hardened regulars are left with a venue where they engage in "voyeuristic (although interactive) fantasy." The book's primary focus is how this fantasy-the customer's belief that he's personally important to a particular stripper and she to him-draws men and dollars to clubs.

Frank's core research is firsthand: in the interests of fact-finding and graduate school fee-paying, she worked as a stripper in five clubs in a southeastern city. Concurrently she interviewed thirty club regulars, ranging in age from fifty-seven to twenty-eight and including senior executives, blue-collar managers, manual laborers, the married, and the single. She explores the diverse world of clubs with their ever-differing match between ambience and activity and the strippers' means of encouraging but controlling customers. In counterpoint, in three sections Frank draws on her fiction writing to describe clubs, stripping, and patrons from the stripper's viewpoint.

Strip clubs continue to bedevil moralists, legislators, feminists, and not a few wives. They tend to escape satisfactory regulation; for most localities they are an acceptable nuisance. Frank addresses these and related issues, appositely citing an extensive literature. Nonetheless, her analyses of ambience, emotional manipulation, and control of unfulfilled fantasies do not easily lead to hard findings: the journey proves more important than the arrival. Lay readers placed in the territory between desire and fulfillment may well prefer a precise map: less exploration and more penetration.

PETER SKINNER (March / April 2003)

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