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Autobiography & Memoir

Working: My Life as a Prostitute
Dolores French
Linda Lee
Vista
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For anyone who ever wondered what the world of prostitution might be like, here it is, in all its vivid detail. At age 27, the author, Dolores French, a native of Louisville, Ky., decided to become a prostitute. This book proves she certainly has done her homework. She began first as a courtesan, meeting clients in a swank apartment. But she wanted to experience all phases of prostitution. She worked in a few brothels, walked city streets and even plied her trade on filthy sheets in a small room off a bar in Puerto Rico. Just reading about French servicing nine guys or more a night was exhausting.

The book covers all the ins and outs of being a call girl, a streetwalker and whorehouse hooker. It's almost a how-to guide on getting into the business.

The narrative has a witty, chatty tone. It's obvious French enjoyed her work. At one point the pace is so rapid, it's difficult to keep up. She's sharing trade secrets (never get involved with a client), telling us what dress really works with men in the Caribbean (black, very tight, with spaghetti straps) and advising streetwalkers what kind of shoes to wear (expensive, Italian).

At times, the plot rambles. A low point is the long section on the author's childhood and another on her campaigning for prostitutes' rights. The book has the slightest creaky feel, mainly because it covers the years 1978 to 1988 just when awareness of AIDS seemed to be peaking.

We learn that prostitutes should listen to advice from veterans in the business: never get into a car with mismatched hubcaps, always tell another hooker where you are going (life insurance on the street). French has learned that when she would meet a group of men and tell them what she did for a living, the most prudish man in the group would pay the most for her later in the evening.

Some of French's reminiscing will drop jaws. Those who worshipped certain body parts…her assessment of women clients (too clingy, they wanted her to stay and have coffee after a session)…the fact that she juggled. Yes, with small, rubber balls. (She felt it added a sense of mystery to her time with a client.)

French, who later became a member of the Mayor's Task Force on Prostitution and consulted for the Centers for Disease Control on prostitution and AIDS, is honest in the book about this aspect of her life, admitting it's not all merry rolls in the sheets. There are the scary problems of psychos and vice cops out to make a bust. She sums it up: "I am suited to being a prostitute. Even when I'm bored or when I have other things on my mind, I still feel spiritually uplifted by the work. I am improving on my clients' lives, and the lives of the people around them. …I am not inhibited about sex, but that's a very small part of the job. Most of the job involves dealing with people: the other women, my agents, my clients, the police."

Carol Hopkins