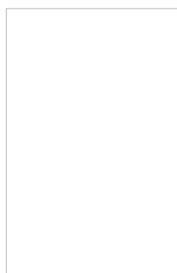


Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire

Katherine Frank
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Reviewed by David Steinberg
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Over the past ten or fifteen years there has been some wonderfully thoughtful, insightful, provocative writing by and about sex workers of various stripes and persuasions. Dozens of prostitutes, escorts, strip dancers, lap dancers, dominatrices, porn actors and actresses, erotic massage workers, and sexual healers -- sex workers sacred and profane -- have written scores of revealing articles and books, analyses and memoirs, offering personal accounts of what it's really like to be in the business of exchanging sex for money.

What has been noticeably absent from the growing documentation and commentary on sex work, however, has been reliable information about the people (predominantly men, but increasingly adventuresome women and couples as well) who form the consumer base of the sex industry -- the millions (probably tens of millions) of customers of prostitutes and escorts, the masses of guys who keep the number (and the quality) of strip clubs and lap dancing theaters increasing, coast to coast, in big towns and small, year after year, decade after decade.

Who are these guys? What is it about having sex with prostitutes, about sitting with women in lap dancing clubs, about watching women in strip clubs, that makes them eager to spend millions of hours and hundreds of millions of dollars every year on an expanding array of paid sexual outlets?

Given the stigma and guilt associated not only with being a sex worker but also with paying for sex in any form, it's hardly surprising that little is known about any of these questions. It's not like you can call people on the phone and conduct a poll about how customers feel about sex work. Sadly, in the absence of reliable information about this huge section of the American population, what passes for shared wisdom is a confusing and distorted amalgam of moralistic, dismissive, stigmatizing, and grossly misconstrued stereotypes -- entertainment for the Jerry Springer set, but useless for any real understanding of this bulging underbelly of American sexual culture.

In "G-Strings and Sympathy," Katherine Frank takes an important first step in investigating, reporting on, and beginning to truly understand one segment of these paid-sex consumers -- men who are regular customers at non-contact strip clubs. Frank, when she was a graduate student in anthropology, worked as a stripper at six different strip clubs in a large Southeastern city (she refuses to identify which one) over a period of six years, "both as a means of earning extra cash for graduate school and as part of a feminism theory project investigating female objectification and body image."

She began as an anti-porn activist, a student of feminist anthropology "interested in the links between power, gender, and sexuality, and concerned about the 'culture of objectification' that [she] believed influenced women's experiences." When she began working as a stripper, however, Frank quickly found that her preconceptions about the dynamics and power relations involved in that work were contradicted by her experiences at both upscale "gentlemen's" clubs and lower-tier "dive" bars. She became interested in the men who she met at the clubs, particularly her regulars, and decided to do an extended study of them for her doctoral dissertation in cultural anthropology at Duke University. "G-Strings and Sympathy" is the product of that study.

Finding willing subjects among both her own regular customers and those of other dancers, Frank conducted a series of extensive interviews over a 14-month period with 30 male customers from five of the clubs where she danced. She asked probing questions about what these men liked and didn't like about the clubs, what they made of the sexualized (but not sexual) possibilities there, what they found most significant about their interactions with dancers, and how their regular visits to the clubs fit into the context of their outside lives, marriages, and other primary relationships. Her status as a dancer clearly helped the men move beyond potential defensiveness and embarrassment and enabled them to be more forthcoming in how they talked about themselves, their experiences, and their feelings than they would have been with a researcher more removed from, and potentially more judgmental of, the strip club scene.

Both in the way she structured her interviews and in her sophisticated interpretation of her subjects' responses, Frank's blend of anthropological, political, and professional dancer's insight reaches well beyond obvious, superficial issues to paint a complex portrait of these men and the psychological, cultural, and political dynamics that affect them, their interactions with dancers, and the meanings they assign to this significant ongoing aspect of their sexual lives.

Politically, Frank brings a developed awareness of the significance of the power dynamics, colored by gender and class discrepancies, that are inherent in sexualized interactions between men with money to spend and women with money to earn. Happily, Frank holds these political perspectives in a thoughtful, non-simplistic way, recognizing that the interactions between customers and dancers are cannot be reduced to a bunch of privileged, wealthy men unilaterally controlling and manipulating disprivileged, financially disadvantaged women. Indeed, she explores in some depth the complex power dynamics, status concerns, and potential manipulations that are very much a two-way street between customers and dancers at strip clubs. She is both critical of and respectful toward her subjects, neither taking their perspectives at face value nor pathologizing them for their substantial involvement with the clubs.

Culturally and psychologically, Frank focuses on issues of perceived masculinity, sexual identity, sexual self-image, and leisure; on the sexual excitement the men experience in these circumstances of bounded sexual transgression (going to stigmatized clubs, but not actually engaging in sexual contact with the dancers there); on the men's desire for adventure and escape from routinized daily lives and marriages (what Frank addresses interestingly as "touristic practice" -- stepping out of daily life into a world that is distinctly, even mythologically, "other," even as international tourists do when visiting foreign cultures); on the men's visits to strip clubs as an outlet for the aggression common to primary relationships; and on the men's search for various forms of sexualized authenticity that contrast with not only the inherent artificiality of paid sexualized interaction, but with the increasingly artificial nature of their outside lives as well. She also looks in detail at her subjects' conceptualizations of marriage, monogamy, and emotional commitment to their primary partners, evaluating the complex ways these men integrate their frequent, generally secretive visits to strip clubs with their continuing belief that they are being true to their monogamous commitments to wives and primary partners.

These are complicated issues and, to her credit, it is not Frank's goal to find convenient pigeon-holes for her subjects, nor simple answers to the question of what motivates them to frequent and spend large amounts of money at strip clubs. Instead she offers complex, multi-layered, sometimes paradoxical, explanations of what is at work, emotionally and culturally, for these men.

One area that Frank examines in great detail is the question of authenticity in the interactions between customers and dancers. Frank notes that the issue of authenticity is primary to almost all of the men she interviews. She quotes them extensively as they explain the complex systems they have devised to distinguish dancers they believe relate to them in a genuine manner from those who, they believe, do not. The question of how and to what degree dancers are authentic with their customers is a complex one, especially when viewed from both sides of the dancer-customer divide. As a dancer, Frank is in a perfect position to explicate in detail the ways that dancer-customer interactions are manifestly inauthentic. She recounts a long list of strategies dancers use to convince their customers that they are being more authentic than they really are, in the interest of selling more dances and generating greater tips while maintaining relatively strict (and psychologically necessary) boundaries around their personal identities and lives. (Having two different stage names is one such device -- the announced stage name that each dancer uses, plus a second invented name to offer customers in conversation to give them the sense that they are being offered the privilege of knowing the dancers beyond their public personae.) Often, these sophisticated strategies are in stark contrast to the positively naive beliefs of many of the men about how they have gotten to know the real dancers that stand behind their generated stage images.

But Frank also details the ways that dancer-customer interactions also often generate a genuine level of authenticity, separate from the primary theatrical performance. She notes that dancers do genuinely look forward to seeing their regulars (as an opportunity to make more money or relieve the boredom of interacting with other customers, if nothing else), do come to care about them to some degree (though generally not as much as they pretend), do get increasingly familiar with the psychological quirks, traits, and lives of their regulars over time, which often gives rise to a degree of real intimacy and affection. She also points to the ways that the unusual context of dancer-customer interaction often provides an opportunity for the men to become more genuine and less self-conscious than they are in the rest of their lives, generating an interpersonal authenticity that they may lack in daily lives increasingly consumed with artifice, pretense, and multi-layered posturing.

Frank's writing style invitingly combines academic and analytical rigor with an easy accessibility that is unusual in academically oriented work. She brings to her subject a sophisticated background in cultural theory, political analysis, and feminist perspective, but she carries these constructs lightly and critically -- explaining terms and concepts that might be unfamiliar to lay readers, and pointedly noting the limitations of each analytical framework as a tool for explaining the complex psychological, political, and cultural workings of real people in real social situations. Frank uses a variety of writing forms and styles, shedding light on her subjects from a different vantage points -- analysis of the qualitative data in her interviews, direct commentary about and notes from her experiences as a dancer, a delightful section of her preface that is a verbatim transcript of the orientation she received as a new dancer from a club DJ, even four delightful fictional "interludes" -- well-written, enlightening short stories related to stripping that provide yet an additional, refreshingly alternative perspective all their own.

"G-Strings and Sympathy" offers a unique, intelligent, sympathetic, politically-aware look behind the curtain of secrecy and shame that shrouds the thriving culture of strip (and lap dancing) clubs across the nation. If you've ever wondered who the other guys are when you're at one of the clubs, or wondered why your guy might enjoy going there, a cruise through its pages is an enjoyable way to find out.

[A longer version of this review first appeared in Spectator Magazine. If you'd like to receive Comes Naturally and other writing by David

Steinberg regularly via email (free and confidential), send your name and email address to David at <eronat@aol.com>. Past columns are available at the Society for Human Sexuality's "David Steinberg Archives": <www.sexuality.org/davids.html>. Two books edited by David -- "*Erotic by Nature: A Celebration of Life, of Love, and of Our Wonderful Bodies*,"and "*The Erotic Impulse: Honoring the Sensual Self*" -- are available from him by mail order. Descriptions and ordering information are posted at <www.sexuality.org/l/davids/en.html> and <www.sexuality.org/l/davids/ei.html>.]

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