



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

Katherine Frank

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Based on her experiences as a stripper in a city she calls Laurelton—a southeastern city renowned for its strip clubs—anthropologist Katherine Frank provides a fascinating insider's account of the personal and cultural fantasies motivating male heterosexual strip club "regulars." Given that all of the clubs where she worked prohibited physical contact between the exotic dancers and their customers, in *G-Strings and Sympathy* Frank asks what—if not sex or even touching—the repeat customers were purchasing from the clubs and from the dancers. She finds that the clubs provide an intermediate space—not work, not home—where men can enjoyably experience their bodies and selves through conversation, fantasy, and ritualized voyeurism. At the same time, she shows how the dynamics of male pleasure and privilege in strip clubs are intertwined with ideas about what it means to be a man in contemporary America.

Frank's ethnography draws on her work as an exotic dancer in five clubs, as well as on her interviews with over thirty regular customers—middle-class men in their late-twenties to mid-fifties. Reflecting on the customers' dual desires for intimacy and visibility, she explores their paradoxical longings for "authentic" interactions with the dancers, the ways these aspirations are expressed within the highly controlled and regulated strip clubs, and how they relate to beliefs and fantasies about social class and gender. She considers how regular visits to strip clubs are not necessarily antithetical to marriage or long-term heterosexual relationships, but are based on particular beliefs about marriage and monogamy that make these clubs desirable venues. Looking at the relative "classiness" of the clubs where she worked—ranging from the city's most prestigious clubs to some of its dive bars—she reveals how the clubs are differentiated by reputations, dress codes, cover charges, locations, and clientele, and describes how these distinctions become meaningful and erotic for the customers. Interspersed throughout the book are three fictional interludes that provide an intimate look at Frank's experiences as a stripper—from the outfits to the gestures, conversations, management, coworkers, and, of course, the customers.

Focusing on the experiences of the male clients, rather than those of the female sex workers, *G-Strings and Sympathy* provides a nuanced, lively, and tantalizing account of the stigmatized world of strip clubs.

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