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The Culture at Large

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Reviewer Spotlight: Annie Sprinkle on Sex, Art and Activism

By JENNIFER B. MCDONALD

Annie Sprinkle, who reviews Chester Brown's "Paying for It: A Comic-Strip Memoir About Being a John" in this weekend's Book Review, is no stranger to the documentary urge. "From the day I gave away my virginity at 17, I started documenting my sexual experiences," Sprinkle told us recently. "I still am, 40 years later."

Sprinkle has cultivated one of the more audacious careers of anyone who has ever reviewed a book in our pages: porn star, prostitute, artist, academic, AIDS educator, author, filmmaker, political activist. She was also, she says, the first American porn star to earn a Ph.D.



Illustration by Tina Berning

Annie Sprinkle

In an e-mail exchange, Sprinkle discussed her long and still-evolving career.

Q. What first led you to work in the sex industry?

A. When I was 18 (in 1973) and all my high school friends went off to college, I surprised everyone, especially myself, and followed my muse into prostitution and pornography. In retrospect, I realize it was because I was raised to be a political activist, and sex can be very political. I also needed to be touched, had an interest in filmmaking, and thought that sex was simply the most interesting experience in the world. At that time, having sex with total strangers was irresistible and fascinating.

There came a point when you decided to turn your sex work into art.

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Q.

A. Eventually I got bored exploring men's fantasies and desires and became far more interested in my own desires, and was motivated to explore new concepts and genres in sexually explicit media. Simultaneously, I discovered there was less censorship and more creative freedom in art. I quickly fell in love with the art audience, which was charming and welcoming, and included women. Plus, thankfully, art paid better.

Q. *What led to your transition from sex worker to author, artist and sex educator? What made you decide to get your Ph.D.?*

A. I've long documented my sexual experience, but at a certain point, I wanted a more global, historical and scientific perspective. So I got my Ph.D. in human sexuality. My dissertation was "Providing Educational Opportunities for Sex Workers." I surveyed 100-plus sex workers about what they would most, and least, want to learn if there were continuing education in their fields.

Q. *You write in your review of "Paying for It" that Chester Brown's coming out as a john is "truly groundbreaking." Can you think of any other books like his?*

A. Brown's book — and another called "Paying for It," subtitled "A Guide by Sex Workers for Their Clients" (2004), edited by Greta Christina — indicates that there may be a growing societal openness toward prostitution, one that's moving "reputable," average people to speak up about the value of paying for sex. Pamela Madsen's memoir "Shameless: How I Ditched the Diet, Got Naked, Found True Pleasure ... and Somehow Got Home in Time to Cook Dinner," which came out earlier this year, is the first book I know of in which a woman details her adventures and experiences paying "sexual healers" to coax out her own sexuality.

Working with sex professionals helped Madsen save her 30-year marriage, which is the opposite of what Brown sought. But what bridges the two is that both authors found that sex workers gave them the means and safety they needed to have the personal relationships they craved. I have two women friends who created what they call "bondassage": they've hit on a way for women to feel comfortable paying for an erotic and kinky experience by being pampered with a full-body massage and spa-like amenities. They are the busiest erotic practitioners I know, and about a third of their clients are women. These stories foretell a time when pay for play in the sex field may find legitimacy as a path to self-discovery and actualization — no apologies necessary.

Q. *Who are some of your favorite authors, in fiction or nonfiction?*

A. Rarely do I read fiction. Real life is so much more fantasmagorical. I find people's honest, self-revelatory, sexually explicit autobiographies — like Chester Brown's, Virginie Despentes's "King Kong Theory" and Michelle Tea's "Valencia" — deeply enjoyable. But my absolute favorite writer of all time is the performance artist Linda M. Montano. Anything she writes absolutely blows me away; she also happens to be a practicing Catholic, which makes it all the more complex and interesting. My favorite poets are Yoko Ono and Eileen Miles.

Q. *Do you have any new books in the works? Other projects under way?*

A. These days I'm touring a theater piece that my partner, Elizabeth Stephens, and I wrote and perform: "Dirty Sexecology: 25 Ways to

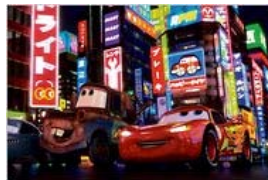


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“Make Love With the Earth.” Elizabeth and I coined the word “sexecology” to describe a new field of research where sexology and ecology intersect in our culture. We are “ecosexual sexecologists,” switching the metaphor from “Earth as mother” to “Earth as lover,” to make the environmental movement a little more sexy, fun and diverse, and to entice other people to join us in helping to care for nature. We lead ecosex walking tours and ecosex workshops, and produce ecosex art-weddings and ecosex symposiums. We just made a public declaration of our “Ecosex Manifesto”: “We shamelessly hug trees, massage the earth with our feet and talk dirty to plants. We are skinny dippers, sun worshipers and stargazers. We caress rocks ... and admire the earth’s curves often. We make love to the earth with our senses.”

Elizabeth and I also just created Volume 1, Issue 1, of The Journal of EcoSex Research, which we published ourselves. And we’re working on two books: one about our Love Art Laboratory art project (loveartlab.org) and the other a collection of interviews with notable ecosexuals about ecosexuality (sexecology.org).

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