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BOOKS

HEALTH, MIND & BODY NERVE: LITERATE SMUT

Genevieve Field

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REVIEW

The only thing more difficult than writing well about sex is writing about it honestly. That's what a couple of twentysomething editors, Rufus Griscom and Genevieve Field, discovered when they left their jobs to launch the online sex magazine Nerve.com last summer. "Sex is a subject tripwired with insecurities and conflicts -- a subject that people lie about as a matter of course," note Griscom and Field in their introduction to NERVE: LITERATE SMUT. One peek at this anthology --- a sampling of previously published essays, stories and photos preserved offline in the traditional way suggests that many of the contributors evidently felt up to the challenge.

Nonetheless, the volume's title is something of a misnomer --- there's not much smut (literate or otherwise), and if it's Nancy Friday or Penthouse Forum you're looking after, look elsewhere. But if what you're after are honest and perceptive essays about sex, you'll find several here. Editors Griscom and Field have gone to some pains to include a wide variety of experience, neatly (though arbitrarily) grouping contributors into six sections such as "shame," "taboo," "fringes," etc. Smut aside, there's bound to be something here to pique the interest of almost any reader.

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One of my favorite pieces (I discovered it first online) remains Poppy Z. Bright's "Would You?" a fantasy which explores how better off the world would be if John Lennon and Paul McCartney had fallen in love. While the essay is sure to enrage some traditionalists (Beatles's fan or otherwise), Bright isn't just out to tweak conservative sensibilities. Beneath her light touch, she's very aware of the power of pop culture to move us and to change our minds --- and what better way to counter homophobia than to extrapolate beyond the complex relationship of these two great songwriters?

Curiously, it's the essays banished to the "fringes" that make for the best reading. In the hands of a less honest or capable writer, for example, Aaron James's sensitive but sobering account of his days as a high-end male prostitute ("Hustler's Measure") might've collapsed under the weight of lurid details. Instead, James comes across as a born writer-highly observant and sensitive to the complexities of this unappealing lifestyle.

More philosophically reasoned than James's account is that of Evan D. Hopkins, "Sex and the (Somewhat) Celibate Prisoner." In a place such as prison, where every aspect of life is regulated, and each sex act not about love but power, Hopkins comes to realize that celibacy can be an act of defiance, of free will. Celibacy is one of the few choices that can remind a prisoner of his potential.

Not everyone in the collection is as lucid as James and Hopkins. If the combination of observation and self-knowledge mark these essays, then other ones are marred by strange assumptions or undeveloped ideas. Noted wag Quentin Crisp tries



to explore his lonely lifestyle in "The Art of Celibacy," but the essay never moves beyond platitudes and anecdotes of other celebrities (and celibates). And though we're supposed to be impressed by the honesty of self-confessed player John Perry Barlow, "A Ladies' Man and Shameless" --- the title is meant ironically --- is less about the shortcomings of monogamy than about the shortcomings of its author and his childish ways.

While the essays in NERVE are uneven, the fiction is mostly good or better. Contributors include some famous names: Thom Jones, John Hawkes, Carole Maso and Robert Olen Butler among them. But it wasn't necessarily the established names that surprised and delighted me. Newcomer Courtney Eldridge's rips through the insatiable appetite of one man in "Anonymous," and what begins with elegant (but graphic) symmetry and vivid, sparing characterization grows into something else: an elegy for a lost lover. Meanwhile, Ben Neihart's "The #1 Song in the Country," a sly romp about a rock 'n' roller who must go to unusual extremes in order to gather material for her first single, is one of the funniest and adroitly told in the whole anthology.

As with the best stories and essays in NERVE, these ones are fun to read because they are smart, graphic and immediate. Like all good writing, they deliver their pleasure in unexpected ways.

--- Reviewed by Paul Zakrzewski
(pzak)

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