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Books: Skin City by Jack Sheehan

Naked truth

By Geoff Schumacher

Perhaps the best way to start talking about Jack Sheehan's new book, *Skin City*, is to explain what it is not. It is not a muckraking exposé of the sex industry in Las Vegas. It does not "blow the lid off" anything. It also is not a deep socio-political treatise on "Sin City" and its anything-goes morality. It is not an academic text.

But while those seem like worthwhile research projects, the fact that *Skin City* is not either of those books may be its greatest strength. Sheehan is your guide for a breezy tour of the Las Vegas adult trades and pastimes--legal and otherwise. This is a five-minute roller-coaster ride, rather than a cross-country bus trip, and we know which of those wins a popularity contest.

Sheehan, a veteran local journalist, has a light touch, injecting humor into most everything he writes, and this style works well for *Skin City*. His self-deprecating approach is a constant source of amusement as he interviews porn stars, swingers, strippers and prostitutes. For example, while hanging around with adult film star Christi Lake during an Adult Video News Awards banquet, he finds himself seated at a table with a placard that says, "Talent."

"Several people walking by our table, fans of the industry who have purchased tickets, give me a funny look," Sheehan reports. "I wonder if they're thinking that I'm some over-the-hill swordsman clinging to my glory days as a porn star. On the table in front of each place setting is a bottle of I.D. Lube, with a card proclaiming that it is the 'Official Lubricant of the 2003 AVN Awards Show.' It occurs to me that this is surely the only fancy gathering I will ever attend where the table gift is meant to be applied directly to my penis."

One of the more fascinating revelations from *Skin City* is that so many well-known porn stars are from Las Vegas or live here now, often ensconced in relatively inconspicuous suburban comfort. UNLV's theater department, for example, has an impressive list of alumna who have gone on to triple-X stardom. A highlight is Sheehan's profile of Ashlyn Gere, who once was a student in an English class he taught at UNLV. Gere also was a cheerleader and talented theater student who went on to become one of porn's biggest names.



Skin City:
Uncovering the Las Vegas Sex Industry
Jack Sheehan
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276 pages

The prevailing attitude Sheehan gathers from the porn stars, swingers, strippers and working girls he interviews is an almost total absence of guilt. These are completely uninhibited women (and men) who gain confidence and considerable income from their lines of work. They do not attribute their career decisions to childhood sexual abuse, broken homes or financial desperation. Most of them say they are highly sexual humans who relish what they do. One high-priced call girl tells Sheehan: "I know people are shocked when they hear this, but I just don't have an ounce of guilt about what I do. It's adult entertainment, the oldest profession in the world, and it's never going away. And when I realized I could be really good at it, I felt totally free from my financial worries."

Whether this represents a complete picture of the sex trade is a question that Sheehan does not vigorously pursue. For example, he does not spend any time interviewing prostitutes working East Fremont Street. They might, one suspects, tell a different tale.

Sheehan does interview Clark County Sheriff Bill Young and undercover vice officers about prostitution, and they emphasize how much it has grown in Las Vegas in recent years and how difficult it is to police. Metro does not have the resources, they say, to effectively crack down on call girl rings.

Of course, in a town that tells the world that what happens here, stays here, maybe cracking down on call girls isn't a good use of taxpayer funds. The corporatization of the Las Vegas Strip hasn't erased the age-old practice of casino employees providing gamblers with whatever they desire. "The sex industry thrives in Las Vegas through a network of service workers whose livelihood depends on tips," an undercover officer tells Sheehan. "So if an older widowed woman inquires of a bartender where she might find male companionship and tokes him with a twenty, the odds are pretty good that the bartender can hook her up with a male escort, or gigolo. Same with a man in town for a convention who is looking for a hooker."

Sheehan brushes a bright coat of paint on the Las Vegas sex industry, accentuating the empowering, enriching aspects. This is a legitimate and entertaining part of the story, but it's important to remember that it's only part.

Disclosures: Stephens Press, publisher of Skin City, is owned by the same company that owns the Mercury. Stephens Press also will be publishing a book written by the reviewer.

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