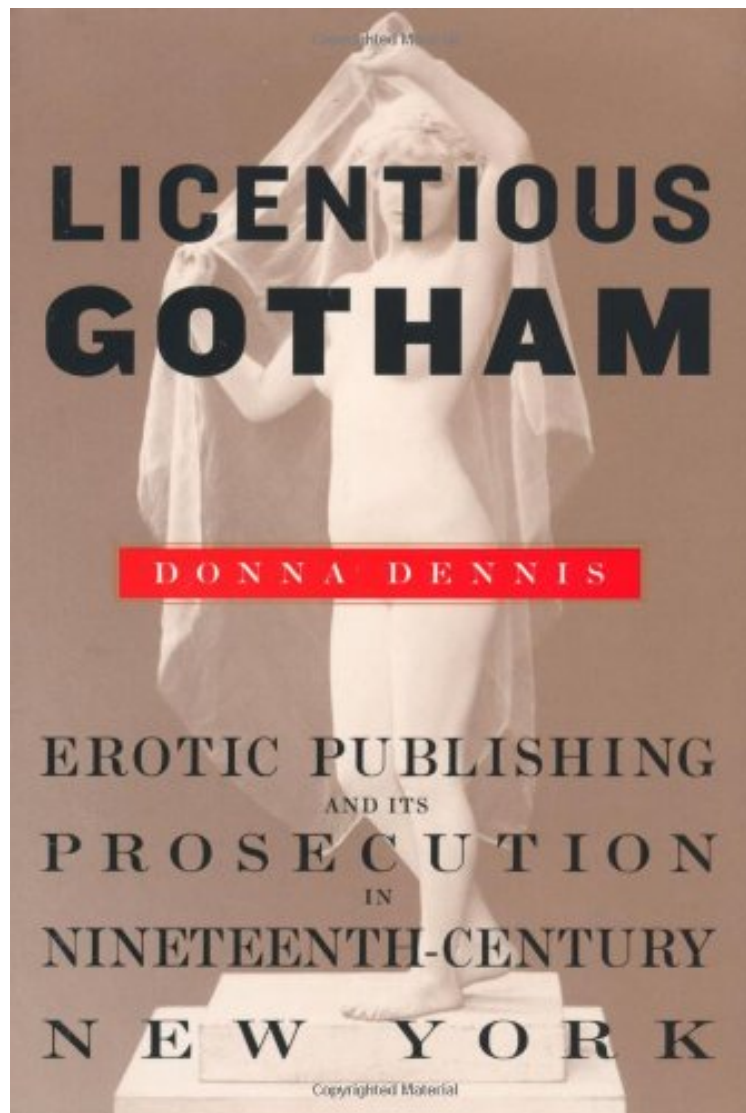


(Download free pdf) Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York

Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York

Donna Dennis

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Donna Dennis : Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. The Start of the Old DanceBy Rob HardyNowadays you can get just

about any sort of pornography you want with a few clicks of the mouse, and much of it is free. Before that, New York City, especially Times Square, was known as the headquarters for porn movies, and when porn was available only in print media, New York's Nassau Street in lower Manhattan (close to City Hall) was its hub. Historical factors made it so around 1840. Donna Dennis, a law professor, has taken the history from that beginning through the end of the century in *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth Century New York* (Harvard University Press). As you'd expect from her background, there are plenty of legal case studies here, with descriptions of court arguments and eventual punishments or lack thereof. There are amusing descriptions also, however, of the sort of poetry, prose, and pictures that were considered hot stuff in their day, as well as profiles of the publishers who were part of the incipient American pornography fascination. Of course, the fascination continues, and although plenty of the porn mentioned here has more of a historic rather than prurient appeal, many of the legal issues still stand. The ambivalent nature of the works described here is perfectly shown in the 1839 *Prostitution Exposed: or, A Moral Reform Directory, Laying Bare the Lives, Histories, Residences, Seductions of the Most Celebrated Courtezans and Ladies of Pleasure of the City of New York*. The anonymous author advised that readers could use the guide so as to shun the brothels described in detail within. Or not. Enforcing morality really began with the coming of the "flash" weeklies like *The Whip* or *The Weekly Rake*, which offered themselves as guides to the best and worst of available commercial sex. What really got them into trouble, however, was that they made much of their income by blackmail, offering to hold particular stories about public figures for a fee. New York also became a center for the publishing of "fancy books", relatively expensive, well-bound texts illustrated with engravings. Dennis shows that the books did reflect a change in the understanding of female sexuality in acknowledging that it even existed. The women in the books enjoyed sex and experienced lust at a time when it was the men who were supposed to be carrying on that way. The men reading the books obviously enjoyed thinking about women with such attitudes. In 1856 came the nation's first sex magazine, *Venus's Miscellany*. One of its most popular features was its letters column, a forerunner of *Letters to Penthouse* or blog entries, wherein men and women would describe their sex lives and secret desires (no matter that most of the letters were written by magazine staff). The 1873 Comstock Act made it illegal to send such things via the US mail. The act that bears his name appointed Anthony Comstock a commissar within the Post Office to snag pornography in the mail. His work was initially wildly effective, and literally tons of erotic mailings were seized and burned. He became less effective as he assumed controversial stances and overreached, like prosecuting those who sold classics like *Tom Jones* or *The Decameron*, or arresting the owner of an art gallery on Fifth Street for selling photographs of paintings from a Parisian Salon. Comstock didn't succeed in stopping pornography (and for all his industriousness, he wound up being a laughingstock of prudery). Dennis's volume shows pointedly why such efforts will never be successful. The simple enjoyment people get from viewing or reading about other people having sex makes it too big a commercial pull. (Indeed, the current governor of New York has proposed taxing downloads of pornography from the internet; he did not suggest trying to eliminate it.) Faced with a simple supply and demand economy, the product got through, no matter what. The pornographers adapted with new styles, techniques, and delivery systems, and the moralists proposed new solutions and prosecutions that made them feel they were making a more moral city. It is easy to see that the dance has never stopped.

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A must read
By PeeDeeLaw students and lawyers are not the only ones who will be enthralled by this scholarly, yet very readable, account of erotic publishing in the 19th century and the resulting prosecutions and evasions and intrigues by booksellers and publishers - as well as public, political and press reaction. Ms Dennis's research is extraordinary and her illustrations are fascinating (and kind of titilating too!). Its a law book that doesn't require the reader to go to law school to enjoy!

Licentious Gotham, set in the streets, news depots, publishing houses, grand jury chambers, and courtrooms of the nation's great metropolis, delves into the stories of the enterprising men and women who created a thriving transcontinental market for sexually arousing books and pictures. The experiences of fancy publishers, flash editors, and racy novelists, who all managed to pursue their trade in the face of laws criminalizing obscene publications, dramatically convey nineteenth-century America's daring notions of sex, gender, and desire, as well as the frequently counterproductive results of attempts to enforce conventional moral standards. In nineteenth-century New York, the business of erotic publishing and legal attacks on obscenity developed in tandem, with each activity shaping and even promoting the pursuit of the other. Obscenity prohibitions, rather than curbing salacious publications, inspired innovative new styles of forbidden literature such as works highlighting expressions of passion and pleasure by middle-class American women. Obscenity prosecutions also spurred purveyors of lewd materials to devise novel schemes to evade local censorship by advertising and distributing their products through the mail. This subterfuge in turn triggered far-reaching transformations in strategies for policing obscenity. Donna Dennis offers a colorful, groundbreaking account of the birth of an indecent print trade and the origins of obscenity regulation in the United States. By revealing the paradoxes that characterized early efforts to suppress sexual expression in the name of morality, she suggests relevant lessons for our own day.

A wonderfully readable and sophisticated look at the raucous popular culture and freewheeling politics of a New York City that in some ways seems impossibly distant, yet in other ways strikingly familiar. (Paul Boyer, author of *Purity in Print*) Marvelous and funny, both smart and dare I say? sexy. Donna Dennis has written a history of nineteenth-century obscenity law that will define the field. The protagonists-- a particular group of entrepreneurs who produced lascivious print--and their pornographic ventures are wacky, brilliantly devious, and determinedly wicked. (Christine Stansell, The University of Chicago) A brilliant and fascinating book on a strangely neglected subject. Dennis shines a bright new light on a hidden and underground aspect of American social and cultural life, and on the response of the law to the trade in dirty books. (Lawrence M. Friedman, Stanford Law School) *Licentious Gotham* is original and illuminating essential reading for those who wish to understand the law in action. (Robert Post, Yale Law School) [Full of] riveting and good-natured detail. It's not just [Dennis's] descriptions and reproductions of old-fashioned dirty pictures that hold the reader's attention. Her discussion and analysis of legal and social responses to the growth of erotica is as compelling as it is comprehensive... There's an important lesson to be drawn from the book: Moral regulators cannot effectively police the desires, dreams and fantasies of consenting adults. Indeed, prohibition typically creates or exacerbates many more problems than it solves. It's a lesson we are painfully slow to learn, whether the offending substance is alcohol, marijuana or porn. This book may speed up our education. (Nick Gillespie New York Post 2009-03-08) Much of *Licentious Gotham* is undeniably entertaining... Donna Dennis has certainly written an important work of American cultural and legal history. (Michael Dirda Washington Post 2009-04-16) Dennis traces the ways in which provocative material was passed off as edifying, like the guides to the city's prostitutes that purported to steer unknowing rubes away from their clutches. And she also notes that prohibitions of one sort of racy material only led to another innovation, often more popular than the first. (Susan Dominus New York Times Book 2009-04-05) [Dennis] offers revelations of her own in sharply etched portraits of resourceful publishers who managed to survive and prosper despite Comstock and his ilk... Dennis also strikingly highlights the underestimated role of women both as workers in the business--they specialized in coloring engravings--and as customers... Perhaps the most significant contribution of *Licentious Gotham* and its predecessors is the lesson they afford in the futility of keeping secrets, particularly against academic industriousness aided by the collapse of government censorship. Erotica, on the face of it, might seem especially fated for early destruction: cheaply made, energetically used, and often confiscated in raids or shredded in panic when Ma undertook the spring cleaning. But the embarrassments of the past are more durable than their perpetrators prayed. A furtive Victorian wank can inspire a leer for the ages. (Mark Caldwell Bookforum 2009-04-01) Dennis' book begins with the early legal battles over explicit pamphlets, papers, and novels published in the early 1800s. Collecting a vivid cast of repeat offenders and their aggressors, Dennis presents the infancy of erotic publishing as a battle of the little man against the censors... From simple erotic fan fiction to the blockbuster sensory assaults common to the Internet, erotic publishing online has been fought every step of the way but persevered in manner not too different than Dennis' history of erotic print. Perhaps, this will be the true legacy of the book: by illustrating a previously unknown struggle in the past, cultural critics will stop crying falling-sky whenever a new erotic meme crops up on the Internet. Dennis' book reminds us that lust has been commoditized for centuries... *Licentious Gotham* is a landmark in sexual scholarship. (Erik Hinton PopMatters 2009-04-28) About the Author Donna Dennis is Professor of Law and Justice Frederick W. Hall Scholar at Rutgers School of Law-Newark. From The Washington Post From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com ed by Michael Dirda In the 19th century, a bookseller who stocked John Cleland's "Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure" -- a novel better known as "Fanny Hill" -- could be arrested, severely fined and sentenced to prison. In my own youth, "Fanny Hill" was still kept behind the counter at Rusine's cigar store, carefully sealed in plastic shrink-wrap. Today it's a Penguin Classic and frequently taught in college literature courses. The world changes. In "Licentious Gotham," Donna Dennis, a professor at Rutgers School of Law in Newark, carefully examines a series of prosecutions and legal battles to better understand the extent and character of erotic publishing in 19th-century America. She also aims to reconstruct "the meaning of obscenity" during that time and repeatedly shows how prohibitions "promoted, as much as suppressed, the proliferation of sexual representations." Dennis begins by discussing such antebellum "flash" weeklies as the *Whip*, the *Libertine of New York*, the *Weekly Rake* and the long-running *National Police Gazette*. These papers offered sporting men news about Manhattan low life and specialized "in lavish descriptions of the milieu of New York prostitution, for which they provided a veritable directory to the best and worst prostitutes, brothels, and madams in the city." The *Sunday Flash* even ran an 18-part series called "Lives of the Nymphs." "Each number featured a lengthy biographical sketch of a prominent New York prostitute." As Dennis makes clear, this "flash" press made most of its money out of extortion: The editors "humiliated private figures and attempted to blackmail prominent citizens. They also violated public order and offended Christian sensibilities by brazenly marketing their papers in public spaces and on Sundays. And by openly discussing prostitution and extramarital sex, they shone an unwanted, embarrassing light on licentiousness in Gotham." But these weeklies were eventually overshadowed by the lucrative trade in "fancy" books, "elegant" engravings and "racy" yellow-back pamphlets. (All three of those adjectives were code for what we would now call "hard-core.") Many of these "standard works of the voluptuary" were imported from England or supposedly translated from scandalous French originals. Whatever their naughty contents, the language of their titles is

certainly luscious: Consider "The Confessions of a Voluptuous Lady of High Rank. Disclosing Her Secret Longings and Private Amours before Marriage. Forming a Curious Picture of Fashionable Life and Refined Sensuality" or "The Cabinet of Venus Unlocked in a Series of Dialogues between Louisa Lovestone and Mariana Greedy, Two Cyprians! of the Most Accomplished Talent in the Science of Practical Love." If memory serves, a few of the books mentioned by Dennis, or at least their titles, could still be found in my youth: "The Lustful Turk," for instance, and "The Curtain Drawn Up; or, The Education of Laura." Dennis points out that many of these works boldly highlight the existence of female sexuality: Women were actually depicted experiencing desire, even lust. This, she suggests, was a kind of progress, given an era when wives were generally expected to show no signs of passion and were usually advised -- in the old British phrase -- to simply lie back and think of England. But the world really was changing. In 1856, George Akarman inaugurated the country's first sex magazine, Venus' Miscellany. It was sold by mail and thus discreetly available to anyone anywhere. Before long, the magazine's popular letters column was encouraging ordinary women, as well as men, to describe their sex lives and fantasies. No doubt much of this material was made up by the editors. And yet the very existence of such a feature suggests that eroticism could move out of the brothel or the French chateau and actually become middle-class and downright American. In the pages of Venus' Miscellany, pornographers advertised their "fancy" books, and some of the more entrepreneurial branched out to offer condoms, sex toys, alleged aphrodisiacs and even abortion aids. In fact, anything gynecological could be marketed as erotic, including a dour and wonderfully titled polemic against female masturbation: "The Secret Habits of the Female Sex: Letters Addressed to a Mother on the Evils of Solitude, and its Seductive Temptations to Young Girls, the Premature Victims of a Pernicious Passion, with All Its Frightful Consequences: Deformity of Mind and Body, Destruction of Beauty, and Entailing Disease and Death; but from Which by Attention to the Timely Warnings Here Given, the Devotee May Be Saved, and Become an Ornament to Society, a Virtuous Wife, and a Refulgent Mother!" In "Licentious Gotham" Dennis also briefly outlines the career of George Thompson, the most prolific writer of what has been called "American porno-gothic," a subgenre emphasizing graphic violence, dark secrets and sexual excess, including teasing hints of incest, miscegenation, orgies and public sex. Some of Thompson's novels include "The Ladies' Garter" (c. 1851), "The Gay Girls of New York" (1854) and "The Bridal Chamber, and Its Mysteries" (1856). While Thompson freely reveled in every form of splatter-flick violence -- including disfigurement by acid and cannibalism -- he would typically build up tremendous erotic tension, then suddenly announce that the law or morality compelled him to draw a veil or "drop the curtain" over what was to ensue between some snowy-globed damsel and her well set-up admirer. Much of this "pleasurist" writing is now lost to us, known only from police accounts or the bibliographical records of the famous collector of erotica H.S. Ashbee. Thousands of books, prints and printing plates were destroyed during the long career of Anthony Comstock, who from 1873 to 1915 was secretary and chief special agent of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. (The 1873 law against sending obscene material through the mail bears his name: the Comstock Act.) In "Traps for the Young" (1883) this relentless scourge of smut actually calculated that there existed, by title, exactly 165 "bad books" when he began his more than 40-year crusade in 1872. He tried to destroy every last copy. For instance, of the Cupid's Own Library imprint a single item survives (owned appropriately by the Kinsey Institute): "The Love Feast; or, A Bride's Experience: A Poem in Six Nights." While much of "Licentious Gotham" is undeniably entertaining, much is also dryly legalistic, paying minute attention to the judicial maneuverings of both prosecutors and publishers. In short, Donna Dennis has certainly written an important work of American cultural and legal history, yet somehow it's not half as titillating as one might expect -- or hope. Copyright 2009, The Washington Post. All Rights Reserved.