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Virgin: The Untouched History



author of STRAIGHT and BIG BIG LOVE



Synopsis

Why has an indefinable state of being commanded the attention and fascination of the human race since the dawn of time? In *Virgin*, Hanne Blank brings us a revolutionary, rich and entertaining survey of an astonishing untouched history. From the simple task of determining what constitutes its loss to why it matters to us in the first place, Blank gets to the heart of why we even care about it in the first place. She tackles the reality of what we do and don't know about virginity and provides a sweeping tour of virgins in history - from virgin martyrs to Queen Elizabeth to billboards in downtown Baltimore telling young women it's not a "dirty word." *Virgin* proves, as well, how utterly contemporary the topic is - the butt of innumerable jokes, center of spiritual mysteries, locus of teenage angst, popular genre for pornography, and nucleus around which the world's most powerful government has created an unprecedented abstinence policy. In this fascinating work, Hanne Blank shows for the first time why this is, and why everything we think we know about virginity is wrong.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A billboard in Baltimore used to read, "Virgin: teach your kids it's not a dirty word." That it could be thought of as a dirty word, and that social forces might pay good money to change this concept, illustrate part of the ambivalent feelings our society has toward virgins and virginity. The ambivalence, at many levels, is exhaustively examined in *Virgin: The Untouched History* (Bloomsbury) by Hanne Blank. An independent historian (with some books of erotica to her credit), Blank says that she was working as a sex educator and wanted to find authoritative sources on virginity. Despite the medical, historic, religious, and social implications of the subject, she found

few. "Even though my interests were limited to virginity and virgins in the Western world, it was rapidly becoming obvious to me that if I wanted to read a comprehensive survey of virginity, I was going to have to write it." Her book is indeed comprehensive, and it is scholarly but far from dry, as she examines the surprisingly complicated topic of what a virgin is, and tries to make sense of why the subject has been on our collective minds for so many centuries. Just defining what a virgin is is a tough exercise. And it isn't just a philosophical or verbal one: "It is an exercise in controlling how people behave, feel, and think, and in some cases, whether they live or die." The confusion is shown by Augustine, who said that if a virgin resisted rape, then she was still a virgin after rape.

I have been looking forward to this book with vivid interest, since I have studied the subject myself in the context of sociobiology and given it more than a passing thought. The author divided her book in two main sections, the first being devoted chiefly to the bio-medical aspects of virginity, the second to its cultural and religious aspects. Both parts are well written and read sometimes as a thriller on a fascinating subject. Since the author limited herself to the Western history of the subject, she can hardly be blamed for incompleteness, but the result is, as a consequence, somewhat biased. Some examples. The Greek word 'hymen' means 'membrane' in general, but Hymen is also the Greco-Roman god of marriage. I have always found the learned question whether there is a link between the two highly prosaic, but the author seems to agree with the view that there is no relation. Yet, the mytho-poetical transformation of empirical data often splits the meaning of words into different spheres of significance. So, for Hippocrates epilepsy was merely a process within the brain, whereas it was a 'holy sickness' in Greek religion. Hymen, the god, and hymen, the word, both have roots in Sanskrit culture. Such loose ends get lost in a study which limits itself to the Western history only. The original manuscript of the book had about 1000 pages which the publisher wanted to be reduced to less than 300, so it is hardly amazing that only a selection of the enormous amount of material in the medical literature is included in the publication. The author concentrates on the final 'discovery of the hymen' by Vesalius, but its existence was still denied afterwards, not only by Par  .

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