

book reviews



The Thinking Man's Tool

BY BOB WOLFF

A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis
David M. Friedman
The Free Press / Simon & Schuster,
306 pages
ISBN: 0-784-85320-5

David Friedman has not only written the lark I expected when I picked up *A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis*. He has packed the pages with history and insights on the influence of a man's most prized organ and many other forces that drive civilization.

Friedman starts with the devil of early Christianity and moves through da Vinci to Freud to feminism and beyond. His is an often humorous biography of the very idea and symbolism of this body part. Thanks to his research we learn how the people of different eras considered the organ; the role it played in politics, literature and art. Early Christians made the

penis into the "demon rod," writes Friedman, and he shows us how ancient Egyptians and Greeks idealized the organ, making it the symbol of power, energy, companionship, and plenty. Negative to Christians, erections intrigued Romans. Freud may have focused on the penis too much for the good of his own young science and art.

Friedman and Freud fall into the same trap — looking at the penis mostly from a heterosexual male viewpoint. What if Freud had considered the loss men feel not having a vagina? What if Friedman considered women's viewpoints on the penis other than as something 'missing' that they can obtain only by allowing a man to do something very much akin to possessing them?

It should have been no surprise Friedman doesn't consider the meaning of the penis to gay men, but the gay point of view seems so essentially prick-centered that its omission is shocking. He also misses an opportunity to cover the essential connection between the joy of sex for men, some

of their partners, and what may be the most damaging infection to humankind since the middle ages.

While there are gaps in Friedman's exhaustive study, it is a solid, instructive read. As Friedman introduces us to sexual dynamics during the eras of slavery and post-slavery in the United States, we are told the importance of the penis as the Jim Crow laws were upheld in the South. When lynched, African-American men were castrated by Caucasian KKK men in front of a crowd to keep Black men in their place. Another interesting political thread of Friedman's story concerns the Clarence Thomas saga as a latter-day reflection of that earlier era.

Friedman explains why the penis is shaped as it is, why so many sperm are ejaculated, what scientists believe about Human Sperm Competition, and the medicalized penis — medicine offering opportunities to those involved with penises to have them behave more as they wish.

For politically minded gay men the book will interest and at the

same time frustrate and may anger. Gay men are missing from this cultural history except for peeks into the life of Leonardo da Vinci. One could ask — will the next 21st century penis historian not only include the thoughts and feelings of gay men, but consider the effects on society, in the 1980s as AIDS made their prized possession a potentially deadly weapon?

We certainly can wonder why a book copyrighted almost 30 years after AIDS emerged discusses Viagra and penile implants but avoids the psychological and other health issues of AIDS. We could also ask why the lesbian viewpoint on penises is missing from this book — after all, it is called a cultural history of the penis. But then, for those whose vision is limited to the straight and narrow, we are missing from the culture, aren't we? ▼

Bob Wolff is a theatrical acoustic design consultant who lives in Randolph.

SEX and SELF-HELP

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

The Big Bang: Nerve's Guide to the New Sexual Universe
by the writers of Nerve
Plume Publishing, 258 p.
ISBN: 0452284260

I Will Survive ... and So Will You
Tammy Faye Messner
Jeremy Tarcher, 240 p.
ISBN: 1585422428

This month we look at two self-help books, *The Big Bang: Nerve's Guide to the New Sexual Universe*, and *I Will Survive ... and You Will Too*, Tammy Faye (Bakker) Messner's new tome. Although you would think these two books couldn't be more unrelated, there is a thread that ties them together: Nerve's book is all about screwing, while Tammy Faye's is all about getting screwed.

First, *The Big Bang*. Nerve is a popular website devoted to sex and sexuality, and this is their first printed book. Nerve's experience in the area shows: *The Big Bang* is fun, smart and educational. It's this generation's *The Joy of Sex*, only not judgmental and creepy.

There are one-liners throughout the book that give you a sense of its irreverent, intelligent approach to sex edu-

cation. "Fellating is fun but it's hard work; after twenty minutes, it's just hard work." "The male g-spot is Mother Nature's reward for guys who open themselves up to a little anal action." "The vagina is a lot like the revamped VW Bug: There's a lot more room in there than you'd think."

The Big Bang teaches you not only how to navigate the main highway of intercourse, but all the side roads as well. There's extensive coverage of topics such as manual stimulation, oral and anal sex, and bondage. You know a book is comprehensive when fisting and female ejaculation each gets its own chapter! There's also a lot of good health information covering sexually transmitted diseases and genital self-care.

You also get helpful sidebars on a variety of interesting trivia. Looking for how to make oral sex better for your partner? "Flavor Savers" lists food that "may affect the way both men and women taste and smell down there, for better or worse." "Off to the Side" teaches us that "Arousal is fabulous for anal relaxation, so don't leave the foreplay at home. But once you're in the process of 'moving in,' lay off the body's other major hot zones — tweaking a nipple, tickling a clit, or caressing a penis can cause inopportune sphincter contractions. Once you're in, however, everything's free game again."

Although it's mainly directed at straights, *The Big Bang* goes out of its way to be gay-friendly. Even the photos (which range from PG 13 to R ratings) feature a variety of same-sex couples (as well a sprinkling of friendly-looking three-ways). But since bodies come in only so many configurations, even the most hetero-directed advice will probably work for you, too. This book is the Olympic pool of sex: whether you're looking to learn the basics of the breaststroke, or the intricacies of advanced swimming, *The Big Bang* makes it easy to dive right in.

Unlike *The Big Bang*, the former Tammy Faye Bakker's book is a mess, and not a particularly fun one either. While it does feature some enjoyable campiness, it's mostly morose and unfortunate. The title *I Will Survive ... and You Will Too* sounds inspiring, but unless you're looking for someone to whom you can feel superior, it would be hard to describe this book as uplifting.

Early on, Tammy Faye signals that she doesn't harbor any bitterness towards her famously bad past, saying that you can't drive forward with your eye on the rear view mirror (or something like that, I can't bear to look to look it up), but every other chapter has her harkening back to the wrongs she felt were done her. So, while she starts by sounding very above-it-all, she's soon reminding us of "the unimaginable deceit and lies and plotting of people we thought were our friends."

There are all kinds of bizarrenesses in this book, and they're completely random. Mixed in with recriminations and blaming, there are chapters where Tammy Faye morphs into a demented Martha Stewart. "To make your own jewelry," one chapter begins, "all you need is some old jewelry or clip earring backs and some E6000 glue — it glues anything to anything!"

"I took those new one-dollar coins and made the most beautiful earrings," Tammy Faye enthuses. "I glued them to clip-on backs because they are a little heavy. I also made a matching ring."

As lovely as that sounds, it pales next to the beauty of Tammy Faye's poetry. "I feel good about my dogs; they don't care/It's not what I look like, it's that I am there. They don't judge me, they don't make fun/They never hurt my feelings or make me want to run/Away where it doesn't matter anymore/If I do or don't go to the makeup store."

If you're wondering how Tammy Faye became a gay icon, this book might not provide the answer. The good news is that Tammy Faye looks like a million bucks on the cover. And the big diamond ring on her hand is probably not of her making. ▼

Scott Sherman lives and writes in Richmond when he's not jetting around the country for his real job.

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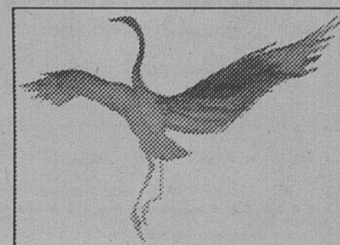
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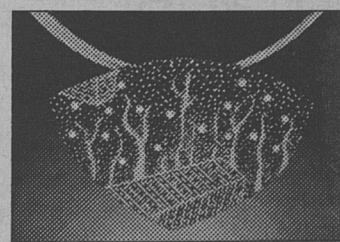
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