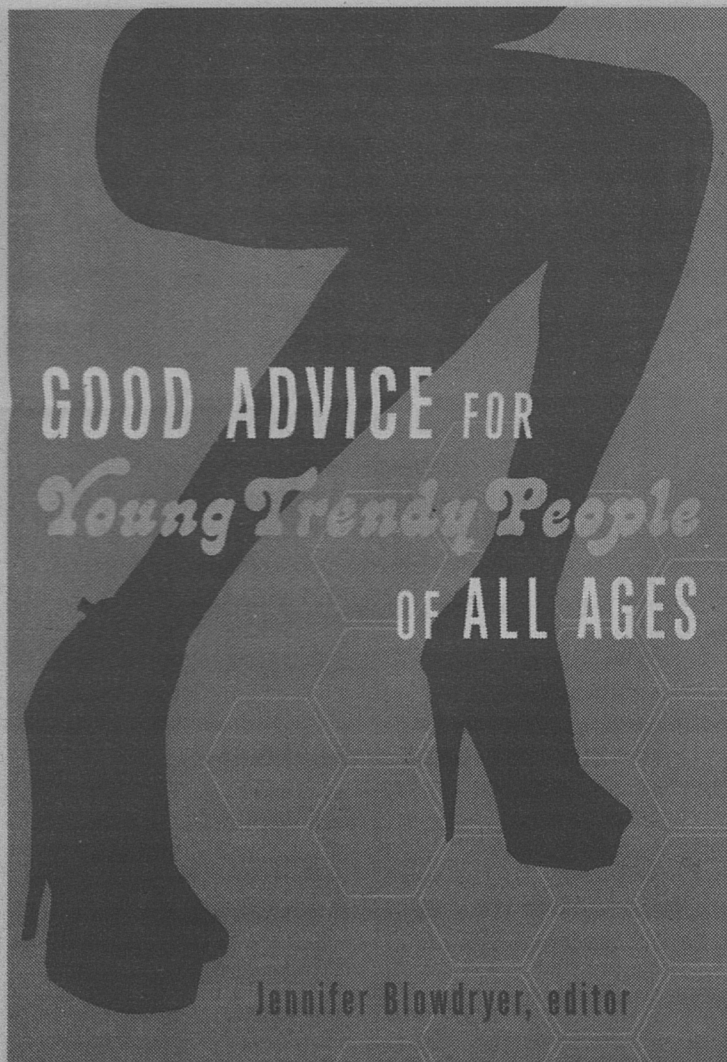


BOOKS

Avant Garde Cool

Or, How I Learned To Stay Young and Trendy



BY CLARK SHELDON

Good Advice for Young Trendy People of All Ages
Jennifer Blowdryer (Ed.)
Manic D Press
Softcover, 141 pages
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In thinking about what to say in review of *Good Advice for Young Trendy People of All Ages*, edited by Jennifer Blowdryer, I decided to make a list of a few main points that stuck out in my mind. First I'd like to convey what seems to be the common thread connecting this compilation of short-essay advice columns: "To thine own self be true." Borrowing directly from wise poet Shakespeare, Reverend Jen (our knowledge Dominatrix), advises on staying popular in modern art scenes, using this historical bit of knowledge to close out her essay. Contrary to popular queer trends, she urges us budding art stars to consistently arrive one minute *early* to parties: "There is no sense in pretending that you are there for the party when all you care about is the free booze and food." Why waste all that energy on being fashionably late when you can use it to concentrate on eating?

The essays span general smorgasbords of sage aging-punk-rocker knowledge to soberingly practical first-person knowledge about surviving while incarcerated. I appreciate the straightforward irony of the mix of perspectives each author brings. I appreciate, as a reader, that I can choose to take all advice with a grain of salt. Or, go out and experiment in being my own art star living for free on credit cards, working rooms like a nightlife diva, screwing like a sexy stud in bed and being a damn good dominatrix.

I want to share two nuggets of knowledge that make the book worthwhile and stretch beyond the realm of pop culture coolness. The first, and in my opinion most important, is "Never throw out drag, unless you're dying." I suggest giving old drag away to friends to wear at your funeral, and if they don't want it, you can send it to me.

The second nugget is extracted from Mistress Daria's advice on being a professional and credible Dominatrix. She says, "If you take another's power by force, you are not strong." Consider this advice in any socio-political context, like a

side dish to current moral or ethically driven battles for leadership positions in Washington, DC, or as the philosophical theory behind use of violence: it's hard to not conclude that many of our country's trusted and age-old cultural norms and processes are founded explicitly on the belief that force is elemental to obtaining power!

Are you wondering about the title of this review yet? The answer, including the concept '*avant garde*,' requires quoting



Jennifer Blowdryer

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editor Jennifer Blowdryer: "I'd been the first punk in high school, an ardent fag hag back when that was frowned upon, a student at Columbia University while simultaneously appearing in skin mags, a campy and blithe stylist in an era of sincere and detailed writing – all kinds of things too early for surrounding society – and taken the blows. Jazz Philosopher Albert Murray, who spent his life in the Air Force in order to weather the storm of being an iconoclastic African-American critic, pointed out that '*Avant Garde*' is a military term. It refers to the shock

troops, the ones sent to the front of the battle who end up dead or badly wounded."

So the question remains, is being *avant garde* cool? I don't have an answer to my own question and I don't feel like Blowdryer's book answers my quandary either. If being shocking ahead of your time in thought and appearance is going to bring pain, persecution and ridicule, then I would advise thinking it through carefully. I have a ring in my septum. My mother doesn't like it, and after four years of nudging me to remove it, she has finally stopped asking.

Having a piercing doesn't put me on the front line of cultural coolness but it does open up avenues for questions about why I'd ever want to do "that" to my body. If being on life's front line with visible piercings increases my mortality rate (so to speak), then my experience has provided more opportunity for conversation with strangers on downtown sidewalks and fewer direct threats and not, in the military sense, real potential for death. I speak carrying a lot of privilege, and really, this book review isn't about me so I'll carry on.

What does *avant garde* conjure in your mind? Mostly, I think of visual art as the picture (no pun intended) definition of *avant garde*. For example, Jackson Pollock's paintings shocked audiences when first unveiled. Now he's seen as a leading creative staple in the cosmopolitan world of art and history. I'll argue Blowdryer suggests the same for punk culture, punk music and punk community.

Blowdryer admits that at the age of 40 she's settled comfortably into the margins of society. Fortunately it's not my responsibility to define social norms and cultural appropriateness. That means I don't have to do anything in particular to either be or not be on the front line of trend setting and trend breaking.

This collection of essays is a primer. Think of *Good Advice for Young Trendy People of All Ages* as the theory book of cool. The book provides the tried and tested tools with which to create new versions of hipness. Rock on, dear reader, and don't forget to send me that drag. ▼

Clark Sheldon, *InterContinental Man of Mystery*, collects vintage Harley Davidson motorcycles in his dreams and resides in Burlington's Old North End.

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