

Meet, Pay, Love

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Sasha Grey, and the new HBO series "Hung," about a nice middle-aged dad who becomes a gigolo. The show, however, plays it safe, making him a financially strapped, reluctant gigolo and not, God forbid, a lusty one. Here, ironically, sex for money is more decent than sex for pleasure.

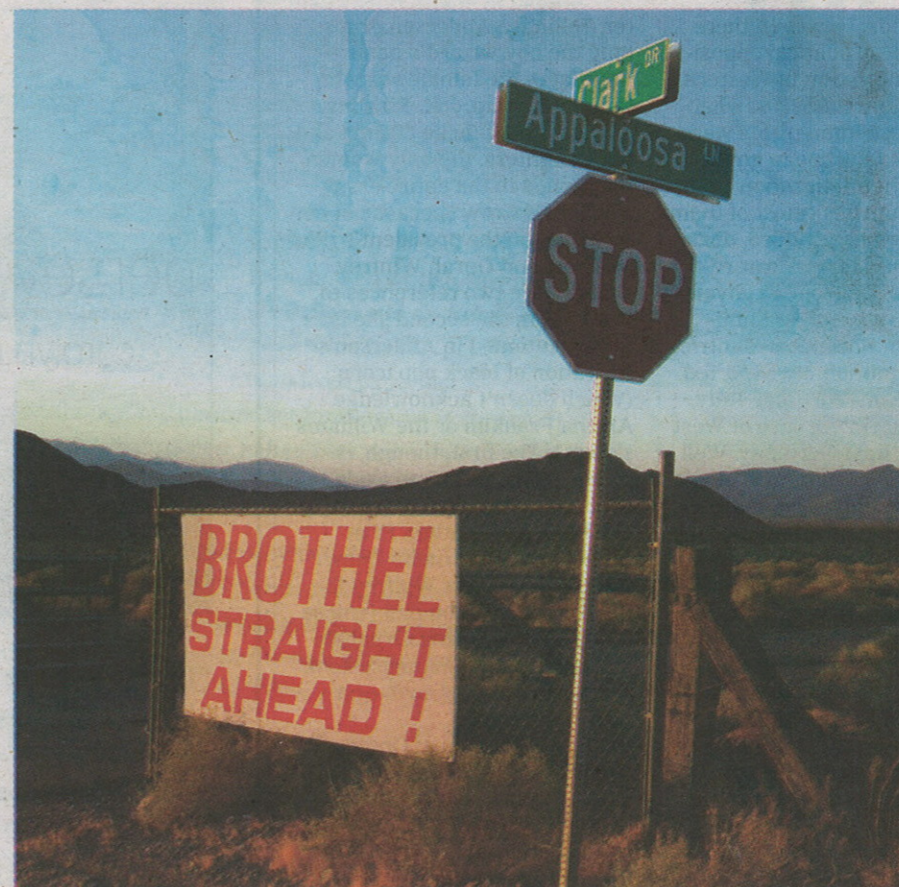
But if you want to know the real price of pleasure, ask the strippers, streetwalkers, Craigslist prostitutes, phone-sex operators, madams, pimps, drug addicts, porn stars and "performance artists" who offer themselves up in "Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys," a collection of essays, vignettes, rants and poems, edited by David Henry Sterry (who wrote the very good 2002 memoir "Chicken," about his life as a young hustler) and R.J. Martin Jr., the director of development for the SAGE Project (Standing Against Global Exploitation) in San Francisco, which offers support of all kinds for sex workers. While good girls require dinner, trips, "commitment" or even an engagement ring for sex, here is a book by those who simply get the cash upfront.

From the unappealing title, you might think this is a truly trashy paperback. Far from it: it's an eye-opening, occasionally astonishing, brutally honest and frequently funny collection from those who really have lived on the edge in a parallel universe. Their writing is, in most cases, unpolished, unpretentious and riveting — but don't worry, their tales are also graphic, politically incorrect and mostly unquotable in this newspaper.

There are some well-known names here. Xaviera Hollander informs us that "it's much harder to be a writer than a hooker," and the ever-sprightly Annie Sprinkle gives "40 reasons why whores are my heroes" and then asks, "Do you have what it takes to be a whore?" Probably not: (Easier to be a writer, I think.) But the joyous glibness displayed by Hollander and Sprinkle is nowhere to be found in the best of the entries.

"Lele," a piece by Jodi Sh. Doff, who "grew up in the suburbs as someone else entirely," recalls Henry Miller's in-your-face exposition. She tells of a night at Diamond Lil's on Canal Street, where "Viva's sitting onstage, legs spread wide." While her customer is buried and busy, she holds a cigarette in one hand, a drink in the other, and chitchats with a girlfriend about another girlfriend. "Every two minutes or so Viva taps him on the head and he hands her a 20 from a stack of bills he's holding, never looking up." We see in this wonderful set piece the whole money/sex connection enacted with raw charm and an immediacy that reaches far beyond

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this strip club, as the man's stack of 20s, one by one, becomes hers. Multitasking Viva holds them "folded lengthwise in her cigarette hand."

Audacia Ray, who now teaches human sexuality at Rutgers University, certainly earned her degree out in the field, having at one point paired up with a woman named Lily as a massage team offering happy endings. "Money got us hot and bothered," she writes, and one evening, after Lily cashed a disability check from the federal government for \$10,000 (she had no bank account, of course), she poured the money — "mostly \$20 bills" — onto the bed. They shut off their phones, bathed together, got "very, very high" and then rolled around "naked in the cash. . . . Even now, when I think of the hottest sex we had, I think about currency stuck to her flesh." Now there's an Uncle to promote the beneficence of an Uncle Sam.

One online dominatrix, Sadie Lune, poo-pooes all the knowing talk of the "natural power" of a *domme* making a "proud man" stoop — you know, the lawyer, doctor or judge who wants to clean toilets on a leash. "What we talk about, often off the Internet and out of leather, is the power of money. . . . More often than not the money tops the scene. . . . Money demands slow heavy bondage when all we feel like is smacking a grateful subject around. . . . The biggest trick is really coming to terms with the fact that money is the boss's boss." So which is more powerful, money or sex? I forgot.

There's plenty of useful information in this book for those of you planning a little adultery or prostitution, or even just some old-fashioned phone sex. Lilycat describes the protocol of "Feed Me the Line": "We couldn't use any sexually explicit words or phrases till the caller used them first. . . . And strangely enough, getting a very horny man to talk dirty to you isn't as easy as it seems." The women

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were permitted to use medical names for body parts, but "Baby, I would like to do something pleasurable with your penis" was not — surprise, surprise — what the client wanted to hear (though it's all you'll get in this review). If the caller refused to talk dirty first, moaning was the fallback, and Lilycat reports the little-known fact that "if you moan for long enough you can become lightheaded and almost pass out" — "so baby, use your dirty, dirty words" and help the lady out.

The most devastating section of the book — its broken heart, its guts on the page — is found in a few horrifying stories that came out of a writing workshop Sterry gave for severely abused young women. For example, Jessica Bertucci

writes about her "weekend visit with my dad": "I begged my mom not to take me but she did anyways. Oh, by the way, my dad raped me when I was 2 years old." After being blindfolded in a room with her father's drinking, crack-smoking buddy, she heard her dad "whispering in my ear, 'Don't be scared, you're helping Daddy pay the rent.' Oh, by the way, I was 9 years old."

Sterry, as editor, inserts himself considerably more than necessary, introducing many of the writers in such relentlessly lengthy and glowing terms as to patronize them. On the other hand, the actual bios for the contributors make for provocative reading and can leave one feeling like an unadventurous slacker. Berta Avila, "a Chicana from El Segundo Barrio of El Paso," is now a translator but has been an "exotic dancer, escort service worker, brothel worker, waitress, medical-legal assistant and instructional assistant for elementary-school children." Zoe Hansen "achieved stability through methadone maintenance and felt it was time to open her own brothel, Sterling Ladies, which was on Park Avenue and 21st Street. It was the first of five brothels she opened during the next three years." (I'm starting to get a brothel-opening feeling myself.) Carol Queen "got a Ph.D. in sexology so she could impart more realistic detail to her smut." (Dr. Queen writes about her "oral clairsentience," but I can't explain here.) While many, perhaps most, of these writers use pseudonyms, they are everything but anonymous.

Kirk Read tells the magnificent story of Ray, a rich, hairy, middle-aged Texan, who hired Read to be his witness as he methodically enclosed his entire body in numerous "stretchable layers, one upon another." With the final touches of "gold gloves that reached up past his biceps" and a black spandex hood, "he turned and faced me, holding his hands up into the air like a victorious Mexican wrestler. Humble. Brave." Very brave, very moving. The scene, in its inherent perversity, has the feel of a crucible, a kind of spandex crucifixion bestowing grace on one who has the courage to go "to the underworld" and find "erotic freedom by any means necessary." The two men shook hands, the only time they touched, and parted ways, an encounter with more tenderness and dignity than many a marital one.

This collection is a wonderful reminder that good writing is not about knowing words, grammar or Faulkner, but having that rare ability to tell the truth, an ability that education and sophistication often serve to conceal. While we are all, I suppose, in the business of surviving, some really are surviving more notably than others. The collective cry for identity found in this unsentimental compilation will resonate deeply — even, I suspect, with those among us who pretend not to pay for sex. □