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City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Women in Culture and Society)

By Judith R. Walkowitz



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City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Women in Culture and Society) By Judith R. Walkowitz

From tabloid exposes of child prostitution to the grisly tales of Jack the Ripper, narratives of sexual danger pulsed through Victorian London. Expertly blending social history and cultural criticism, Judith Walkowitz shows how these narratives reveal the complex dramas of power, politics, and sexuality that were being played out in late nineteenth-century Britain, and how they influenced the language of politics, journalism, and fiction.

Victorian London was a world where long-standing traditions of class and gender were challenged by a range of public spectacles, mass media scandals, new commercial spaces, and a proliferation of new sexual categories and identities. In the midst of this changing culture, women of many classes challenged the traditional privileges of elite males and asserted their presence in the public domain.

An important catalyst in this conflict, argues Walkowitz, was W. T. Stead's widely read 1885 article about child prostitution. Capitalizing on the uproar caused by the piece and the volatile political climate of the time, women spoke of sexual danger, articulating their own grievances against men, inserting themselves into the public discussion of sex to an unprecedented extent, and gaining new entree to public spaces and journalistic practices. The ultimate manifestation of class anxiety and gender antagonism came in 1888 with the tabloid tales of Jack the Ripper. In between, there were quotidian stories of sexual possibility and urban adventure, and Walkowitz examines them all, showing how women were not simply figures in the imaginary landscape of male spectators, but also central actors in the stories of metropolitan life that reverberated in courtrooms, learned journals, drawing rooms, street corners, and in the letters columns of the daily press.

A model of cultural history, this ambitious book will stimulate and enlighten readers across a broad range of interests.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This treatise on fluctuations with regard to class and gender in late 1800s London both informs about the past and reverberates today. Walkowitz's style is sometimes thick but never impenetrable. She does however have a habit of needlessly ending each chapter by stating what will follow in the next. The author (a historian and director of women's studies at Johns Hopkins) analyzes such social phenomena as *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, a notorious four-part newspaper series published in 1885 that chronicled the lives of prostitutes, and the Men and Women's Club, a middleclass group organized that same year to discuss, among other topics, prostitution, the Darwinian evolution of women and what their proper roles might be. The most widely known sexual narrative of the time is the story of Jack the Ripper, and Walkowitz convincingly asserts that its circulation did not increase sexual violence but established a common vocabulary and iconography for the forms of male violence that permeated the whole society. The final chapter on the Yorkshire Ripper murders, committed between 1975 and 1981, ties Walkowitz's theories about backlash against women's freedom to the present day.

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Review

This remarkably polished, lucidly argued work is innovative cultural history at its best. It is one of the most sophisticated and thorough historical treatments of issues that are of widespread interest, among them sexual conflict and violence against women Martha Vicinus

About the Author

Judith R. Walkowitz is professor of history at The Johns Hopkins University. Her research and writing have concentrated on 19th-century political culture and the cultural and social contests over sexuality.

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