

**A History of X: 100 Years of Sex in Film.** By Luke Ford.  
Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1999, 252 pp., \$32.00

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Words = 1090

We did not like this book, yet—given the topic, the author’s sprightly manner, and the promise of inside gossip—we are sure many will—for example . . . uh . . . well . . . we can’t think of anyone right now, but we are sure it will come to us.

Luke Ford is well known in the X-rated movie business. Whether you think he is “the Matt Drudge” of X-rated blogs or “notorious” depends on your point of view. He is certainly controversial. The son of a Seventh-Day-Adventist minister, Ford grew up in Australia. He moved to California in 1977. During the 1980s, he wrote for a variety of newspapers, including the *Auburn Journal*, and worked in the newsroom of KAHI/KHYL radio in the Sacramento area. In 1992, he converted to Orthodox Judaism; *XXX-Communicated: A Rebel Without a Shul* details his problems with his favorite shul. Currently, he is best known for his provocative web site and blogs on Jewish issues and pornography: LukeFord.com, lukeford.net, and lukeisback.com. He helped expose a 1998 HIV outbreak which infected a number of actors, including Tricia Devereaux, Brooke Ashley, and Kimberly Jade. He has been sued for defamation of character by several people working in the pornography industry.

The book jacket claims: “This in-depth, comprehensive history of cinematic pornography is the first book of any kind to detail sex in films.” He focuses on sex in film from the late 1880s (when Eadweard Muybridge’s *Studies in Movement* and talking and moving animation—penny arcades, magic lanterns, peep shows, flip books, zootropes, zoopraxiscopes, kintetoscopes, and other mechanical gadgets, were all the rage) to the present, “when porn [has] penetrated the popular culture.”

Ford’s claim that he is “the first and only” to offer a historical

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review of this phenomenon is untrue. In the late 1980s, for example, Linda Williams (1989) published *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* It is a delightful analysis and history and well worth reading. Today, there is a burgeoning cottage industry of fine cultural historians who are investigating pornography, in all its forms, including X-rated films.

The book flap continues: "Bold and compelling, *A History of X* takes readers on a delicious romp through the back rooms and film studios of the fascinating array of characters who gave porn its start in the 1900s as a daring and risqué attempt at sexual freedom, and explains how it transformed into the closed-door, multi-million-dollar corporate film machine that operates today."

We admit we found the book to be distasteful. Ford possesses a bad-boy persona, something that usually promises a lot of fun—but as we read his text, it felt "icky." A few quotes will give you the flavor of his prose:

- "While Ph.D.s theorize about sexuality, pornographers deal with its reality. By studying porn, therefore, we are more likely to study something substantial than if we undertook graduate work in sociology" (p. 8.)

- "Women who seek to understand men should rent a few X-rated videos—say *Anal Analysis*. That's what your loving father, husband, brother, and friend ponder: *Anal Analysis*. *Women Who Suck Cock and Eat Cum*. *Black Fuckers*."

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to give the bad news." (p. 8).

- "For most of us males, most of the time, orgasm most resembles a piss down the toilet" (p. 15).

- "In the nineteenth century, for instance, most of the madams of major brothels in the Western United States were alienated Jews as were many of the traffickers and prostitutes in the white slave trade. Though only 2 percent of the American population, Jews dominate porn" (p. 21-22).

Then follows a higgly-piggly list of “Jews alienated from Judaism and Jewish life as well as the Christian culture embraced by a majority of Americans” (p. 21). The list of Jewish porn-promoters includes Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, novelist Philip Roth, comedian Lenny Bruce, psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich, *Screw* publisher Al Goldstein, Hugh Hefner’s ex-lover Barbara Klein (but not Hugh Hefner himself), and William Styron—among many, many others, famous and not-so-famous. To pair Philip Roth with Al Goldstein strikes me as something as something of an indiscriminating stretch.

About this point in our reading, we thought: “We’re not sure we’re the ones to review this book for the *Archives*; it deserves a more sympathetic reader. But then came to the question we posed at the start of this review: “Who might that be?”

So from here on, we will suck it up, point out that: “This book will appeal to those who like this sort of thing,” and provide a overview of the material Luke Ford attempted to cover in this little text.

In the style of Luella Parsons and *Photoplay*, Luke Ford drops the names of the most popular X-rated porn films, from *Deep Throat* to the present: those celebrating group sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, adultery, whipping, bondage, and bestiality, to name a few. Interestingly, he relates the controversial careers of top porn stars like Marilyn Chambers, John Holmes, Linda Lovelace, Harry Reems, Gerard Damiano, Georgina Spelvin, Traci Lords, Max Hardcore, Ginger Lynn, and others—focusing on the benefits and tragic consequences of fame. He discusses the long history of attempts to censor pornography. He does not mention that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, pornography had a political motive—to mock French aristocrats (see Hunt, 1996) . . . but he does cite many later attempts to make political hay by censoring porn. He also discusses the dark side of this multi-billion dollar business, including Mafia influences, the impact of the AIDS epidemic on the industry, and the myths and realities behind child pornography. (This is the most fun in the book, but given the number of suits against Ford, I had no way of guessing whether this is the truth, the whole truth . . . or just a good story. And no real way to find out.)

So for those who like this sort of thing, here’s yet another book

for you. As for the rest of us, maybe we'll settle down with a cool drink and a good book, like Roth's *Sabbath's Theatre*.

#### References

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