

THE MAKING
OF ISAIAH BERLIN
SIMON SCHAMA

THE UNMAKING
OF BUSH'S AGENDA
PETER BEINART

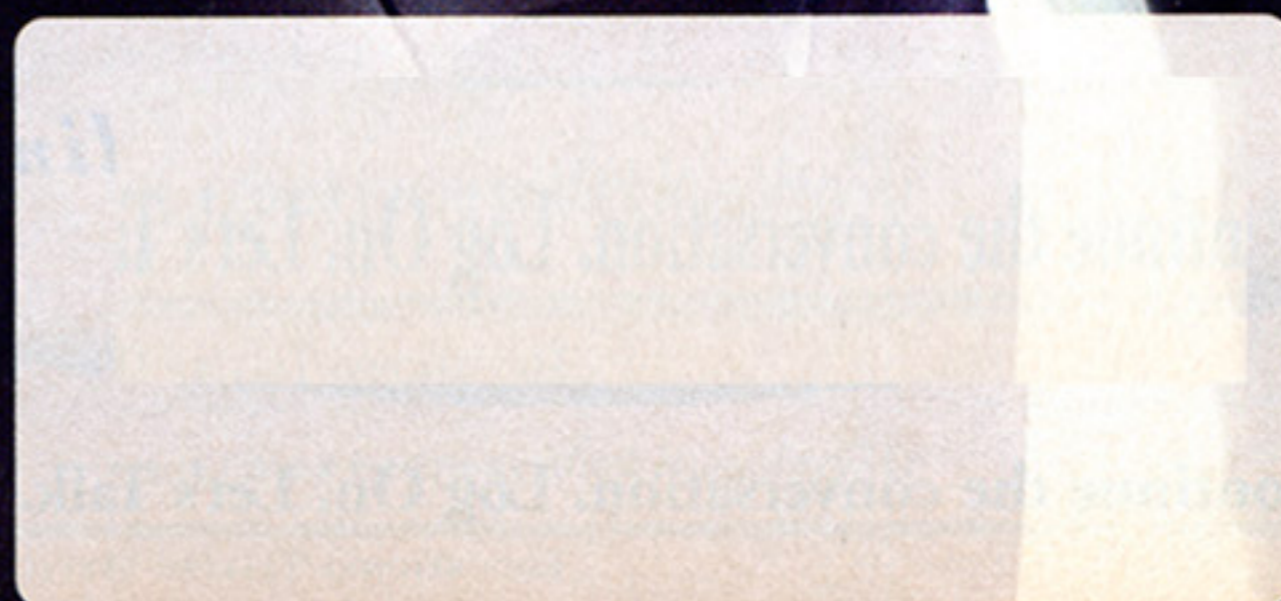
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THE NEW REPUBLIC

Southern Man

Is Phil Bredezen the Future
Of the Democratic Party
Or the Last of a Dying Breed?

CLAY RISEN



the answers to these philosophical questions with that degree of urgency with which a true philosopher must want them." Instead he had discovered that he wished to reconstruct how social and political ideas were generated in a particular place and a particular time, and then how they operated in the flesh-and-blood world of history. And he also knew, with the decisiveness that his immersion in history had brought him, that the last places such illuminations would be yielded were official research departments, where humane intelligence toiled for the powerful. He would, then, go back to Oxford.

And there Isaiah Berlin stayed for the rest of his life, unrepentant of the decision, dismissive of the view (held by Weizmann, among others) that in so doing he had somehow turned his back on real political engagement. For Berlin the academy would never be a site of preening or professionalism. It was, rather, a place where liberty—defined as freedom from any sort of coercion—could be lived, and where the challenge of choosing between life's contradictory impulses could be faced with clear-eyed courage. Here these early letters end; here the intellectual breakthroughs begin. ■

Toni Bentley

The Sway of All Flesh

STRIPTease:

THE UNTOLD HISTORY
OF THE GIRLIE SHOW

By Rachel Shteir

(Oxford University Press, 438 pp., \$30)

THE ONE-HUNDRED-YEAR history of women stripping in America is one long tease. It goes like this: the women take it off, one way or another (or yet another), and the authorities tell them to put it back on, or some of it anyway. So the girls put it on, the ticket sales cease, the girls take it off again, the ticket sales soar, and the censors start counting naked breasts again and shut the show down, after which it re-opens with a different name down the street. Show after show, year after year, decade after decade, this cycle of end-runs repeats, as it still does today, and there is no reason to suspect, or to desire, that this dance between censorship and sex, between God and go-go, will ever cease. They are mutually dependent; without each other they would not exist. Within the delicate confines of its proscriptions and limitations, stripping was gradually forced to define its character, and thus it found its heart and its spirit, and more than a few game dames.

In her fascinating and well-researched book, Rachel Shteir has documented this odd and salacious window onto a great and ongoing American pastime: watching

women lose it. "It," of course, denotes a wide range of sexual and sartorial modes, but whether it be their clothes, their fat, their beauty, their morality, or only their sanity, all speak to the same enticing phenomenon: a woman out of control is an exciting being—to both sexes, one might add.

One learns from Shteir's detailed history that government strictures have shaped striptease as a cultural way-station as much as striptease has shaped the American idea of what is sexy. Her study outlines that very particular courtship between men and women where a theatrical proscenium frames the dialogue—a dialogue that will never be consummated, though not for lack of effort, on either side of the footlights. Like "Whack-a-Mole," that other edifying example of the "now you see it, now you don't" school of entertainment, where one smashes down a little mole's mug with an enormous mallet only to have one of his siblings resurface inches away, striptease will always be denounced but will never disappear.

Among all the boas, double entendres, and onstage milk baths lies a historic and hilarious trail of G-string-splitting laws passed in the noble but futile attempt to control what is truly uncontrollable: the male mind. As Sally Marr, the mother of Lenny Bruce and the dean of the Pink Pussycat College of Striptease in Los Angeles—no applica-

tions, please, it has long since closed its doors: strippers today merely improvise on their vertical poles—wisely explained, "A woman's best weapon is a man's imagination." And therein lies the key to stripping. It is worth noting that not one of the great burlesque queens of the 1930s and 1940s actually got naked.

Alain Bernardin, the visionary founder of the Crazy Horse in Paris, the classic French tribute to the live nude woman, once remarked that "eroticism is like a mountain—you can't see it all at once." Thus begins a man's ascent to a particular idea of eternity. And the runway to this eternity in the world of burlesque is lined with a plenitude of feminine frippery: tassels, pasties, rosettes, merkins, fishnets, garters, pearls, rhinestones, veils, lashes, wigs, ropes, chains, water, fire, feathers, fans, and other assorted "hypothetical costumes." A good strip is nothing if not smoke and mirrors. Otherwise it is simply a half-naked girl, not a bad alternative but not always as intriguing as one framed in the theater of the ephemeral. As one carnival barker said, striptease makes "old men young and young men dizzy."

WHILE IT IS HARD TO subscribe to the notion that stripping—or the display of "human apertures," in the words of a rather unpoetic critic—is an art form, it most certainly, in particular circumstances with particular dancers, can reach a state of magic. But its history is notable for another no less fascinating reason: it is the story of a young, unsophisticated, Puritan nation's struggle to deal with sex in a public forum and to define the sexual woman. Where else have the Madonna and the whore been so virulently separated and yet so closely juxtaposed that their garments are interchangeable? Is not the duster of burlesque merely the cloak of chastity unfastened? The stripper straddles the contradiction between Madonna and whore: she is the nice girl who might rather than the bad girl who has. The stars of this colorful tale are the thousands of young women who were willing not only to show their wares but also to risk their reputations in jail cells and theaters alike. This takes guts in a society as devoted to

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judgment as it is to forgiveness.

Shteir has done a lot of work, for which one can only be grateful. She has uncovered every uncovering on every stage in every city across this great land from the late nineteenth century to today. (The high points certainly occurred in the decades preceding television and free love; in the 1960s the sight of bare breasts became so ubiquitous that the charm of seeing any particular pair all but vanished.) The back and forth of what has been allowed and then not allowed makes the reader a little dizzy, and Shteir has documented it all. Her book is impressive, though the writing itself is less than inspired. *Striptease* is overwhelmed with facts, dates, and places, and sometimes the prose takes on a tone of gravity that belies its delightful subject. There are also numerous typos and misspellings, as well as a few factual errors. Still, the beautiful and entertaining saga of the whole "take it off, put it on" tale has more than enough wits and tits to carry the show on its own. *Striptease* is a genuine contribution to the history of American culture.

THE STORY BEGINS IN THE nineteenth century, and in the Old World. The invention of the cancan in France in the mid-1800s revealed women's bodies in a way that was previously unimaginable. Those uncanny vertical high kicks and horizontal floor splits separated ladies' legs in public like never before, and further enticed with the tantalizing flashes of flesh between the black garters and the frilly white pantaloons. The composition was brilliant: a blatant erotic display disarmed by speedy movement, boisterous music, wide grins, and ribbons galore. Heine may have thundered that "the cancan dancers pour scorn on all those things that are held to be noblest and holiest in life," but not all agreed. The Prince of Wales, in love with La Goulue, the most famous of the Moulin Rouge dancers, saw things from a different perspective, calling his beloved "the wickedness of Paris on a very good pair of legs."

In 1896, burlesque made its first substantial appearance on American shores with Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, who, for the most part, were dressed *en travestie* and bared ankles and calves ensconced in tights. They were deemed "optically edible" by one admirer; Mark Twain declared them dressed

"with a meagerness that would make a parasol blush." Shortly thereafter the Salome craze, inspired by Oscar Wilde's play and Richard Strauss's opera, unleashed hundreds of girls into American vaudeville sporting jeweled bikinis, transparent skirts, heads of John the Baptist, and those infamous seven veils—and thus was born the most undefined of dances, opening wide the field for experiment and exposure. The musical accompaniment to these improvised inspirations mimicked the dances by using all manner of styles, from Strauss's nine-minute 1905 atonal dance to Tin Pan Alley and Jazz Age hits, and then to David Rose's "The Stripper" from 1958, the bump-and-grind anthem that made its way into all American homes as the music for a Noxzema shaving cream commercial.

In his great floor shows, which ran in New York from 1907 for more than two decades, Florenz Ziegfeld lost little time making the most of beautiful women dressed in fabulous risqué costumes and testing the limits of both his audience and the authorities on exposed flesh. As family fare in large well-appointed theaters, his shows paved the way for the subsequent career of stripping that would proceed in less reputable venues in New York and later in the hinterland. Thus the theater of the nude began its simultaneous rise and fall into American show business. Girls "are the most fundamental of commodities," noted Earl Carroll, an early Jazz Age promoter (a "preacher with an erection," according to W. C. Fields) who put undressing on the Broadway stage in the "Vanities Revue" that ran from 1923 to 1931.

THE HISTORY OF STRIPTease is hardly a science, and the facts are often hard to come by, but the tale is happily punctuated by numerous proud claims of "firsts": first stripper, first teaser (one strips onstage, the other offstage), first topless, first moving topless (New York Statute 1140a stated in 1923 that it was "illegal" to reveal a breast while moving), first busted bra strap (Carrie Fenway, also in 1923: "out it pops, this one like a big vanilla sundae with a cherry on top, and Carrie ... bawls it out for getting loose"). And it is one Hinda Wassau—born Hinda Warshaw in Milwaukee—who lays possible claim as the first American girl, circa 1925, to "strip."

It was in Chicago and it was, of course, a mistake: Hinda's costume caught "un-

intentionally" on the scenery. But she proceeded to grab the opportunity and to extend the provocation. She touched her body with her own hands, crossing what may be termed the fifth theatrical wall while magically maintaining the fourth. It is one thing to advertise the goods, but quite another to squeeze them with autoerotic intent. Wassau was an outlaw with a propensity for touching the wrong things in more ways than one. She had a police report to prove it.

Less than a decade later, two years after Wall Street had "laid an egg" in the crash of 1929, the country was primed for some serious escapism, and Herbert and Morton Minsky launched the Golden Age of burlesque. They brought their revue uptown from the Lower East Side to the sumptuously renovated National Winter Garden on Broadway, tripling ticket prices to \$1.50 and presenting the great queens of burlesque on their stages, most notably Gypsy Rose Lee. The Minskys presented the very best of American showmanship: a brazen vision, a well-founded belief in the force of the naked girl, and a willingness to break the law in their endeavor to present her to the public and to fill their theaters with an eager audience, and their coffers with gold. They even founded "Minsky University" with an eye to educating burlesque critics in the new American art form.

While the first runway had appeared at the Shubert Theater in 1912, the Minskys took this devious theatrical device to its logical extreme. The significance of the runway—that great phallic extension that penetrates the audience and allows the performer not only to parade before them but also to enter into their midst—cannot be underestimated, and it remains today one of the hallmarks of a strip joint. Aptly named by one well-traveled wit the "Bridge of Thighs," the increased proximity that the runway provided also aided in the birth of the verbal wit of burlesque, which became a sideshow all its own. It also came with its own vernacular, invented by those whose business is show business. At the height of its popularity, an "ecdysiast" might perform a "skin opera" of "deciduous kinesthetics" while "peeling" to her "pasties" and doing a "horizontal cooch" and a sideways "shimmy" until she was mostly "nudified" and "flashing" her "gadget." Pretty sexy stuff. No wonder that a prominent New York rabbi proclaimed that "you cannot make these places decent. You might as well try to freeze hell."

With show titles such as "Mind Over Mattress," "The Sway of All Flesh," and "Panties Inferno," the Minskys' success provoked John Sumner, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), the committee started by the notorious Anthony Comstock in 1873 to guard the morals of American society, to spearhead a new campaign. Sumner declared 1935 the year that "burlesque commenced to run wild," and on one evening his agents counted no fewer than fifty-six bare breasts on the stage of the Apollo Theater—a record bosom count, and another first of sorts. Never has a police department enjoyed so much paid time in the theater as during the height of burlesque's reign, when patrolling the aisles was hard work indeed—and the detail compiled was worthy of a study by Alfred Kinsey.

Edicts were issued: the size of G-strings was dictated to the eighth of an inch; the dancers could pose but not undress on stage (so they went offstage repeatedly, returning with less and less, over and over); and they were forbidden to touch themselves, as naughty Hinda had. Despite some adherence to these new rules—and considerable lip service—the theaters were regularly raided, and Mayor LaGuardia even appointed a "burlesque czar" to oversee the prosecutions and "end incorporated filth." (Oh, for the days when burlesque was the greatest threat to New York City!) By 1937, fourteen theaters had their licenses revoked and two thousand people were out of work. Brooks Atkinson, the liberal theater critic of *The New York Times*, explained that "the human body terrifies some people," while it was proudly noted by the NYSSV that striptease had finally been wiped from the city's landscape. Well, not quite. Stripping simply went underground, as did drinking during Prohibition. Thus were born "floating" clubs that would open for a week or so only to evade the authorities by promptly relocating. Between 1939 and 1942, when the war added a new urgency to the public's desire for pretty girls and broad humor, only three burlesque theaters managed to stay open legally.

But all this censorship did little to quiet the creative juices of the performers; it merely inspired new innovations. In 1940 it was duly reported that Margie Hart's "break-away" dress caused more eye-strain in one night than the New York Eye Hospital saw in a year. (Alas, the dress was confiscated.) After the war,

burlesque enjoyed a huge resurgence. Though it was still banned in New York, Harold Minsky opened the enormous Adams Theatre in Newark, thereby clogging the tunnels between New York and New Jersey on Friday and Saturday nights as New Yorkers flocked across the river. While Ohio boasted five burlesque theaters by 1951—more than any other state in the Union—stripping in New York simply moved into smaller, more intimate, and often more glamorous venues. So many of these chic supper clubs lined Fifty-second Street that it was referred to as Sixty-second Street.

BUT FOR ALL THE MERRY TALES of jail sentences and costume innovations, the real stars of striptease are the women who chose to walk the razor's edge of decency in the effort not only to entertain and to make a living, but also to participate in the great American story of self-reinvention. It is here that the story of striptease gathers its greatest cultural significance—not as an art form, but as a forum for young girls and women of little prospects, money, or education to bypass their identities by way of their anatomies. Though the last decade has seen a few memoirs published by women claiming Ivy League roots or aspirations while slumming it in stripping, your average stripper has not grown up on Park Avenue and gone to Brearley.

Stripping is for women what boxing is for men: the opportunity to break out of one's social class, to change one's name, and to become a star by physically epitomizing one's sex. On the runway and on the ropes, both the stripper and the boxer push their bodies to the brink and hold them there while the rest of us watch their courage with a mixture of awe, excitement, and, inevitably in our laziness, intellectual superiority. And these girls did change their names, though rarely to protect anyone, much less the innocent. Mary Dawson became Mademoiselle Fifi; Katherine Boyd became Zorita; Juanita May Wide became Stacy "Eartha Quake" Farrell; Dina Dell became Jacqueline Joyce; Annie Blanche Banks became Tempest Storm; and while Rose Louise Hovick became Gypsy Rose Lee, Marjorie Rose Lee became Rosita Royce, and Rosina DePella became Rose La Rose. Go figure.

In 1935, there were 3,500 strippers in America, but that number was reduced after the war to 2,500. The average pro-

fessional stripper had a career for about six years, while the headliners—Gypsy Rose Lee, Sally Rand, Georgia Sothern, Lili St. Cyr—sometimes performed for decades while amassing small fortunes and numerous husbands. The big stars of burlesque were women of considerable interest, and their individual stories, as told by Shteir, are both entertaining and, in a larger sense, educational—and all defy expectation.

They were not the prettiest girls with the best figures, but they all knew what it meant to entertain. And yes, each had her gimmick. Carrie Finnell could twirl the nipple tassels on her enormous breasts at different speeds and in different directions with such panache that her breasts were compared to propellers readying for lift-off—and she performed this mesmerizing anti-gravitational feat until she was seventy years old. Zorita performed with a giant snake about her body, echoing Eve entertaining herself without Adam. Blaze Starr, the "Human Heat Wave," rigged her bikini with tasty morsels of raw red meat and then lay supine onstage while a large black panther would retrieve his dinner from her quivering extremities.

Tempest Storm had breasts so big and beautiful that they were insured for a million dollars, and when the luscious redhead complained to a theater manager on one occasion that her breasts were simply too big, she was told, "God didn't make boobs too big for my business." Georgia Sothern, the "Human Dynamo," shook her hips into such a frenzy that she would have to steady herself on the scenery. "She strips just like she had dynamite for lunch," commented one fan. Fanny Brice posed as Rodin's Thinker for Alfred Stieglitz in *Vanity Fair* with a couple of strategically placed feathers.

Sally Rand, born Harriet Helen Beck in Elkton, Missouri in 1904, debuted her fan dance in Chicago in 1933 at the appropriately named Progress Exposition and never looked back—unless the fan fell. Later adding a sixty-inch opaque balloon as an alternative device, Rand kept things simple: with either fan or balloon she wafted about the stage twirling, bending, pausing, and posing, always keeping her three magic places covered by her improper prop. It was supposed that she was naked but no one could tell, and everyone wanted to know. She was repeatedly slapped with "indecent exposure" lawsuits and emerged from each trial a little more famous than before. She

went on to become one of the biggest names to hit the burlesque circuit, eventually doing ads with her fan for air conditioners, performing for a crowd of eleven thousand at Hennie's Sideshow in Des Moines in 1947, and making as much as \$1 million a year during the late 1940s. At the pinnacle of her fame she was even invited to give a lecture at Harvard that she titled "How to Be Intelligent Even Though Educated." Her sage advice to students was lost among the shouts of "Where's the bubble?" and "What's your phone number?" The educated wanted to know.

THEN THERE WAS GYPSY ROSE Lee. She made her debut at Minsky's in 1931 and went on to perform her famous "Stripteaser's Education" for the Ziegfeld Follies in 1936, where she stripped in a slow and stylized manner while reciting a witty poem indicating her great intelligence. And Gypsy owed her fame to her brains, for she had neither the prettiest face, nor the biggest breasts, nor the shapeliest legs in her business. But she had a genius that melded elegance, sex, and self-deprecating wit in all the right doses to produce the essence of a great tease where mystery is married to promise and charm in perfectly calibrated doses. All this and a nose for publicity that made her mother proud, and Gypsy remains the most famous stripper in history.

Lili St. Cyr was born Willis Marie Van Shaak in 1918, and became the best-known postwar stripper in North America. Unlike her predecessors, St. Cyr heralded the slimmer and more linear woman of our own time. She was cool, calm, even icy—blond and beautiful; and it was said that Marilyn Monroe modeled herself after Lili from Minneapolis. With hugely elaborate stage sets, St. Cyr rarely bumped or ground, but in numbers such as "Love Moods," where she bathed in a \$10,000 crystal bath, and "Royal Wedding Night," where she impersonated Grace Kelly on her honeymoon with Prince Rainier, she paraded around with an impeccable class that rendered her deliciously untouchable.

St. Cyr endured numerous obligatory arrests, most notably at Ciro's in Los Angeles, where her trial became a travesty that succeeded not only in having the charges dismissed but in illuminating the hypocrisy of the whole endeavor. Her lawyer first sought to have a jury of "her peers" appointed—namely, four-

teen strippers; and when that failed his client offered to "bathe" for the entire courtroom in her crystal bath to demonstrate that her nudity, while existent, was never apparent. The flustered judge declined St. Cyr's evidentiary offer, and she returned to bathe at Ciro's to standing-room-only crowds.

When Alfred Kinsey's sensational study of male sexual behavior was released in 1948 and it was stated that he had interviewed no fewer than 5,300 men, St. Cyr promptly pointed out that her own male "sample" was larger than Kinsey's "in a single three-performance day." Kinsey, for his part, had utilized his scientific methods some years earlier to measure the particulars of striptease as closely as he had measured the gall wasp: "the g-strings ... are half as wide as your little finger and not a button wider at the strategic spot ... she will remove even the string—slipping a finger in place ... with more damaging effect that the complete exposure of a nudist camp."

And what about that infamous G-string, a decoration born of fig leaves in Eden that one can predict with some certainty will be re-invented until the end of time? There is little question that this tiny triangle has taken up an inordinate amount of shelf space in many men's imaginations. (The burlesque G-string is undoubtedly grandmother to the ubiquitous thong that has laid claim to the American woman of today like a vise about her vagina.) Often called a "gadget," this miniscule article of costuming made one of its most poetic appearances on St. Cyr when attached to an invisible wire and painted with glowing radium. The theater lights went black while the audience watched Lili's little triangle lift from its cozy perch and float, all alone, into the wings, leaving its owner completely naked—in every man's mind. This was great striptease.

DESPITE THE ENJOYABLE RESURGENCE of interest in "burlesque" in the last few years, the great days have long been gone, and the so-called "new burlesque," while a well-meaning nod to the Golden Era, appears, well, vulgar by comparison. With the advent of movies, television, the Pill, and porn, the need for the sweet titillation of burlesque lost out to up-close and in-your-face sex. The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that stripping was a "form of free speech" in 1953, but that ruling was reversed in 1957 with the claim

that "obscenity" was not protected by the First Amendment. The Adams Theater in Newark closed its doors permanently.

The first successful union of striptease artists was organized in that same year, and its demand for increased wages put most of its members out of work, as theaters simply could not pay the union rates. One ambitious producer fought for no less than four years in the courts to be able to open a burlesque show without striptease in Brooklyn and finally won his case in 1957. The show closed after four days, owing to poor ticket sales: burlesque without naked girls is like a fish with a bicycle.

The Minsky family, ever true to their calling, premiered their first show in Las Vegas in the late 1950s, and the Nevada legislature failed (though it tried) to pass the "bare bosom bill." In 1959, the musical *Gypsy* opened to enormous acclaim on Broadway, reviving interest in the genre—but it was already at one remove, promoting an air of nostalgia about a theatrical era gone by. Shteir interestingly points out that the crackdown on organized crime during the McClellan hearings in 1962 probably provided the single biggest blow to burlesque by linking pornography and striptease in the public mind.

Where has all this teasing led us today? To the corporate strip clubs, where Cocteau's observation that "in the long run, the Americans suffer from a craze for the colossal" has been confirmed in mounds of gravity-defying silicone. The girls more often than not are bored or drugged, the ballgame blasts from a plasma screen in one corner, and the men sit at the "sushi bar" gazing in equal lust and embarrassment like teenagers in a circle jerk, offering crumpled dollar bills to the tattooed Lolita splaying herself before them. Even sex ain't what it used to be.

None of the girls removed those mandatory G-strings until the 1950s, and now dancers not only discard them, they also expose the mystery of the "fatal vault" for their customers. Where can one possibly go from here? Or there? With nothing left to hide, there is nowhere to go; one can never get enough when there is already too much. We may be witnessing the grand finale of an ancient thrill. Rachel Shteir's accomplished book leaves one longing for the mystery of a white mink merkin from Harry Bosen's New York Costume Shop in Chicago, or the charm of Lili St. Cyr's roaming radium gadget. ■