



A Mind of Its Own: A Cultural History of the Penis

By David M. Friedman

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Whether enemy or ally, demon or god, the source of satisfaction or the root of all earthly troubles, the penis has forced humanity to wrestle with its enduring mysteries. Here, in an enlightening and entertaining cultural study, is a book that gives context to the central role of the penis in Western civilization. A man can hold his manhood in his hand, but who is really gripping whom? Is the penis the best in man -- or the beast? How is man supposed to use it? And when does that use become abuse? Of all the bodily organs, only the penis forces man to confront such contradictions: something insistent yet reluctant, a tool that creates but also destroys, a part of the body that often seems apart from the body. This is the conundrum that makes the penis both hero and villain in a drama that shapes every man -- and mankind along with it. In "A Mind of Its Own," David M. Friedman shows that the penis is more than a body part. It is an idea, a conceptual but flesh-and-blood measuring stick of man's place in the world. That men have a penis is a scientific fact; how they think about it, feel about it, and use it is not. It is possible to identify the key moments in Western history when a new idea of the penis addressed the larger mystery of man's relationship with it and changed forever the way that organ was conceived of and put to use. "A Mind of Its Own" brilliantly distills this complex and largely unexamined story. Deified by the pagan cultures of the ancient world and demonized by the early Roman church, the organ was later secularized by pioneering anatomists such as Leonardo da Vinci. After being measured "scientifically" in an effort to subjugate some races while elevating others, the organ was psychoanalyzed by Sigmund Freud. As a result, the penis assumed a paradigmatic role in psychology -- whether the patient was equipped with the organ or envied those who were. Now, after being politicized by feminism and exploited in countless ways by pop culture, the penis has been medicalized. As no one has before him, Friedman shows how the arrival of erection industry products such as Viagra is more than a health or business story. It is the latest -- and perhaps final -- chapter in one of the longest sagas in human history: the story of man's relationship with his penis. "A Mind of Its Own" charts the vicissitudes of that relationship through its often amusing, occasionally alarming, and never boring course. With intellectual rigor and a healthy dose of wry humor, David M. Friedman serves up one of the most thought-provoking, significant, and readable cultural works in years.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

David M. Friedman's *A Mind of Its Own* is a cultural examination of the penis, from ancient Sumer to the present. Friedman convincingly suggests that humankind's various and contradictory attitudes toward the penis have been instrumental in mapping the course of both Western civilization and world history.

Friedman begins with pagan attitudes: ancient Greeks considered the penis a measure of a man's proximity to "divine power," while the Romans, whose generals were known to promote soldiers based on penis size, saw it as an indicator of earthly strength. Thanks to the spread of Christianity, the "sacred staff became the demon rod"--a fearful manifestation of the devil. Theology gave way, grudgingly, to science. In the Renaissance, anatomical discoveries allowed for the possibility that this "agent of death" was, in fact, only a "blameless instrument of reproduction." Subsequent chapters discuss the penis's role as a racial yardstick; its "defining role in human personality" as asserted by Freud; its politicization; and finally, through the likes of Viagra, its objectification as a "thing ... impervious to religious teachings, psychological insights, racial stereotypes and feminist criticism."

Friedman's study of what he calls the "symbolic muscle" is filled with fascinating side trips (castration cults, ancient graffiti, the anti-masturbation "semen-retention movement," aphrodisiacs through the ages, and, to modern eyes, risible medical practices with the likes of monkey glands), as well as a rich cast of characters (Leonardo da Vinci, John Kellogg of cornflake fame, Kate Millet, Clarence Thomas, and Walt Whitman). The book is informal, but well researched (and documented), entertaining but not cute, wide-ranging but not sketchy, and simultaneously irreverent and respectful. --H. O'Billovitch

From Publishers Weekly

"Over time, the penis has been deified, demonized, secularized, racialized, psychoanalyzed, politicized and, finally, medicalized," declares freelance journalist Friedman in a serious yet entertaining book that weaves together an enormous amount of material. In the Greek and Roman worlds, statues of figures with erections were commonplace, he observes, though by the Christian era, the penis had become a source of evil and weakness. Doctors and scientists from da Vinci onward "deflat[ed] the religious rhetoric" and scrutinized the male organ sometimes with untoward results, as when American "semen science" led to the creation of antimasturbation products such as Graham crackers. Western man's fear of the African phallus undergirded colonialism and slavery, and resonates to this day, Friedman argues, as was evident in the case of Clarence Thomas. If some of Freud's case histories might be questioned, Friedman notes how the psychoanalytic interpretation enduringly places the penis and associated anxieties at the fulcrum of society. The rise of feminism put the penis in its place, as The Hite Report pointed out the limits of conventional intercourse in moving women to orgasm, and as Andrea Dworkin exposed penile pathology though the author concludes that male sexuality arises more out of evolutionary strategy than misogyny. His final and liveliest chapter concerns the medicalization of the penis, culminating in Viagra. Even though Friedman quotes a (female) sex therapist on the limits of such drugs, he concludes optimistically that "the erection industry" has performed a paradigm shift, allowing man to impose his will below his belt. The book has a few gaps -- there's little about the gay penis -- but it should reign as the seminal treatment of this topic (and inspire many more puns).

From Library Journal

An impressively research-prone journalist who has written for Esquire, Rolling Stone, and the Village Voice, Friedman has prepared a catalog of happenings and horrors perpetrated on the penis or in the name of the penis as an organ and as an idea. His opening chapter about religious teachings begins with a ghastly story about the torture of a witch who "knew the Devil's penis." Next come Tissot and the medical antimasturbation mania, plus biological discoveries about the organ. This is followed by an even more terrible and detailed discussion of racist stereotypes and violence relating to supposedly macrophallic Africans. Chapter 4 belongs to Dr. Freud, Chapter 5 to feminist criticism, and Chapter 6 to Viagra and the erection industry since ancient Egypt. Referenced in considerable (if not perfect) detail, the work could be improved only by textual subheads and (perhaps) illustrations. A fascinating and sobering complement to more lighthearted books, including Maggie Paley's *The Book of the Penis* (Grove, 2001), Joseph Cohen's *The Penis Book* (Konemann, 2001), and Kit Schwartz's *The Male Member* (St. Martin's, 1985). Recommended for collections in history, popular culture, and sexology. Martha Cornog, Philadelphia Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Users Review

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