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The Covent Garden Ladies tells the story of Samuel Derrick, Jack Harris, and Charlotte Hayes, whose complicated and colorful lives were brought together by the publication of *Harris' List*, an infamous guidebook of prostitutes which detailed addresses, physical characteristics and "specialties." The true history of the book is a tragicomedy motivated by poverty, passionate love, aspiration, and shame. Its telling plunges the reader down the dark alleys of 18th-century London's underworld, a realm populated by tavern owners, pimps, punters, card sharps, and of course, a colorful range of prostitutes and brothel-keepers.

The Covent Garden Ladies: Pimp General Jack & The Extraordinary Story of Harris' List Details

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Fuzzy says

2.5 stars. I think the stories of the three main characters and Harris's list would have worked better as a chapter within a Georgian Covent Garden or Georgian London history. They simply don't seem to have left us enough evidence of their lives for a whole book. Rubenfold makes a good effort but there is quite a bit of conjecture here. Also, the book suffers from the publisher's decision not to have notes - wish I'd known that before buying on kindle and that I'd known about the thumbnail quality and size of illustrations. Not the author's fault but overall, not quite good enough.

Siobhan Johnson says

This starts off slow, but by the end I was reading it pretty much addictively. A great look at both Covent Garden and this period in history. I'd never really heard of Harris's list before picking up this book, but it was very informative and gave a very good overview of all that went on. It also struck an excellent balance between being fun, because the list itself is fundamentally *really funny* in a lot of ways, and highlighting the pathos of how genuinely terrible life was for a lot of the women involved.

A really good, fun and interesting book.

Sharon Jacobs says

Well written history. Structure made it an easy but still informative read.

Melissa says

An interesting book- gives historical context and detailed portraits of the three main characters: a failed poet, a pimp, and a "harlot" (yes, I came here because of the Hulu series). Nevertheless it was a little repetitive and slow sometimes- largely, I think, due to the narrow focus on the three main characters. A broader history might have been more interesting, even if that meant the List itself (and Sam Derrick, whom I found tedious) were less central in the book.

I didn't love the tone. Unlike some other reviewers, I don't think Rubenhold has actual contempt for her subjects. But she does seem to veer back and forth between a desire to imitate the tone of the List and a desire to use a more serious one. I found the former off-putting. Referring to the women as diseased, filthy, immoral, etc, even in a joking way, doesn't go over well when we are told elsewhere that most of them were basically raped as children. And so on. There are also a number of grammatical mistakes and strange sentence constructions.

Nevertheless, I learned a lot, and that's the main reason I picked up the book.

Magid says

There are too many typos in this book. It makes me mad - didn't anyone read the manuscript before it went to print? It also didn't appear to be a particularly well written or well researched book. There was too much conjecture from the author, with too much 'we don't really know what happened to so and so' and 'so and so must have felt like this' - not very impressive from a historiographical point of view. However, the compilation of entries from Harris' List in the middle of the book was really fascinating. Makes you think about the sheer scale of prostitution in London at the time, and the tragedies that befell women who, if they didn't follow the very limited path that society laid down for them, had no alternative but to sell themselves.

Jenny Brown says

The title did not do justice to this book. Indeed, it almost kept me from reading it. What it is is a group biography of three people involved with prostitution in mid-1700s London. The author weaves their stories together in a way that illuminates their sordid world.

Rubinfeld manages to find a way of telling this story that avoids both prurience and fingerpointing, letting the story arouse our outrage instead of telling us to be outraged. She gives us the information we need to draw our own conclusions.

Very impressive.

My only quibble is that much of the information comes from fake biographies published by hack writers which may be largely fiction. A bit more discussion of her sources in the text would have been illuminating. I understand how limited valid sources would be for a book like this, I just wanted a little more insight into what we know about these sources.

This is the latest of a long series of books I've read that make it clear how little respect any modern person should give the British ruling class. As Rubinfeld states, their sexual tastes would have put most of them in prison today, and they would have deserved it. They delighted in rape, especially that of children. They had no compunctions about having people kidnapped for their sexual use. Why do so many people romanticize these people and continue to think there was something magical about their "high birth?"

And what is it about British culture that makes their ruling class so prone to sexually abuse children? Though Rubinfeld seems to think this was confined to the 18th century, the biography of Waugh I just read made it clear that social acceptance of the sexual abuse of children (in that case boys) was common well into the 20th century. And child prostitution, too, as long as the children were not of one's exalted social class.

Very radicalizing!

Lois says

Not as much about the show Harlots on Hulu as I thought

Miranda says

On the plus side, this book is a compelling narrative about figures we don't hear much of in history, namely prominent members of London's underworld during the Georgian Era. Rubenhold's prose is good and it's a fast read.

Rubenhold's obvious disdain for her titular subjects is the book's major weakness and oh man, it's a big one. While she's not without pity for the titular Covent Garden Ladies, that pity is mixed with enough disdain to make it feel disturbingly familiar to actual Georgian and Victorian middle to upper class writings. You might hope some things have changed in the last centuries but apparently, not for Rubenhold. While she acknowledges many of these women had little choice in their given profession, she also describes their work as sacrificing their integrity, a frankly baffling and archaic moral read on the whole situation. She also wants you to know they were gross! REALLY gross! We get references to "whores", "harlots", "foul mouthed, tippie loving prostitutes", "writhing" posture girls (posture girls being something of the 18th century equivalent to a modern day stripper) and brothels that "infested" London. She also puts scare quotes around "ladies", just to be sure we get it. It's jarring to read Rubenhold whipping back and forth between pity and disdain, but the two seem closely intermingled, much as they were for actual 18th century commentators.

The main focuses of the book are Jack Harris, a pimp, Samuel Derrick, a failed middle class Irish poet and Harris' copywriter, Charlotte Hayes, a courtesan-turned-madam, and Dennis O'Kelly, Charlotte's common law husband, horse breeder and co operator of her brothels. All four of her central protagonists commit appalling acts and all four of them seem to escape the stinging disdain she lavishes on any female sex worker who isn't Charlotte. Her admonishments to take these people as products of their time would be a little more compelling if she hadn't spent so much time criticizing women who did far less. O'Kelly's attempted rape of a young noblewoman and his subsequent arrest is described as English society putting him in his place. Maybe there's a grain of truth in this, as upper class Englishmen rarely suffered consequences for the same act. But it's just jarring to read after reading paragraphs slamming poor women for having the nerve to pick up a bottle of gin. Hayes is a compelling figure, and not an unsympathetic one, who both faced horrific abuse and inflicted it on others as a madam. But it's hard not to feel like Rubenhold is comparatively easy on her due to her high earnings and relatively demure personality. It's not that I'd exactly prefer to see her deny any sympathy to Hayes, who in my view is worthy of a nuanced look, but surely her crimes (such as kidnapping twelve year olds) are more serious than being "foul mouthed" or "tippie loving".

The real nail in the coffin here is the sourcing. I've read a lot of historical biographies that I didn't particularly like or agree with, but I was at least able to find and trace sources. Rubenhold does provide a bibliography but her chapters are littered with quote marks that don't seem to have any particular attributed source. Her notes explain the meaning of specific terms, but they don't actually point to where she got her quotes or provide any context for them. I have never seen this in a historical biography before and it's extremely shoddy. I might say this book was worth it for the information alone, but the mess that is her notes pretty much kills that. Don't read.

rachel whitelaw says

Fascinating

A fascinating breath taking journey back in time. The author really takes you back to the 18th century. Never has history been so real. Highly recommended

Penny Hampson says

A thoroughly researched and interesting account of the three main characters behind the 18th century publication 'Harris's List'. Brings alive the reality of life for people (especially women) with no family or friends to support them. Very readable.

Cat says

3.5 or 4

Pretty interesting look overall at sex work in this period in London (and some London/Ireland relationship issues), though it's focused mostly on the three main players of the creation of HARRIS'S LIST, two of whom are male pimps, so while it does try to address the condition of female sex workers some, a lot of time is also spent on the biographies of the male pimps involved (as the subtitle suggests it might). (There's also just a lack of material evidence from women directly, as is often the case, since the LIST and most other surviving pieces of evidence are written by men.)

Amelia says

An interesting story, sensitively told, *The Covent Garden Ladies* fleshes out what life was like for both men and women in Georgian London, through the eyes of three of its players: Jack Harris, Samuel Derrick and Charlotte Hayes. I would like to have seen more details r.e. individual women beyond Charlotte Hayes. The women mentioned are seen almost exclusively through the male gaze; it would be nice if some of them had a chance to tell their own stories but perhaps source material is limited. The read has given me a new perspective on Harlots.

Mark Farley says

Like Hallie's other book, 'Lady Worsley's Whim', this is an excellent study of a period of time quite fascinating and in many ways contradictory to that of modern times, in all aspects of accepted social form, etiquette and moral outrage. In fact, it constantly makes you wonder if we have the right to be so forthright in our views sometimes when it comes to things like chastity and monogamy and what Hallie brilliantly does,

and specifically in this book, is really open up an intense and fascinatingly welcome debate about our attitudes, not to mention wonderfully chronicle the naughty exploits of our Georgian forefathers and mothers. The story of the Harris List is quite remarkable considering the restrictions and the stance of the publishing industry of today. I was completely taken by the stories of these wonderful characters who seem to embody all that was stereotypical of the moment. The grimy streets, the fallen women, the intense atmosphere of the small area of central London is painted with a lot of skill and narration par excellence as we romp along with our numerous storytellers who regale us with captivating tales of almost cinematic adventure and intrigue. Immerse yourself in the time and period with this book. Highly recommended.

Leslie says

Another reminder why nostalgia is a crock: for most people in the past, life was really shitty. Rubenhold uses a book, *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies*, as a peg on which to hang her evocation of London's seedy underbelly in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The two men most responsible for the book, which was basically a guidebook to the available prostitutes in and around the Covent Garden area, were John Harrison (aka Jack Harris), Pimp General of London, and Samuel Derrick, a failed Irish poet and wastrel. As a successful pimp, Harris kept an ever-evolving list of available women and exercised control over them by a variety of nasty means (spreading word to potential clients that they were diseased, for example, was a good way to ruin them). Derrick was quite sure fame and success (not to mention wealth) were just around the corner for him as a poet and man of letters, but in the meantime, short on cash and long on creditors, he hit upon the idea of publishing Harris's list, embellished with witty details and bits of gossip. The book was an instant hit and was updated and republished at regular intervals for almost forty years (although Harrison and Derrick had less and less to do with it later on, and the decreasing quality and wit of the information provided fell accordingly). This glimpse of London's central pleasure district in the period--with theatres, taverns, and brothels packed in around the produce market and desperate women to fit every budget in plentiful supply--provides, as I suggested before, a healthy dose of anti-nostalgia. The lives of these disposable women, off whom Harris and Derrick profited, were generally pretty miserable. Harris and Derrick both ended pretty well, with Harris as a wealthy tavern owner living off the profits made on the backs of women and Derrick as Master of Ceremonies at Bath. The woman Rubenhold chooses as her chief representative of the female side of the trade, Charlotte Hayes, ended her days rather differently. She had been born into a brothel, initiated into the trade as a young girl (virgins brought in very high fees, and her virginity would have been recycled by her mother several times), was successful for some years as a beautiful, sought-after provider of sex to wealthy men, then became a brothel-keeper. She was ruthless in controlling the women who worked for her and made an awful lot of money, much of it spent by Dennis O'Kelly, the man she spent much of her later life with. Hayes (or Mrs Kelly, as she later called herself--names were very changeable things among such women) did as well as any woman in her circumstances could, but no amount of money or property could ever make respectable people forget where she came from. Men could roll in the gutter and come out smelling sweet (men will be men, you know), but a woman once spoiled, no matter the circumstances, could never be anything but a whore.

The real heroines of the book, though, are the prostitutes themselves, doing the best they could with the terrible cards they'd been dealt.

This is part of the List's description of Miss Young, of 6 Cumberland Court: "We mentioned her in the last list as tolerably handsome, but of a disposition mercenary, almost beyond example, her beauty is now vanished, but her avarice remains, and what is worse, she has very lately had the folly and wickedness to leave a certain hospital, before the cure of a certain distemper which she had was completed, and has thrown

her contaminated carcase on the town again, for which we hold her inexcusable, and which was our only reason for repeating her name, that her company might be avoided, and that she might be held in the infamous light she so justly deserves for her wilful villainy" (1779).

And this is Hetty D-rkin, of Meard's Court: "A thin little girl with blue eyes, aquiline nose, and a very little mouth. She is the daughter of a reputable tradesman in Wapping, and was debauched by her father's porter. She has frequent fits of repentance, and has more than once been wavering at the threshold of the Magdalen House. However, a glass of punch or wine is sure to bring her back again. She is an agreeable companion, but having no passions, considers every man merely as a cull, and seldom scruples to pick his pocket, if she can do it conveniently" (1761).

Finally, here's Miss -----, of No. 44, Newman Street: "This petite belle has not yet attained her sixteenth year; and, to make amends for her deficiency of height, she is elegantly formed, nor does she lack beauty. Her sparkling eyes would warm an anchorite. Her hair is beautifully fair: and her liveliness in conversation renders her a most agreeable companion. Two guineas will bring you better acquainted with this charmer; nor will you have cause for disagreeable reflections from her acquaintance" (1793).

Sally says

This is a great little book. I'd heard of Harris's List from my studies of the period at university, and had read some extracts from it. This book traces the interweaving stories of three of the people involved in its production, and in doing so, introduces a lot of other personalities and explores a lot of the issues.

There are a lot of the usual problems in writing social history of the poor - the relative lack of documentary evidence, and the propensity of people to change their names, does make it hard to piece together people's lives - and sometimes the author is forced to rely on conjecture. None of her conjectures are unreasonable but some are longer reaches than others, especially when it comes to what one or other of the people must have felt.

But these are quibbles. It's an engaging, accessible account, which is sensitively written. It is compassionate to the women (and men) who found themselves drawn - or forced - into prostitution. It acknowledges that for some it was a good career choice, while recognising that for many it was exploitative and horrid. It explores the prevailing gender stereotypes that drove the trade and the attitudes towards prostitutes and their clients, and in a move that made my feminist heart glad, it includes an appendix, listing four pages of names of men who regularly used prostitutes - the men who, as the author points out, have been able evade the scrutiny and judgement heaped on the women who serviced them.

It did strike me how much our sexual 'morality' has changed. We regard the 18th century - especially in terms of high society - as a time of rigid sexual morality compared to our own. Certainly, any breath of impropriety could ruin a woman's reputation - and chance of a decent life - forever. Same sex relationships were illegal and harshly punished. But by modern standards, many of the men on that list - who no doubt felt themselves blameless and were pillars of society - would be regarded as criminals. Many of these girls were children. Many 'seductions' were, in fact, rapes. Many of these 'filles de joie' were no more than indentured slaves. People who condemn modern morality and long for a return to old fashioned values would do well to remember that.

This book is a welcome antidote to the over-romanticisation of the Regency period. I like a Regency romance as much as anyone, but this provides a good companion piece.

