

Sex, Sedition and the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Book review

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a review of

Len Bracken, *The East is Black*. Sexpol Editions (Third Edition) 2000

Pornography is a literary form fraught with political implications often operating outside the text. The very question of what is pornography has been the pretext of many political trials. But, political and sexual implications aside, pornography is simply what it is: a literary (or artistic) form.

Only recently has the genre of pornography come into its own, as have the previously pulp genres of science fiction and mystery fiction before it. It will be some time before local pornography shops are on the same cultural footing as the corner mystery book store. Although many groundbreaking works of fiction in the twentieth century were considered pornographic, few intended to be. We can truly know pornography when we see it, as the saying goes, only because pornography wants to be seen that way. Form follows function.

Len Bracken's *The East is Black* is true to the form. Originally published as *Stasi Slut* by genuine porn house Masquerade books, it is in its third, revised edition from the more socially minded Sexpol Editions. When interviewed in an anarchist bookstore in Baltimore, Bracken assured me that he thought it was “possible to be a good-natured pornographer,” and didn't want to be confused with the perversions of literary eroticism.

Like most pornography, it's story is a twisted morality play, the central character an everywoman. Following form, it's a story of sin and redemption. Although a variety of sexual combinations are employed in the narrative, the chief fetish is political.

We follow our heroine, Adina, from the almost pre-proletarian countryside of East Germany to the Stasi-infested streets of East Berlin to unification-era West Berlin and back again. By the time she has finished her sex-pol odyssey she has acquired a taste for adventure and a circle-a tattoo on her half-shaved Berlin bob.

Bracken told me how he got the inspiration for the story from a lover who had related “the story about how she had fallen for a Stasi water polo player and how she eventually left him for a West Berlin film director.” Conspiracy writer Jim Keith steered Bracken to Masquerade, a Playgirl subsidiary. “The editor, a woman, must've read the book and liked it enough to let most of the radical rhetoric remain in it. Although part of the way such a wild book made it into print is that I delivered the manuscript at the last minute, then I had to write a hundred more pages after the deadline to make the word count. We had problems with the computer files that put more of a time crunch on the project: What could the publisher do? He could've pulled the book, but he had announced it to the trade and there wasn't time to make changes other than editing out the bestiality and unwitting incest.

Asked how he felt about those changes, Bracken replied, “I didn't really care about the brief depiction of the young woman and her beloved dog's tongue, but I was disappointed about the incest because my point was that the protagonist wasn't just screwing women, he unwittingly screwed over his adult daughter when he insisted on helping break in a new sex worker in a darkened room.”

I assumed he meant by that that men should treat all women dearly, as if they were their own daughters. “Something along those lines,” Bracken agreed, “Treat women the way you would like your daughter to be treated, with love.”

While many writers have been inspired by their lovers to create erotic stories, Bracken has a deeper agenda to pursue with his pornographic prose. Asked how he approached his narrative, Bracken replied, “As I like to say, the Stasi agents became the butts and big boobs of my jokes, and by extension, either directly or indirectly, the porn industry became a target for subversion. It helped that they were Communists. Otherwise, I doubt such treatment of men could ever appear in a porn novel marketed to male readers. Ultimately, I wrote the book for women, from a woman’s point of view, although men like it too.”

The line between pornography and satire is a thin one. True to both forms, Bracken’s characters, with the exception of Adina, seem comically one-dimensional, but unlike the denizens of most stroke boob the “types” he employs have the extra qualities of post cold war kink. From the central Stasi character, named Dick (what else?), to the Turkish anarchist Hadid, each character offers not only sexual opportunities to Adina, but political ones as well. With his satire biting both at political ideologies and pornographic sensibilities, I asked Bracken how the first publisher felt about him making fun of the porn industry.

“Actually, the publisher of Masquerade Books was a man. I know he liked the humor in the first chapter, but it’s hard to say if he ever read the rest of the book.”

The rest of the book is a playful coming of age journey from East to West during the fall of the Berlin Wall. The sex is hot—if you can get off while watching CNN and reading *Revolution of Everyday Life*. Stasi sex is the personification of authoritarian domination, but Adina’s breathless come-ons are compared to Gorbachev’s overtures towards the West. References to obscure ideologues pepper the book the way pop culture and stock fetishes pad mainstream porn. Adina reads Magnus Hirschfeld, “founder of the defunct Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin.” A Polish hotel clerk pauses to think of Konwicki, Gombrowicz, Lem, Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche immediately before joining a Stasi orgy. Bracken name checks everyone from Bakunin and Kropotkin to Rabelais, Rodin and Balzac to Wim Wenders, cobra, fluxus, and neoism to the A-Infos anarchist news service. Even Pythagoras and Erasmus merit a reference. In what could be the books defining epigram, Bracken quotes Egoist Max Stirner: “Am I my own master when I give myself up to sensuality? No, I must master sensuality.”

Adina’s sexual trek from East to West and back to “the black East” is a metaphor for the social experiences under Stalinism, capitalism, and, ultimately, anarchism.

Dick, the Stasi agent, is increasingly the personification of the State (at one point thinking, “I am the State”) until an anarchist squatter with the slogan “Work, No Thanks” tattooed on her forehead forces him to have sex chained to the bed, thinking it “a large opportunity to fuck the State.” As the State falls, so do Dick’s fortunes, until he is forced to become a pimp (what else?) as he discovers, “His Stasi seal no longer paid his way.”

As the Wall falls, so does Adina. In fact, she literally falls off of the tumbling wall itself into the arms of the incarnation of western spectacular capitalism, a movie director. Of course, his films are perverted sex flicks, and his designs on Adina are no less exploitative than the Stasi’s. Her fate in his hands comes as no surprise to any who read the international news or those whose tastes are filled further in the back of the newsstand. Where once Adina’s fantasy life of the West found New York and Cuba equally exotic, her outlook is broadened: “We survived socialism, Adina thought with a mix of pride and disgust as she eyed rows of western billboards, but will we be able to survive capitalism?”

Still, Bracken’s is a moral universe. Just as Dick is reduced to pimping, eventually unwittingly pimping his own daughter, Albert the film director meets his end at the hands of anarchist squatters who lecture him on the society of the spectacle before assassinating him in the midst of shooting a perverted movie.

As for Adina, the Turkish anarchist Hadid has the solution. “Well, since there are no longer Stasi, that makes you an ex-Stasi slut. You’ll have to become something else, something better.”

Delightful details abound, from the depiction of Adina’s mother as a Catholic anti-Communist peasant, to the descriptions of the filthy Berlin squats, to the graffiti that pops up like a Greek chorus to announce the story’s anarchist intent. It’s clear that while Bracken loves his sex, what he really desires is to encourage the readers to engage in “loving seditiously.”

“One woman recently told me that she loves to have her boyfriend read passages of *The East is Black* to her as they make love and then spank her with the book,” Bracken told me. “As a writer, it gratifies me to enter into my reader’s lives this “way.”

While Bracken insists that this is the final version of *The East Is Black*, I had the idea that his research into hedonism continues. I asked him if he shows the book to the women he knows. “Many women have been intrigued by it. Of course they get wild ideas about what they imagine my fetishes might be, and other than a little exhibitionism and voyeurism, I tend to either relive or disappoint them, depending on their expectations. But a few months ago, I had a brief affair with a woman working in a high-level capacity in the German government. When I warned her that I am the anarchist author of *Stasi Slut*, it only heightened the sexual tension.”

“P” stands for polemic and pornography in this entertaining little book; “S” stands for sedition and... “And secretions,” Bracken adds, laughing, “we can never forget about secretions and lest we forget, I address them to an even greater extent in my next novel, *Liquid Zinc*.” Bracken manages to combine his seditious polemics with his pornographic secretions well. The book may be a valuable implement in spanking, and it’s a good party game to read passages aloud and see what comes up.

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