

# Getting Off Easy

## Men & Pornography!

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2008

a review of

*Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, Robert Jensen, South End Press, 2007, 197 pages

It is hard to read Robert Jensen's *Getting Off* without getting drawn into an internal debate about power and desire and without feeling that there is a greater economic issue that the author, a journalism prof at the University of Texas at Austin, has left essentially untouched.

Porn is a billion dollar industry in the United States, and it shares mainstream distribution and production networks with so-called "family" and "Christian" oriented corporations. Eighty-nine percent of porn is created in the U.S., \$2.84 billion in revenue was generated from U.S. porn sites in 2006; 72 percent of porn viewers are men, and 260 new porn sites go online daily. One can only estimate the total number of the workforce involved, both in front of and behind the cameras.

But *Getting Off* is not a follow-the-money book. It is about personal choices, social activism, and in many ways about personal confessions. In this sense, it is an alienating read and only a step in the right direction in talking about the issue of misogyny.

Jensen focuses on the increase in production of gonzo porn; that category in which extreme or degrading acts are the central images. Kind of like the "Jack-ass" version of dirty movies. The book makes its case against pornography through graphically described scenes of irrefutable exploitation and in some cases physical pain. There are, in fact, far too many graphically recounted scenes for the reader to consume (did he really watch all of these?), plus, there is a certain degree of self-righteousness in presenting this to the reader; a sense that we will be in denial or even complicit if we skip a page.

There is a certain value in Jensen's depiction of how common porn is in men's lives, and how as it has become so mainstreamed it has fallen out of discourse and debate. But the normalization of exploitation is not news; network TV sit-coms feature sequential half hour programming of tittering about sex, to say nothing of cable shows like "Sex in the City."



Our late friend, Richard Mock, often said his inocuts were ambiguous enough that they could accompany almost any article, or certainly stand alone. The one above seems like a perfect example.

Perhaps the greatest value of the text is Jensen's appeal for men to join the fight against toxic masculinity and in the power of the book's final statement: "I choose to renounce being a man; I choose to struggle to be a human being." For both men and women it is indeed a struggle to be more than the sum of our bodies and our socialized compulsions, but his implorations seem to offer little to hang a hat on.

His call is akin to asking men to give up watching professional sports (with the ragged edge being cage fighting) because of their psychic tie-in to militarist and competitive mind sets. What is never addressed is why men, and some women, watch porn. In classical social theory, porn qualifies as what Herbert Marcuse called repressive desublimation-what was previously suppressed into the unconscious is released but still chains the conscious mind to ruling ideas.

Jensen says he doesn't want government censorship, but dependence upon calling for individual ethical will for avoidance of a compelling genre doesn't seem very powerful. And, he really doesn't make his case.

Does the mass proliferation of porn affect men's attitude toward sexuality as negatively as he claims?

If there's so much of it filtering into men's minds, why hasn't there been a massive increase in violence towards women which he claims porn engenders? Statistics show levels of rape and assaults of women, although alarmingly high, have not increased with the mass expansion of pornography over the last twenty years.

Isn't misogyny greater in societies where porn barely exists such as in Saudi Arabia? Is porn consumption a reaction to women's increased power within Western society, or, is it just plain old voyeurism that is made easily accessible through mass communication technology that bids up what the porn consumers expect? Ordinary vanilla sex just doesn't cut it as it used to when it was underground and passed hand to hand behind a school or in a men's locker room. Viewers expect more and more, so the damned weirdest and often disturbing stuff appears on porn sites. Jensen says this raises men's expectations for kinky sex at home, but it's hard to believe too many women are going for it.

Also, Jensen discusses quite disarmingly his own obsession with pornography, so is this a case of a recovering addict demanding that no one else be tempted by what got him hooked and feeling guilty?

So, what do we do about porn, or, for that matter, should we do anything? There's probably nothing currently that can erode the mass appeal it has to men in a society drenched in sexual anxiety. Not paying for it and enriching the entrepreneurs who profit from our lust and/or sexual misery is a good starting point, but catching yourself watching is no reason to induce another level of guilt or shame. However, if you find yourself attracted to the pretty awful material Jensen describes, and he was obsessed with, it might be worth asking yourself why. A little self-analysis never hurt anyone.

One *Fifth Estate* staffer says there's a lot of non-sexist, DIY porn out there, as well as feminist generated sexually explicit material. I was going to write, perhaps those would be more appropriate places to satisfy one's voyeurism, but saying that is little different than what Jensen asks of us: Watch what I think is appropriate.

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