

Press - Article in LA Times

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### **Love Hurts**

[THE HAPPY HOOKER](#): My Own Story, By Xaviera Hollander, [Regan Books](#): 288 pp., \$13.95 paper  
[CHILD NO MORE](#): A Memoir, By Xaviera Hollander, Regan Books: 306 pp., \$23.95

By [TRACY QUAN](#)

Xaviera Hollander's "[The Happy Hooker](#)" is a kitsch classic, a memorable slice of New York life with a life of its own. Its title is part of our vocabulary. Today, affluent prostitutes are playfully referred to as "happy hookers." One eccentric wing of the international prostitutes' rights movement has used the term as a political insult since the 1980s.

Many who use "happy hooker" as a backhanded epithet have never even read Hollander's 1972 memoir, a sign of her cultural clout and a good reason to republish. And for many, the 30th anniversary edition of "[The Happy Hooker](#)" is a reprint of a book that opened our adolescent eyes to a new career path.

Of course, there is nothing new about the oldest profession. Nor is there anything new about children earning a living at it. The streets of Victorian London and 19th century New York were filled with youthful hustlers who, by modern standards, were much too young to be having sex for money. But prostitution seemed new to us, middle-class pubescent youths of the 1970s and early-'80s whose parents thought of hooking as something "other people" did.

Hollander's book was not hidden from us, unless you regard a book hastily stashed by one's parents beneath their bed as hidden. It was read by an entire generation of future sex workers whose parents expected us to become doctors, schoolteachers, engineers. We found it on the bookshelves in the homes of families where we baby-sat or on top of a half-open box on moving day. Its author was in the news and on TV: New York's most notorious madam before the age of 30.

Hollander was not the city's first celebrity madam and hooker. Nineteenth century New York had its share of celebrated prostitutes, but their media exposure was limited. When [Polly Adler](#) published her 1950s memoir, "[A House Is Not a Home](#)," she made it clear that she had become a madam without ever turning a trick. Hollander was unabashed about describing her evolution from (unpaid) one-night stand to full-time call girl to front-page madam.

I have met prostitutes, male and female, from Brooklyn, Idaho, Australia and Canada who regard Hollander as their inspiration--a "trailblazing freak," as one New York call girl puts it. A surprising number of today's sex workers can cite "[The Happy Hooker](#)" as a childhood influence, a book that made us think: "I can do that!"

Revisiting "[The Happy Hooker](#)" as a sexually experienced adult is quite jarring, especially for a veteran of the oldest profession. Anecdotes that seemed like happy-hooker high jinks to a child now read like tedious ordeals that a prostitute would want to avoid.

Most adult readers will agree that the first page of this story, which begins in a jail cell, doesn't sound very happy: Six terrified call girls stand cowering in a corner; 20 "jail-toughened" streetwalkers dominate the cell with bawdy catcalls and menacing remarks. There is racial tension, physical fear and not enough bench space. Hollander doesn't shrink from describing the smells of the jail cell or the battered body of a sad prostitute she encounters at Rikers Island.

The first chapter is heart-rending and hardly titillating. When Hollander gets out of jail, she returns to a doorman-guarded apartment building--which might seem glamorous to some--but her problems have just begun: Now she must move because she has been busted.

Despite its upbeat title, its erotic passages and enticing glimpses into Manhattan's top-tier brothels, "[The Happy Hooker](#)" also describes the most trying aspects of sex, whether for recreation, true love or naked profit.

Hollander is frank about the hard physical work of prostitution, the discomforts of taking on multiple sex partners, the dangers of encountering a too-kinky or boorish client and the indignities of working as a beginner.

She has sex in New York's Garment Center on a pile of dresses only to discover--two hours and many clients later--that imprinted on her back are the "impressions of zippers, hooks and eyes" and other trimmings.

On her way to becoming a successful call girl and madam, Hollander pays her dues. Although she likes sex quite a bit more than the average person--I think her appetite exceeds that of most prostitutes--her job is illegal, dangerous and often exhausting. There are terrifying entanglements with mobsters who expect to be paid off with free sex, blackmailers who threaten to have her deported and police officers who threaten to break women's legs. She is often stressed out by a lover's sexual jealousy--one of the perennial hazards of prostitution.

Hollander never denied that her career of paid pleasure required almost all of her emotional and much of her physical strength. When you realize that she has finally retired from it, you are relieved. Hollander paints an impressive portrait of herself as a survivor who prospered in style, but this is no pretty picture of "the life."

And yet, Hollander unwittingly "turned out" an entire generation of young readers. Is this the result of a child's habit of skipping ahead to the juicy parts and overlooking the details? Were we just too young to understand what we were reading?

Perhaps some people are born to be prostitutes, the way some people are born to be athletes, writers or musicians, and no cautionary tale can dissuade such a person from pursuing her natural profession.

Hollander's engaging new memoir, "[Child No More](#)," describes the years before and after New York. These are the Freudian footnotes to "[The Happy Hooker](#)." It's also a rather daring

exploration of her late parents' marriage. If her first book was darker and grittier than we remember, it's because Hollander had rather dark, gritty beginnings.

Born in Indonesia to a Jewish father and a German mother, Hollander lived as a toddler in a Japanese prison camp. In the 1960s, she accepted a free ticket to South Africa from its government, which was actively recruiting white immigrants from the Netherlands. Her breezy descriptions of South Africa under apartheid are disconcerting, especially because Hollander has a lot to say about anti-Semitism and ethnic persecution in Europe. This may explain why Hollander's influence in the global prostitutes' movement has been cultural rather than political.

Hollander says she wrote this new memoir to dispel the myth that she lives only for sex but she is most insightful when describing her sexual behavior and origins. A few quirks can be traced to the brutality of her prison camp childhood, especially her expertise as a professional sadist. She admits that she inherited her father's Don Juan personality but not his gentleness, the very thing that must have made his philandering bearable to her mother.

After Indonesia, Hollander's mother attempted to rebuild a happy home in Amsterdam. Her husband's frequent sexual adventures created an atmosphere of mistrust. Many fathers who engage in extramarital sex manage to conceal it from their families but Hollander's father, who was an attractive, stimulating, intelligent man, needed, for some reason, to remind his wife (and perhaps his daughter?) that other women wanted him too.

This need for adulation, variety and intrigue is a quality shared by many women who work as prostitutes. In fact, the female Don Juan is doubly cursed: Although the pre-Viagra male was forced by nature to curtail his philandering, a female Don Juan never has to give that problem a second thought. The possibilities for conquest and complication seem endless.

At a time when it's fashionable to treat prostitution as sexual labor rather than sexual expression--or to blame its existence on paternal brutality--Hollander's approach to the question of paternal influence is refreshing and nuanced.

But Hollander is not just a female Don Juan. She has become an outlaw mother figure who willfully celebrates a somewhat distorted attachment to her own mother.

Shortly after the publication of "[The Happy Hooker](#)," Hollander married and tried to conceive a child. The result--an ectopic pregnancy--almost killed her. Hollander was devastated.

During the 1970s, a lover assured the childless Hollander that what she had written was "every bit as valuable as the contribution made by any mother." How true this turned out to be. Hollander, at that moment, was morphing into our madam as we devoured her words. She was childless no more, despite herself.

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