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BOOKS

Something for everyone

Just Out reviews recent nonfiction books, from the sublime to the erotic

ASSUMING THE POSITION: A MEMOIR OF HUSTLING
 By Rick Whitaker. *Four Walls Eight Windows*, 1999. \$18 hardcover.

Philosophical Trick: Explicit Sex, Implicit Wisdom—I read this memoir last summer in Room 11 at the White Horse Inn in Provincetown, Mass., the same room where eight years ago the author and I had a hot and philosophically charged summer. His intensity continues to echo in the pages of his new meditation-cum-memoir, *Assuming the Position: A Memoir of Hustling*.

After his lover dumps him, Rick Whitaker, a successful Hunter College philosophy major with his fingers in some of the East Coast's most respected cultural pies, finds his fingers in some of New York's most respected men. Leaving jobs with publisher Alfred A. Knopf Inc. and the New York City Opera, Whitaker spites his ex-lover by striding into the wilderness of prostitution and drug addiction. From the smoky pre-Giuliani New York City hustler bar Rounds to a country house in Connecticut, from the Carlyle Hotel high on crystal meth to the calm vantage of sobriety, Whitaker's words reveal something of his soul, the soul of a hustler, a verisimilitude of every soul.

Explicit in its simplicity and candor, *Assuming the Position* interweaves philosophical tracts of Wittgenstein, Leonard Woolf and Thoreau with Whitaker's contemporaneous impressions recorded during his wild flight from, and into, his darkest demons. —Lake Perriguet

THE TROUBLE WITH NORMAL: SEX POLITICS AND THE ETHICS OF QUEER LIFE
 By Michael Warner. *Free Press*, 1999; \$23 hardcover.

Gay marriage fatigue. Aren't there some other issues we could focus on for a while? Do you wonder why it seems that so many of the headliner issues these days focus on marriage, military and glossy media stars? Why, suddenly, are pop stars speaking for the gay community?

For those of you who aren't suffering from an amnesia of queer history in these days of a bull market or relative success as the gay niche market, Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* reminds and instructs us about the inherent discriminatory aspects of legal marriage.

To Warner, it seems curious that private individuals would strive so hard to have the right effectively to invite the government into their lives. Sure, he recognizes the rights and privileges of marriage, but he is troubled by the intense focus of resources on the subject, which lesbian comic Kate Clinton calls "the mad vow disease."

Definitely controversial, Warner's book analyzes the relationship between conduct and status, shame and stigma, identity and action, as well as the underlying behavioral archetypes that result in the pinning of shame on sexual minorities.

Pointing out that "normal" is merely a statistical range, Warner emphasizes the transformative and educational force of freaks, fairies, queers, prostitutes, trannies and others whose sexual lives and experiences fall outside the statistical norm. Their life experiences, and the cultivation of a respect for what is aberrant, helps us to extend the possibilities of pleasures, private and cultural. Warner reminds us that it is the freaks on the fringe who make the Abercrombie & Fitch fags, bourgeois queers and conservative homos seem so normal and reputable.

In our quest for rights, Warner avers, the queer movement has covered from its historic mission to dismantle the stigmatization of sex and is instead playing along with the nationwide sex panic that is behind the desexing of New York City and police traps of gay men in parks and other public sexual venues.

Highly accessible, *The Trouble with Normal* is a welcome wake up call to all queers to examine the principles by which we fight for freedom and by which we live our lives. —LP

SOMETHING FOR THE BOYS: MUSICAL THEATRE AND GAY CULTURE
 By John M. Clum. *St. Martin's Press*, 1999. \$26.95 hardcover.

I recently watched a veteran show queen friend of mine go into paroxysms of shock. We were sitting with members of the current London cast of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, the ballet that won three Tonys this past year while on Broadway. No one in our après-show salon knew who Irving Berlin was or what he contributed to musical theater; nor did many of them know the standards from *Annie Get Your Gun*, nor the favorites from *Kiss Me Kate*. My learned friend had been certain that the barely

20-year-old dancers would know the details and highlights of a long and rich tradition in which they were now playing such an important part. But they were just beginning to learn.

Thankfully, John M. Clum's *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture* provides a history lesson for serious Broadway aficionados and culture mavens of all levels of theatrical experience. The book is part exploration, part history and always a celebration. Clum outlines the camp, sensuality and costume codes and interprets gay plot lines that served as signifiers and expressions of queer sensibility in American and British theater from the end

of World War I through the present. —LP

