

BOOK REVIEW | By Sharan Street

Walk on the Wild Side

Robert Rosen recounts his, long, strange trip down ‘Beaver Street’

Beaver Street:

A History of Modern Pornography

By Robert Rosen | Headpress, 2012 | Paperback, 224 pages

Since 1983, the year *AVN* magazine came into being, the landscape in the adult industry has undergone more than a few seismic shifts. In *Beaver Street: A History of Modern Pornography*, author Robert Rosen gives eyewitness accounts of some of the earth-shaking events in the industry. He calls the book an investigative memoir, a term that describes the book’s “interplay of the personal and historical.”

Rosen’s run in the industry lasted from 1983 to 1999, when he worked under the name Bobby Paradise as an editor of adult magazines—hundreds of titles, in fact, with such names as *D-Cup*, *Plump & Pink* and *Blondes in Heat*. The best-known of these—the flagships for the two companies at which he toiled—were *High Society* and *Swank*, which still maintain a toehold in today’s adult market.

From his vantage point in the New York smut rag biz, Rosen saw the rise and fall of many a porn trend. In 1983 he walked in the doors of High Society, “unaware that I was stepping into ground zero of a new age of pornographic wealth and joining a revolution that was changing the face of commercial erotica—as well as society itself. I did not grasp the profound, and far-reaching implications of phone sex.”

On his first day, Rosen perused news clips from such publications as *Forbes* and *Fortune*, reporting that “High Society was a visionary corporation run by Gloria Leonard, a media-savvy porn star/publisher who was now making millions of dollars with phone sex, an explosive new business that hadn’t existed two months earlier.” But the man really making the millions was the owner Carl Ruderman; even as the money flowed in he longed for respectability while simultaneously envying the success of his competition, Larry Flynt’s *Hustler*.

In the early 1980s, as the AIDS epidemic raged, 976 phone lines provided an alternative for those fearful of sex with prostitutes. As one of Rosen’s colleagues says to him, “The only thing that’s completely safe is jerking off. And what does Ruderman have? A new way to jerk off.”

Rosen describes the company and his colleagues vividly—“The magazine was like the Ellis Island of pornography, a port of entry into a brave new X-Rated world”—and also provides details on skirmishes with the law over phone sex and censorship. In Canada, where *High*

Society was also distributed, Rosen writes, there were “regulations for everything—dozens of them, covering sexual acts ranging from the remotely kinky, like spanking, to the totally perverted, like incest. … And the rules changed all the time.”

After a short stint at *High Society*, ended by Ruderman when Rosen referred to *High Society* as a porn mag, in 1984 Rosen went to Swank Inc., also based in New York—a company, he writes, that “produces scores of low-rent stroke books like *Stag*, *X-Rated Cinema*, *For Adults Only*, *Seka & Vanessa*, *Adult Erotica*, *Superstars of Sex*, *Lesbian Lust*, and, of course, *Swank* itself. Compared to these magazines, *High Society* looked like *The New Yorker*. ”

Rosen is brutally honest about how his career affected his state of mind and his sense of self. In one of the book’s highlights, he writes about how he came to bare all—including his own genitals—for one of his photo sets. But the more personal stories, though compelling, are less illuminating than his observations about porn history.

In a chapter called “The Secret History,” Rosen explores the roots of Swank Inc. Martin Goodman, the father of *Swank* publisher Chip Goodman, got his start with pulp magazines like *Star Detective*, *Uncanny Stories* and *Marvel Science Stories*. As World War II began, Goodman—who had a talent “for turning a fast profit on an emerging trend”—founded Timely Comics, which became an umbrella corporation that included Marvel Comics. It’s a fascinating exploration of the common ground shared by comics and pornographic magazines.

Having opened his “investigative memoir” during an era when his industry was awash in profits from phone sex, he ends it with the rise of the internet in the mid-1990s, which brought technological innovations that would be far less kind to the adult magazine industry. Rosen ends the book with an epilogue, “The Skin Mag in Cyberspace,” that sums up the decade that followed his departure in 1999—a hard ride made worse by the 2008 recession.

And when speaking about tectonic shifts in the industry, Rosen doesn’t neglect the impact of Traci Lords, devoting a full chapter to the furor raised by the underage performer:

“It took me twenty years to see the Traci Lords wasn’t the natural disaster that I thought she was in the summer of 1986—a tsunami that came out of nowhere and flattened everything in its path. All evidence now indicates that the U.S. Justice Department, working in concert with the L.A. County district Attorney’s office, created for Lords the role she was born to play: anti-porn star, a character designed and nurtured to set off the apocalyptic act of an ongoing morality drama—a religious passion play that had begun ninety-five years earlier, soon after Thomas Edison invented the movie camera.”