



In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal

By Niklaus Largier

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In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal is a new history of voluntary flagellation in Europe, from its invention in medieval religious devotion to its use in the modern pornographic imagination. Working with a wide range of religious, literary, and medical texts and images, Niklaus Largier explores the emotional and sensual, religious and erotic excitement of the whip, a crucial instrument of stimulation in devotional and sexual practices. From early modern pornography to the Marquis de Sade and the fantasies of Swinburne and Joyce, the erotic and devotional imagination drew on the whip. Largier explores how the Reformation and Counter-Reformation problematized the medieval culture of arousal. The stimulating qualities of medieval visual displays, especially flagellant practices, processions, and spectacles, were subjected to a criticism that sought to control the imagination. In modern bourgeois life the practice, effects, and imagery of flagellation became a central site of investigation into concerns and anxieties about exercising emotional self-control and censoring fantasy. Modern references to flagellant practice in the works of Swinburne, Proust, and Joyce testified not only to a "decadent" fascination with "medieval" cultures or "perverse sexuality," but also to a fascination that nineteenth-century censorship, informed by psychopathological discourses, had obliterated. Such evocations of flagellation, Largier explains, were attempts to recover a culture of stimulation and imagination--both erotic and devotional--that transcended the modern boundaries of sexuality.

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Editorial Review

Review

"... *In Praise of the Whip* remains an intelligent and thoughtful work that shows great understanding of the role of flagellation in religious and sexual contexts. This is a work that escapes from narrow and often prurient readings of flagellatory processes that have often dominated academic writing on the subject." *Times Higher Education Supplement*

"The history of arousal that Largier offers is thus very near the heart of the history of being human, that is, the history of being creatures who are both profoundly embodied and inextricably caught up in imagining ourselves capable of transcending mere matter through giving meaning to what we do." *Slate*

About the Author

Niklaus Largier is Professor of German Literature and Director of the Religious Studies program at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Zeit, Zeitlichkeit, Ewigkeit* and *Diogenes der Kyniker*. He is also the editor of the selected writings of Meister Eckhart.

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