



Virgins: A Cultural History

Anke Bernau

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In the Middle Ages it was believed that only a virgin could charm a unicorn out of hiding; but far from being a quaint, anachronistic concept, virginity remains a central value in Western culture. Typing "virgin" into Google results in more than one million hits and includes everything from the Anti-Nicene Fathers to advertisements for free teen virgins, displaying a range of current cultural preoccupations with virginity. This lively, wide-ranging examination of a phenomenon that has touched many aspects of our culture names different archetypes and facets of the concept of virginity. Examples include the Medical Virgin—exploring what exactly virginity is and how to reliably identify one; the Religious Virgin—from the Madonna to the American Christian Right's insistence on sexual abstinence before marriage; the Popular Virgin of Gothic fiction and modern day horror films; the Political Virgin—virginity's intimate connection with money and power; and the Monstrous Virgin, as embodiment of what is ultimately unknowable and of violence, excess, and death.

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