

Book Review Revue

Books About Penises, Balls, America, and Art

The *Big Penis Book* is BIG. Twelve rock-hard inches. Well... it's 12 inches by 12 inches and rock-hard *bound*. It's really THICK, too. I'm sitting here, just holding it, all

alone, in my apartment. God, it's so, so... so HUGE! It weighs almost, what, *seven* pounds? I can barely lift... oh man! Anyway, yeah, it's just me, a *girl*, sitting here with one very large book of penises.

The Big Penis Book

edited by
Dian Hanson
(TASCHEN)
\$59.99.

great big cocks? I have to tell you, anonymous bookstore stockers, you really disappoint me.

What does NOT disappoint is this gorgeous new 384-page book, with over 400 historic color and black-and-white photographs, reproduced in the almost-flawless fashion that master archivists and undefeated art-book champs TASCHEN is known for. I suppose the "GAY!" classification of the book is because many of the photographs are from the studios of Bob Mizer (Athletic Model Guild) and David Hurler (Colt, Falcon, and Champion Studios). But still... I dare anyone, gay or straight, to look at pages 50, 203, and/or 361, and tell me they're not *amazed*. And I daresay a healthy fascination with the large phallus is timeless and compelling to *both* sexes. I might even say this coffee-table book of super-sized schlongs might be the ultimate gift to give to more than one person, male or female, on your holiday shopping list.
KELLY O

Men with Balls

by Drew Magary
(Little, Brown) \$16.99.

Drew Magary is a funny motherfucker. Magary, one of the principal dick-joke writers on the hilarious Kissing Suzy Kolber sports blog—which, in fact, contains very little sports analysis—is the latest blogger to cross over and join the guys from Stuff White People Like and Waiter Rant in a weird, semilegitimate circle of hell

in the literary world.

Magary sticks with what he knows—completely ludicrous sports satire, all of which appears to be new material—in *Men with Balls*. He provides sage advice for up-and-coming rookies ("Smart athletes use racism to their advantage, and so can you!"), (fake) advice from star athletes—see: Gary Payton's guide to shit-talking—and off-handed observations about the problems with sports today ("If any game could benefit from the presence of large-breasted remedial nursing students dancing around in outfits the size of a Wet-Nap, it's baseball").

While there's plenty of great material in *Men with Balls* (a bitchy letter from the Philly Phanatic and a guide to making love like a pro-athlete are standouts), the book drags a bit in the middle as the material wears a bit thin—no amount of effort can make a collective bargaining agreement funny.

While *Men with Balls* attempts to be accessible to casual sports fans in its earlier chapters, the book ultimately descends into—pardon the pun—inside baseball, with semiobscure references to dead quarterbacks and Alex Rodriguez's lack of sexual prowess. Unless you're someone who YouTube's the hell out of brutal career-ending sports injuries, you're probably better off reading a real book. But if you spend more time poring over your fantasy-football lineup at the office than doing actual work, the endless stream of jokes about asshole coaches, audible calls, and athletes' domestic-abuse charges may give you enough of a chuckle to keep you from killing yourself for at least one more day. JONAH SPANGENTHAL-LEE

Antoine's Alphabet

by Jed Perl
(Knopf) \$25.

Jed Perl is not in with the in-kids. He's a critic's critic in a world mostly populated with yes-critics; you value him if you value criticism itself. Agreeing with him or not doesn't matter. For instance, I think this is wrong (he wrote it last May after the death of Robert Rauschenberg, for the *New Republic*, his regular perch since 1994): "As for his art, it stank in the 1950s, and it doesn't look any better today." I still read him.

So when he takes a break from long jeremiads or thick books about history (like his 2005 *New Art City* on the postwar art of New York) and writes a book you can fit in one pocket with 26 bitty chapters corresponding to the letters of the alphabet the way a children's book might, you have to ask: What is he up to? Is this yet another dissent from the trendy scenesterism of the *Artforum* crowd? Is he just being cute?

Probably both of those poses are at play in *Antoine's Alphabet: Watteau and His World*, but Perl is also trying to write the most expansive possible love letter to his favorite painter—subsections veer in content from Vasari and Giorgione to Cezanne, Picasso, and Virginia Woolf—and he is simultaneously trying to resuscitate the rococo, that art historical equivalent of low-cal dressing.

He is most convincing when he is closest to the art. His readings of images—Watteau's *Ger-saint's Shopsign*, *The Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera*, *Gilles*, and his lesser-known depictions of war and soldiers—are specific and sweeping at the same time, not only going places but also providing something to hold on to for the mental ride. He's especially good on the interlocking nature of ideas and styles, the ways they rely on each other even in opposition: "With Watteau, classical wholeness is not something to be achieved but something to be aware of, an enduring hope or promise, a prize to be pursued but not necessarily to be captured. At which point classicism, for all intents and purposes, has become romantic." Conversely, it must simply be said that Perl is not so good at historical fiction.

What keeps the book's lock on the reader is that the "sadistic charm" and "wig-powder cloudiness" of Watteau, to use Jean Cocteau's descriptions, are in fact deserving of a reputation upgrade. And Perl, with his alphabet format, is for the most part successful at being as sly as the tangled lines of Watteau's not-as-light-as-it-looks art. JEN GRAVES

Watching the Watchmen

by Dave Gibbons, Chip Kidd, and Mike Essl

(Titan Books) \$39.95.

With a big, fancy film adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's mind-blowingly brilliant comic series *Watchmen* on the way, publishers will undoubtedly be rushing all kinds of crap onto shelves for the holiday season to cash in on the hype.

Watching the Watchmen is just such crap.

At about 60 kazillion pages, you'd think the enormous coffee-table book—written by Gibbons—would be brimming with behind-the-scenes info. Instead, the book is full of dull, blotchy thumbnail art; early sketches; and anecdotes about going to comic conventions in the 1980s. It is about as lifeless as you could possibly imagine.

Reading Gibbons waxing nostalgic on *Watchmen* is about as interesting as listening to George Harrison talk about how brilliant the Beatles were. Sure, Gibbons, like Harrison, was a fundamentally important cog in a genre-redefining machine, but he was still just the backup band.

That's not to say Gibbons's art wasn't an integral part of *Watchmen*, one of the best—if not the best—comic series ever. But let's face it: He wasn't the brains behind this operation.

While the thumbnails, color tests, and character sketches—sandwiched between fawning passages about the brilliance of Alan Moore (duh!)—are bound to bore the living shit out of anyone who's already read the series or flipped through an issue of *Wizard* (RIP), it might be an all right read for someone who really wants to see how the series came together. Still, a copy of *Absolute Watchmen* would be a much better use of your money and coffee-table space. JONAH SPANGENTHAL-LEE

I have just finished reading Michael Medved's book *The 10 Big Lies About America*, and I am confused. This confusion has nothing to do with Medved's writing (which is clear, simple, and sturdy), nor his politics (pro-American no matter what). The confusion results from the types of critical weapons he displays, like an arms dealer, for cutting down standard anti-American arguments. The whole purpose of the book is to supply grenades of facts, swords of historical information, and machine guns of data to those who are (1) on the right, (2) undereducated, and (3) fighting a seemingly losing battle against those who are (1) on the left, and (2) overeducated. But Medved's weapons are very curious.

Before examining them, some background on this Medved chap. He is the last man standing on the far right in far-left Seattle. He has a radio show; he is on TV a lot, he is in the habit of crossing his legs when he sits, and his upper lip often raises his broad mustache with the pride of a confident weightlifter. That is Medved. Now, his book.

Chapter after chapter, Medved sets up a target—"America Was Founded on Genocide Against Native Americans," "The United States Is Uniquely Guilty for the Crime of Slavery," etc. And chapter after chapter, he shows the reader—a man who knows he is right to believe in the essential goodness of America, but does not know

why he is right—the facts, information, and data that can strike at the heart of these targets. But the examples Medved uses tend to complicate or confuse, rather than make things clear. Read this book closely and you'll realize America is neither bad nor good. America is beyond good and evil.

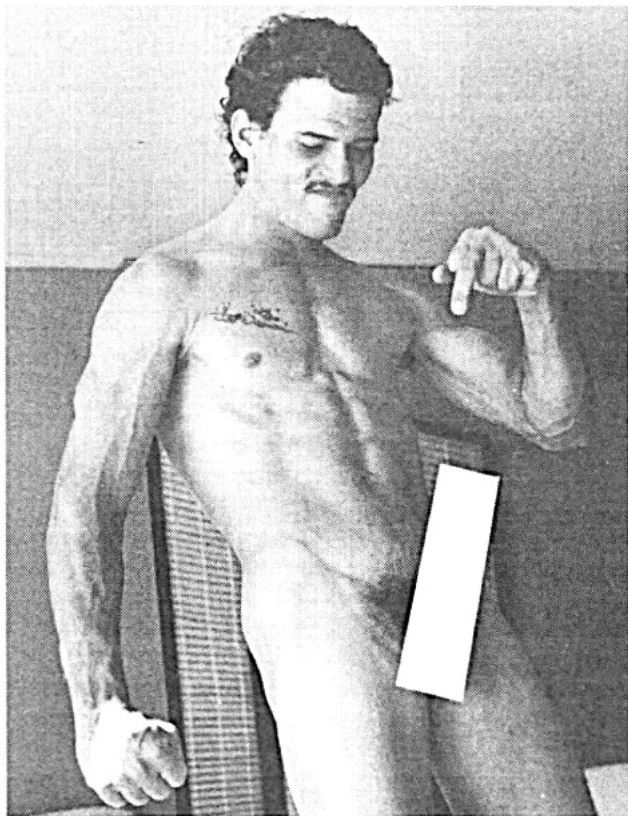
One example out of many: In the chapter "The Power of Big Business Hurts the Country and Oppresses the People," Medved says that the American "public views contemporary corporate leaders as even more dangerous, degenerate, and scheming than the 19th-century captains of industry. Ironically, the big corporations that dominate Hollywood entertainment lead the way in promulgating the image of businessmen as immoral, sadistic exploiters and even killers." He then lists anticorporate films (*Michael Clayton*, *There Will Be Blood*, *Constant Gardener*) made/distributed by corporations. This contradiction, which is supposed to expose us to the fact that the bad feelings we have about the rich are manufactured rather than real, only complicates matters. Why is the public so suspicious of rich people? And is it peculiar to Americans? No, it is not. We can find the same

suspicion in Dickens's novels, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, in Sophocles's *Antigone*, and also Aristotle's *Politics*. Medved has not slain his opponents on the left with this particular Hollywood weapon, but opened a can of worms.

However, Medved's book does have its share of stupidities, one which I'll leave you with: "African Americans, feminists, Latinos, gays, Asians, the disabled, hippies, Native Americans—each aggrieved segment of society demanded justice and redress, competing for recognition as the most victimized and gypped." Gypped! As in Gypsy! Really, Medved, a Jew, should be a little more sensitive. CHARLES MUDEDE

Michael Medved reads Thurs Nov 20, Town Hall, 7:30 pm, \$5.

I dare anyone, gay or straight, to look at pages 50, 203, and/or 361, and tell me they're not amazed.



DAVID HURLES

CHAMP View the pointer's pointer, p. 187 of *The Big Penis Book*.