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Book Review: Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans

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Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans. Schafer, Judith Kelleher. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. 248 pages. ISBN 978-0-8071-3397-2 (Hardcover). \$32.50.

Judith Schafer's *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* is a comprehensive sourcebook of news and public records related to prostitution in Antebellum New Orleans. In the past decade there have been many books published regarding the history of New Orleans. Though none of these books could possibly fail to mention prostitution, few books deal solely with this topic. Those that do are often focused on the late nineteenth century on; for example, Alecia P Long's 2004 work *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920*. Schafer's book is therefore a unique resource for studying prostitutes in New Orleans in the early nineteenth century. Schafer is capable of filling this literary niche, being a published author and specialist in American legal history, history of the American south, and the legal history of slavery.

The introduction to *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* consists mostly of slightly adapted segments of the later

chapters. Schafer clearly lays out the limitations of this book, noting that there are undoubtedly numerous cases of which she is not aware, and entire subjects (such as male prostitution) for which there are absolutely no public record. Chapter One ("Selling Sex and the Law") is a sweeping overview of how existing laws effected to prostitution in New Orleans. Schafer argues that though prostitution was legal, prostitutes were harassed and taxed by enforcing a variety of charges such as vagrancy. As with the following chapters, this chapter describes and comments on individual cases. The cases are arranged by theme, and chronologically within each theme. Chapter Two is entitled "'Disgusting Depravity' Sex across the color line." Unlike prostitution, inter-racial sexual relations were strongly restricted by both the law and social pressure. Yet it still occurred with regularity. In Chapter Three, "Sexual Exploitation of Children," Schafer provides heartbreaking examples of children forced or manipulated into the sex trade, their lack of legal protection, and the media's willingness to publicize this abuse.

The book next presents stories of violence and abuse. Chapter Four, "Infamous Public Women" focuses on select prostitutes who had particularly colorful reputations. Many of these women and some of the stories also appear elsewhere in the book. Schafer uses these stories to illustrate the brutality of these women's lives and the falsehood of the Scarlet Sisterhood myth. "Larceny and Robbery Among Prostitutes" is the topic of fifth chapter. Prostitutes are shown to be opportunists who used every opportunity to steal and improve their lot. There were usually little few repercussions for robbing customers. In Chapter Six, "Violent Lives," Schafer collects stories of brutality by and towards public women in New Orleans, who faced personal injury and even death on a

daily basis. Continuing this theme, Chapter Seven (“The Murder of a ‘Lewd and Abandoned Woman’”) outlines a singular case from 1851 where a man was prosecuted for the murder of a prostitute. This case is of interest not only for its shocking details, but also for its revelations about the larger legal system at the time. Chapter Eight explains the process of “Keeping a Brothel in Antebellum New Orleans.” Schafer recaps many of the points raised in earlier chapters and introduces new examples to describe the legal and social challenges facing a brothel at this time. The book’s final chapter describes “A Ordinance Concerning Lewd and Abandoned Women” as it outlines the various attempts by the New Orleans City Council and others to regulate, tax, or otherwise directly control prostitution in the city. This is followed by Schafer’s moving Conclusion that summarizes the hardships and injustices faced by public women in Antebellum New Orleans. In addition to references and notes, back of the book has a detailed index that includes names, case names, and subjects.

While the book includes commentary throughout, it is essentially a sourcebook of case studies. Yet Schafer recounts the stories one after the other in a narrative fashion as if she intends the book to be read recreationally. To be fair, the cases are fascinating, and Schafer inserts just enough snark and commentary that the book often feels like a scandalous gossip column. However because this book includes every incident she uncovered in New Orleans newspapers and public records, many cases are very similar to each other. Therefore this book is unavoidably tedious at times to the

recreational reader. Not only does Schafer include a huge number of individual cases, but she must also juggle the complexity of prostitution in New Orleans: any attempt to describe the lives of public women also includes other topics such as rights of women and slaves. Schafer does not oversimplify the situation, but her inclusion of such tangential topics might prove frustrating to some readers. Each individual case is also complex, encapsulating a variety of themes such as violence, race, age, and the law. Therefore Schafer’s attempt to categorize them into chapters occasionally fails. Finally, though the reader might expect to read about the same incident in multiple chapters, there are a several times where entire paragraphs are merely copied and pasted into multiple parts of the book. This repetition of exact phrasing and sentences is very disconcerting when the book is read straight through.

Though not successful as a recreational read, *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* is a fantastic sourcebook for cases related to women’s rights, slavery, and prostitution in antebellum New Orleans. In an academic library, it would be very useful for sociology, anthropology, women’s studies, and history collections. Public libraries with southern history collections will also find it to be a valuable addition. *Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women* is available in both hardcover and softcover, as well as Kindle, Nook, and Google ebook formats.

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