

# PERMANENT OBSCURITY



Or A Cautionary Tale of Two Girls  
& Their Misadventures with Drugs, Pornography, and Death

by Richard Perez

**"The American Baise-Moi!"**

—Lynn Breedlove, *Godspeed*

# Permanent Obscurity:

Or a Cautionary Tale of Two Girls and their  
Misadventures with Drugs, Pornography, and Death



by

Dolores Santana

(as told to  
Richard Perez)



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# Permanent Obscurity by Richard Perez

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To play it safe, I called out mad early on a Thursday morning, and that same day we hit I-95 on the road for New England. Destination: the state of Maine. Way north. Baby at the wheel of the old-fart Chevy Caravan, The Siren's tour van. Serena, lead singer, dead asleep in the back, her hair strewn across a pillow. Me, riding shotgun, dozing off. A greasy road map on my knees.

I'd been to Maine before. With Raymond. But I tried not to think of those times, except for once when we were supposed to go camping in Acadia National Park but got caught in the pouring rain.

We ended up in a hotel near Bar Harbor, in some room that had some fishy smell or maybe it was mildew, but I soon took care of that by producing a granny smith apple.

"What the hell is that?" asked Raymond.

"Our antidote to misery!"

I took out a BiC pen from my purse, then punched a hole halfway through the stem and another through the middle, clear through. "See?"

Then I packed the hole from the top with dro. "*Tah-dah!*" I said,

“We’ll smoke out the stink!”

Despite his arty leanings, Raymond could sometimes be uptight and on occasion frowned at my little weed habit, but this time I convinced him it was earned; hell, we were on vacation, right? Didn’t we just drive a thousand freakin’ miles? Plus, he admitted, using a fresh apple was cute. Of course, I knew he would think that. And that was only phase one of my plan.

“We’ll smoke it, eat the apple, then go get some fresh lobsters in Bar Harbor,” I proposed.

Naturally, I made sure he got good and high.

And, instead of lobsters, we ended up staying in.

Having what I’d call *a real vacation*.

Sometimes the right combination of green and alcohol really loosened up his inhibitions and Catholic guilt, and he was able to cut loose on me, block out his “sweet” nature, get in touch with his inner predator, you might say.

I kept blowing apple-scented smoke into his mouth as we kissed, begging for a good roll.

And that night he was able to take charge of me, tune into my fantasy of being ravaged, and really unleash. All I remember was porn dimly blinking on the TV monitor and that hazy feeling of being *oh so helpless*, “forced” into this position and that, his cock working, feeling harder and thicker than it felt in ages.

Raymond turned into a caveman as he finally took me good, yanking on my hair and growling, “Take it! Take it *all!*”

Nice.

It was a raw, unselfconscious avalanche of passion. And I loved it.

His domination and power were so total it made me scream!

Just as entertaining for our neighbors, I’m sure, was this running dialogue as he plowed me:

Him: So—so you’re my *dirty girl*?

Me: (gasping) Your sweet, dirty, *nasty* girl!—that’s what I am!

Him: (grunting) And you like this, huh?—*like it* when I take charge, uh?

Me: Yeah, *I do!*—*Take charge* with your BIG fuckin’ cock!

Him: (panting) ’Cause you *need it*, right?

Me: Sure do, killa’! *Need it!*

Him: Need a good, *hot* FUCK!

Me: Need it! *Want it!* (pushing hard against him) *Gotta get me some! FUCK ME, ughhh!...*

Things got so freaky and wild that we probably had the whole hotel listening—so nasty hot that I imagined the pay-per-view porno actors through the TV screen breaking off just to watch us—Raymond and me: two fiends—busting it XXX—reinventing the dirty act.

Ah, the healing power of sex.

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Reaching Maine took about forever, driving at legal speed.

Once there, it took about another million years to reach up north, where we wanted to go. Beyond that was Nova Scotia and Canada—if we wanted to escape Jesus country, once and for all.

Along the way, I touched my stomach, wondering what was going on in there, imagining a tadpole with Raymond’s face.

It made me melancholy.

Raymond. What a prick.

Raymond. What a dickhead.

Raymond. What a sop.

Raymond. What a shit.

Raymond. The sweetest man I'd ever known.

Raymond. Who believed in my art and did everything in his power to encourage me.

I almost cried, thinking about him.

Asshole.

Then I thought of that Paris Hilton clone.

I still couldn't believe it.

It was so disappointing to discover, in the end, that your man was *not* one in a million, but just like any bonehead, young or old. Take your pick.

I turned away from the passing scenery to gaze at Serena, who was still asleep in the back.

Baby, her sub, was still at the wheel and would be the entire way.

Baby.

Baby Love, as Serena sometimes referred to him.

That little weirdo. Serena's boy.

Or bitch.

Okay, I liked him.

He was even kinda cute in more ways than one, if you want to know the truth.

Sweet faced and innocent. Easy-going and steady. Selfless and kind.

Not that he was my type really.

Baby had been driving us the whole way in focused silence, now and then glancing back at Serena, her royal highness, who was dozing under a comforter.

Now and then, Baby even smiled at me.

Baby had large eyes, that was one thing.

Large, calm, *deep* eyes.

At one point we stopped at a gas station, and I fell asleep. When I woke up we were back on the road, and I realized that Baby had bought me breakfast, completely unasked for.

Of course, he'd meant to provide for Serena, sleeping beauty, first and foremost.

But still it was thoughtful of him. And generous.

"Aren't *you* the gentleman?" I remarked.

"No big deal." He shrugged, looking back at the road.

Serena stirred at that point, probably smelling her food, which consisted of an omelet on a toasted roll, juice and coffee. "Are you hitting on my Baby?" she asked, stretching and yawning.

"Fuckin' right I am," I told her. "You better watch out!"

"Communal property," she announced. "Help yourself."

"Huh?"

"You heard me," said Serena. "Share and share alike. Make him do anything you want."

WTF? I thought. "That's a bit much, Serena," I said, feeling embarrassed now.

But Baby seemed totally at ease with this, even chipper as he passed her back her food, keeping an eye on the open road.

"Did you eat anything?" she asked him.

He smiled. "*You* first."

"Right," she acknowledged. "*Of course.*"

All this made me feel awkward, I'll admit. Too many head-games to wrap my mind around this early in the morning.

"How much longer?" I asked Baby, meaning our estimated time of arrival in butt-fucking Egypt.

"Two and a half, maybe three more hours?" he said, turning to me.

After that he fell silent, concentrating on the task at hand, which

was driving—getting us all there, safely.

In fact, there wasn't another sound in the Caravan as I recall, until Serena, at the end of her meal, let loose with a monster belch, like the slob that she was, saying, "Oh yeah. That hit the spot. Now this bitch's going back to sleep!" then mashed her face back in her foam pillow and almost immediately began snoring.

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The first thing we did, once in Bar Harbor, was to confirm the hotel room, which Baby had hooked up for us.

Then we parked on a side street, and casually rolled out from there.

It was a cute tourist trap basically, though not worse than San Francisco, which was about fifty times larger.

We strutted about, the three of us, checking out the so-called authentic folk art in various boutiques and souvenir shops.

Baby bought us all pumpkin flavored ice-cream, and then we headed toward the main park, which was sort of like the town square, where there was currently something referred to as "an art fair."

No matter where you went in the U.S., the art at these things was always the same. In a word: "nice." In a word: "pleasant." It was the kind of art that didn't rock the boat; the kind of art that said nothing, challenged nothing, showed no darkness or grit, but just lay there like a hollow fuck-me decoration.

Overall, it made my stomach turn.

Art, my ass.

Serena noted my sour expression and suggested, "Why don't we get the hell out of this outdoor mall and take a boat trip?"



“Good idea,” I replied.

The three of us took a little nature tour around the many tiny islands comprising this part of Maine.

“Oh look, there’s an eagle!” our tour guide cried at one point. We could barely hear him over the put-put noise of the boat engine.

We looked in the direction he pointed, strained our eyes.

“Do you see anything?” asked Serena.

I couldn’t see dip.

Baby pointed to a tiny clump of shit stuck up in a tree. “That’s a nest,” he said.

I squinted and could barely make out what looked like a stuffed animal propped in a tree.

Nature. You gotta love it.

At least there were no people around, except for half-wits like us, trying to scope out invisible animals and pretend like we were getting in touch with the natural world.

I kept coughing because of the diesel fumes of the engine.

“And look!” said the tour guide excitedly. “Over there! Seals!”

I strained to make them out, but it just looked like a bunch of rocks.

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After docking, we had pizza, then did more exploring, this time for a non-franchise neighborhood bar.

Along the way, I asked Serena about her encounter with the LA publisher and the future of her fetish model career.

She confessed, “I’m not sure we’re on the same page. That’s what I told him.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“He gave me a sample DVD to watch. I didn’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“It went from verbal abuse to face-slapping to punching to trampling; finally to dick-sucking and straight rutting.”

“No-fuckin’-way.”

“Exactly! And that’s what I told him, Mr. LA! Is this your idea of a fetish video? I made it clear! NO straight porn, NO penetration, I said. And if you want me to show my behind? Put up some of this—” Serena rubbed her thumb and index finger together. “’Cause that other shit—That’s not what I’m doing, *at all.*”

“And what did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything but looked disappointed.”

“They’re *all* about exploiting ‘da bitches.”

“Tell me about it. And they all want the same thing,” said Serena. “*The same thing.* I told the fucker: ‘Let me have creative control.’ He says, ‘You wanna *direct?*—After only one fetish video of your own?’ I said, ‘Why not?’ As if I couldn’t handle a little production of my own. As if I couldn’t provide something of better quality. Or like I couldn’t enter the head of a *real domina* and relate to a *real sub!*” She snorted.

“Yeah, what a stretch!” I had to laugh.

“Fuck, Dolores,” she said. “We should just do it ourselves.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“You know about photography,” she reminded me.

“Yeah, *still* photography. Not moving image.”

“But you know how to frame a shot, at least. You know about lighting. So what’s the big deal?” she said. “We could rent a high-end video camera for a day. I know someone who could edit it later.”

I was doubtful. “I don’t know, Serena. It sounds like a lot to do. I might fuck it up.”

“So what?” she said. “It’s only video. It’s cheap. *We can re-shoot.*”

“Where would we even film it?” I said. “I live in a closet. Your place is a squat, practically.”

Baby interjected, “You can shoot it at my place, in Williamsburg.” He’d been so quiet the whole time, it startled me to hear his voice.

“That’s right!” said Serena, brightening up. “Williamsburg!”

“I’d have to think about it,” I said, not really liking the idea. “What about a script?”

Serena laughed. “A script?”

“We’ll need one, believe it or not. Or we may end up running out of ideas. Inspiration is never there when you need it.”

“Inspiration?” Serena said, making a face.

In the next moment she turned to Baby. Playfully tripping up her unsuspecting victim.

He hit the open pavement hard—dropping backwards. And, as soon as he was down, she mounted his chest, way high. “How about *this?*” she offered.

“Hey,” he protested, finding her ass practically on his face.

“Right.” Serena laughed, leaning forward and tugging his hair. “Like you don’t love it!”

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Skipping the bar, we went straight to our hotel room.

Actually Serena and Baby went up first. I followed later, after stopping by a liquor store just up the block.

As it turned out, the room was a honeymoon suite, spacious and pleasant, with a huge TV and an inviting king-size bed.

Just as I entered, I saw that Serena was having her toes done. Painted a coppery brown.

Baby had paused to open the door for me, then with a focused look on his face, went right back to his task, on his knees.

Serena, watching some forensic show, was reclined in an overstuffed chair, feet up, playing the bitch goddess.

I almost felt like I was intruding on a weird private moment and even lurched, but Serena assured me with a wave and a wink that everything was hip, smooth—just lovely. Evidently this was part of some common head-game between them.

“You gotta let people be who they wanna be,” Raymond once told me, and more and more I understood that to be true.

So Serena and Baby had a *Venus in Furs* thing going. This was how they played together and relaxed.

Who was I to judge?

Going one step further, Serena tried to suck me into their little vortex.

“Need your toe-nails painted?” she asked me, slyly.

“Not right now.”

“Cause Baby wouldn’t mind,” she insisted.

Baby seemed to be fighting back a smile. Actually he looked happy.

“Isn’t that right, Baby?” she asked him, teasingly.

“I wouldn’t mind,” he said, rolling with it. “Not at all.”

“See? Baby likes to put his talent to good use. Don’t you, Baby?”

“Uh-huh,” he replied serenely, delicately applying the brush.

“That’s what I’m here for.”

Then he bent over and planted a kiss on the top of her naked foot.

Serena seemed to get off on it too.

Whatever rocked their boat.

I stood there like an idiot before saying, “Look what I got!”

Raising a liter bottle of Citrus Stoli from a brown paper bag. “This should last us, dontcha’ think?”

Serena smiled. “Now ya’ talkin’, babe!”

“Should we put it on ice?” I suggested, trying to get into the swing of things.

“Baby?” she directed.

Right away grabbing the nearby empty ice bucket, he sprang for the door. As soon as the hotel door closed, I mentioned, “Look at what else.” Pulling out two separate baggies from my jacket: one with a quarter of weed, the other a double of shrooms.

“Oh yeah?” said Serena. “How about this?” And she produced an eye-popping amount of coke, all snowy and white—close to a half a baggie. The bitch.

“Damn, yo! You plan on skiing or something?”

She laughed. “That’s the idea!”

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The night was a sludgy blur, that’s all I can say.

The shrooms put me in a mellow-sexy mood, where all I felt like doing was kissing and melting into someone.

I offered shrooms to Serena, but she passed in favor of the booze and yeyo.

“Oh Serena,” I sighed, laying back on the bed.

“What, honey?”

“I wish Raymond were here,” I said, frowning.

“Forget about him for tonight,” she told me.

“It’s just that I feel like...”

“I know what you feel like,” she said, then threw a glance at Baby across the room, winking him over.

Focused on her, he climbed the bed. Baby was high too, I could see. His eyes were shiny and soft.

She told him: "I want you to play with Dolores."

"Huh?" I said.

"Just *play*," she said, smiling.

"What are you talkin' about?" I argued, feeling funny.

"*Shut-up*," she told me.

Baby looked willing, as I sat there tense and blushing.

"Go on," Serena demanded. "Just kiss her."

That was the last thing I remember before I felt him near me, the moment suddenly feeling gushy and surreal.

And I just let myself go with it.

We touched lips for a while, Baby and I, then Serena directed him to take off his top.

He did so, dutifully, revealing his tight chest and what looked like a gymnast's body.

Hello.

My face felt hot.

He smiled innocently as he held my gaze.

Did I mention how large his eyes were?

I could melt into those eyes.

Oh yeah.

Melt.

We kissed, soft and slow, slow and soft, like little kids, molding to each other's lips.

On shrooms, kissing seemed like an organic activity, no other way to describe it.

Occasionally, I'd blink and see a mild hallucination, usually a flashing image dyed in primary colors or metallic glitter—maybe some reference to artwork or a childhood vision. But mostly I felt a deep empathy, a fluidness and warmth that made kissing intensely pleasurable. Like two pairs of lips that almost became

one: infinitely sensitive with anticipating each other's movements.

On it went, our kissing, like one sweet breath, passed back and forth. For hours.

So luscious. So nice.

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**Read the full novel now!**

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& Their Misadventures with Drugs,  
Pornography, and Death

**by Dolores Santana**

(as told to Richard Perez)

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***PERMANENT OBSCURITY: Or a Cautionary Tale of Two Girls  
and Their Misadventures with Drugs, Pornography and Death by  
Dolores Santana (as told to Richard Perez)***

Written in the 3 parts:

**PERMANENT OBSCURITY: PART 1 - THE KINKY HOOK**

Whereupon we are introduced to Dolores and Serena and their kinky shenanigans.

**PERMANENT OBSCURITY: PART 2 - STRANGE HUNGERS**

Whereupon the ambiguity of relationships/attachments is explored. Culminating with a desperate attempt at making a so-called "femdom" film.

**PERMANENT OBSCURITY: PART 3 - NO MAN'S LAND**

Whereupon Dolores and Serena find themselves in a place not expected. Namely, hell.



My new novel, told in 3 "episodes" or parts, is called  
**PERMANENT OBSCURITY**

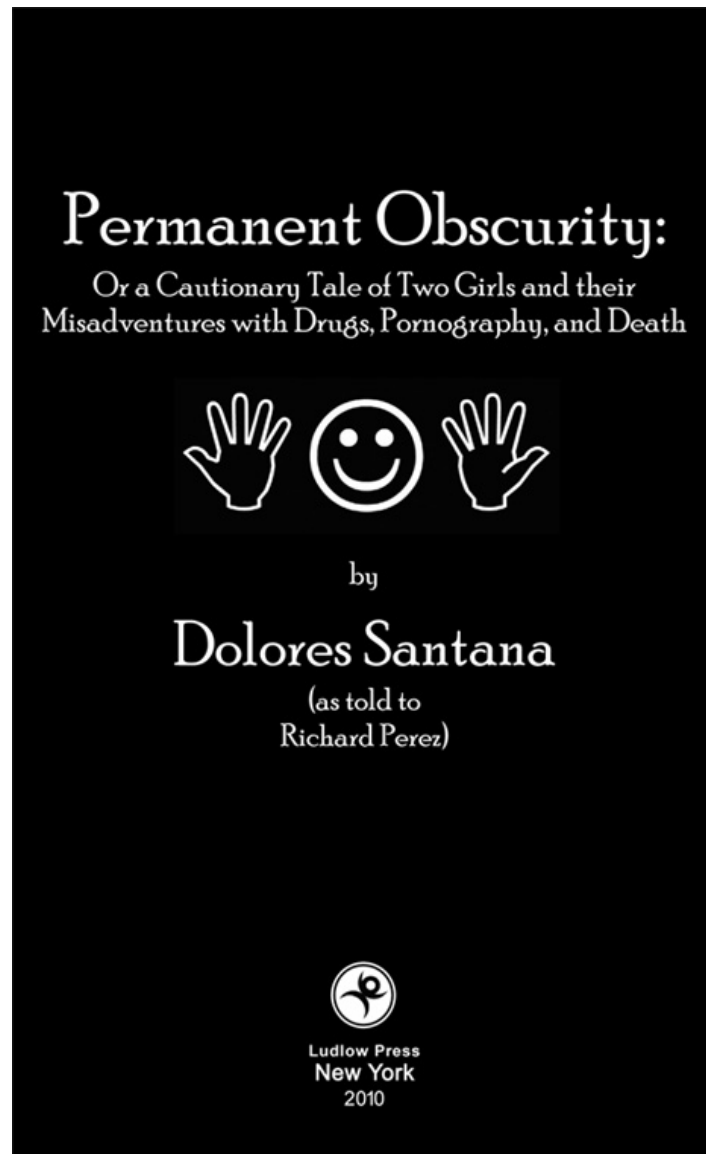
I need to emphasize that PERMANENT OBSCURITY is not "erotica," although it has BDSM overtones (leaning toward so-called "femdom"). It's really a dark comedy about bohemia and the difficulty of relationships (female/male and female/female) and finally the big question for anyone in the arts (or in the tabloid media): sudden fame vs. permanent anonymity. The style of the novel is inspired by '60s over-the-top sexploitation films like those of Russ Meyer (FASTER PUSSYCAT KILL KILL, BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS) and those Something Weird Videos, like A SWEET SICKNESS and BAD GIRLS GO TO HELL [so-called "cautionary tales"]) -- updated to the Bush era (circa 2006).

**On Sale Worldwide: at [Amazon!](https://www.amazon.com)**

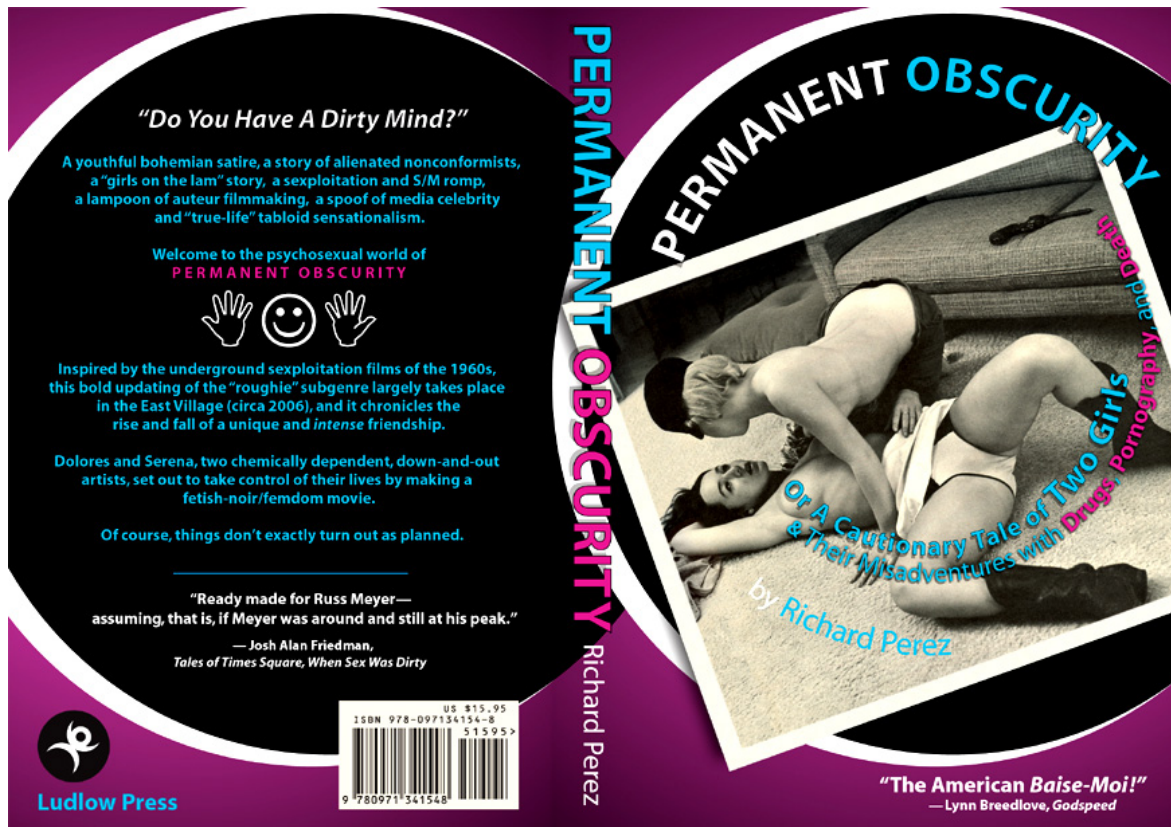


**PERMANENT OBSCURITY: Or a Cautionary Tale of Two Girls and Their Misadventures with Drugs, Pornography and Death by Dolores Santana (as told to Richard Perez)**

A youthful bohemian satire, a story of alienated nonconformists, a "girls on the lam" story, a sexploitation and S/M romp, a spoof of cult celebrity and "true-life" tabloid sensationalism. Welcome to the sordid world of PERMANENT OBSCURITY. Inspired by the underground sexploitation films of the 1960s, this bold updating of the "roughie" subgenre and lampoon of auteur filmmaking largely takes place in New York City's East Village (circa 2006), and it chronicles the rise and fall of a unique and intense relationship. Dolores and Serena, two chemically dependent, down-and-out artists set out to take control of their lives by making a fetish-noir/femdom movie. Of course, things don't exactly turn out as planned.



**PERMANENT OBSCURITY: Or a Cautionary Tale of Two Girls and Their Misadventures with Drugs, Pornography and Death by Dolores Santana (as told to Richard Perez)**



**"Do You Have A Dirty Mind?"**

A youthful bohemian satire, a story of alienated nonconformists, a "girls on the lam" story, a sexploitation and S/M romp, a lampoon of auteur filmmaking, a spoof of media celebrity and "true-life" tabloid sensationalism.

Welcome to the psychosexual world of  
**PERMANENT OBSCURITY**



Inspired by the underground sexploitation films of the 1960s, this bold updating of the "roughie" subgenre largely takes place in the East Village (circa 2006), and it chronicles the rise and fall of a unique and *intense* friendship.

Dolores and Serena, two chemically dependent, down-and-out artists, set out to take control of their lives by making a fetish-noir/femdom movie.

Of course, things don't exactly turn out as planned.

"Ready made for Russ Meyer—  
assuming, that is, if Meyer was around and still at his peak."

— Josh Alan Friedman,  
*Tales of Times Square, When Sex Was Dirty*



Ludlow Press



**PERMANENT OBSCURITY** Richard Perez

**"The American Baise-Moi!"**  
—Lynn Breedlove, *Godspeed*

**WEBSITE FOR THE BOOK:** <http://permanentobscurity.com/>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Initially published small literary magazines, Richard Perez has also written for *The New York Times* (a newspaper he doesn't read.) His first novel, *The Losers' Club* (aka: *The Losers' Club: Complete Restored Edition*) has three foreign translations to date: Korean, Turkish, Italian. *PERMANENT OBSCURITY: or a Cautionary Tale of Two Girls and Their Misadventures with Drugs, Pornography, and Death* — his second novel — also reflects his infatuation with bohemia and willful nonconformists.



**Also by Richard Perez**

“Every generation must describe for itself what it means to be a young writer or artist struggling with anonymity and a mountain of rejection slips in a city like New York. Richard Perez’s *THE LOSERS’ CLUB* tracks the poet Martin Sierra’s melancholy and yet somehow humorous and hopeful life with an acid, yet not unsympathetic, pen. Perez has written a sharp, quick-paced satire of the personal ads subculture and the generally doomed semi-relationships it leads to, the bizarre and manic club life, where slam-dancing and other dangerous sports fail to mask the chronic – one might say terminal – loneliness of the participants. I especially like how the kaleidoscopic whirl of people and objects energizes the author and delights the reader with an almost photographic sense of time and place.”

—**Robert Siegel**, author: Best-selling author of *THE WHALESONG TRILOGY*

"Richard Perez’s *THE LOSERS’ CLUB* moves fast without blurring, and documents New York City in all its self-invented variety: kitsch/retro bars and cafes, goth vampires, dyke rock bands, desperately clever personal ads, the endless cruise for a parking space, and loneliness so relentless its victims wind up feeling stillborn. In its quicksilver way, Perez’s novel manages to be cheerful, bleak, and edgy all at once."

—**John Vernon**, author: *A BOOK OF REASONS*, *PETER DOYLE*

"Along with all its flamboyant extremes...  
an appealingly old fashioned love story at its core."

—Madison Smartt Bell,  
*All Souls' Rising, Ten Indians*

"I couldn't put it down.  
It's a brave book with a great deal of heart."

—Poppy Z. Brite,  
*Lost Souls, Liquor: A Novel*

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Restored  
Edition!

**THE  
LOSERS'  
CLUB**

RICHARD PEREZ

"An engaging debut." —Kirkus Reviews

"Original and highly entertaining." —Midwest Book Review

**Set in downtown New York City, *THE LOSERS' CLUB* tells the story of Martin Sierra, an unlucky writer addicted to the personals. His journey brings us into the East Village, pre-9/11—and in contact with Nikki, his dream woman, who remains unattainable romantically yet becomes his friend and confidant during his illuminating misadventures. A romantic comedy and coming-of-age story.**

### **More Author's Opinions:**

"I was hooked. I couldn't put it down until I finished.... I was simply impressed that these were real, instantly recognizable people ... poor lonely bastards of every stripe resorting to utter humiliation and personal endangerment in the barest hope of hooking up with a kindred spirit. It's a brave book with a great deal of heart."

—**Poppy Z. Brite**, author: *LOST SOULS*, *LIQUOR: A NOVEL*

"A story of youth, very well told, and it dwells in the mind long after a reader finishes it."

—**Joanne Greenberg**, author: *I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN*

"A very beautiful valentine to a time and place almost faded from existence."

—**Mary Gaitskill**, author: *BAD BEHAVIOR*, *VERONICA*

"Funny and endearing—and wisely not so hip as to avoid a good grab for your heart."

—**Marcie Hershman**, author: *SAFE IN AMERICA*, *TALES OF THE MASTER RACE*

"Richard Perez is a clear-eyed chronicler of the New York club scene and a compassionate observer of the lives lived in the carnival at the center of the world. He is a sociologist and a historian, telling the truth about the way we live now. He's funny, honest, and compassionate. We can only hope that *THE LOSERS' CLUB* is but the first act in Richard Perez's Human Comedy."

—**John Dufresne**, author: LOUISIANA POWER & LIGHT, LOVE  
WARPS THE MIND A LITTLE

"THE LOSERS' CLUB evokes a real and genuine sense of place—the world of the East Village—and people—single, young and desperate—written with zest, energy and enthusiasm."

—**Tama Janowitz**, author: SLAVES OF NEW YORK

"Funny, touching, and very much alive, THE LOSERS' CLUB throbs with the subculture of East Village night life. Buoyant and highly entertaining—I couldn't put it down."

—**Stanley Cohen**, author: ANGEL FACE

"THE LOSERS' CLUB gives a complete panoramic view of the downtown New York scene of the '90s, and along with all its flamboyant extremes... this novel has an appealingly old fashioned love story at its core."

—**Madison Smartt Bell**, author: ALL SOULS' RISING, TEN INDIANS

"A fast, fun read."

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"Rich Perez is a rare writer who moves with ease through the blasted lyric pain of childhood, the mysterious and sensuous and powerless world of being a kid, into the spotty drastic charm of '90s downtown flashy and downtrodden New York...having arrived at adulthood so that he can taste it with pleasure..."

—**Eileen Myles**, author: CHELSEA GIRLS, COOL FOR YOU

"Mr. Perez has written a kind of contemporary fable of his generation's life in Manhattan, a fable at once humorous and poignant."

—**Alan Lelchuk**, author: BROOKLYN BOY, AMERICAN MISCHIEF

"THE LOSERS' CLUB is a fine novel. Richard Perez has a wonderful eye for details of the club scene and the humor to be found in urban decay. It is a book to be savored."

—**Tim Sandlin**, Sorrow Floats, Social Blunders

"Richard Perez's THE LOSERS' CLUB is a bittersweet trip through the East Village.... It's a tale of love lost and found among the coffee shops, mosh pits and art galleries. Take it from someone who's spent half a lifetime

archiving the scene—this one's spot on!"  
—**Ron Kolm**, poet, author, member of the Unbearables

"THE LOSERS' CLUB is a vibrant and hopeful anthem for all of us 'losers' who choose not to wallow (for too long!) in our despair and who find the will to keep searching."

—Heather Lowcock, Joseph-Beth Booksellers, Lexington KY\*\

**\*— BOOK SENSE 76 TOP TEN PICK! —\***

**Translated into:**



Italian



Turkish



Korean

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## *"Do You Have A Dirty Mind?"*

A youthful bohemian satire, a story of alienated nonconformists, a "girls on the lam" story, a sexploitation and S/M romp, a lampoon of auteur filmmaking, a spoof of media celebrity and "true-life" tabloid sensationalism.

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Dolores and Serena, two chemically dependent, down-and-out artists, set out to take control of their lives by making a fetish-noir/femdom movie.

Of course, things don't exactly turn out as planned.

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"Ready made for Russ Meyer—  
assuming, that is, if Meyer was around and still at his peak."

— Josh Alan Friedman,  
*Tales of Times Square, When Sex Was Dirty*



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## From Grit to Gloss



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times  
A late 80's mural on Avenue B.



▶ SLIDE SHOW

### The East Village, Then and Now

By **RICHARD PEREZ**

Published: November 13, 2005

The other day, as I stood on the corner of Astor Place and Lafayette Street, two adorable young Japanese tourists stopped to ask me a question: "Can you tell us where is the East Village?"

I was tempted to say, "The East Village is a state of mind, not a place." But these two young women were obviously demanding more concrete directions. Trying to be helpful, I pointed east.

"Over there," I said, almost adding, "Past the luxury high-rise." As they glanced toward where I was pointing, then back at me, I could almost see the disappointment in their eyes.

Afterward, it occurred to me that I should have said something more, perhaps made mention of the raw pre-Starbucks days, recalled historical facts and luminaries who have since died, provided a brief historic explanation of how the notion and myth of bohemia took root in the West Village and spread east to Alphabet City in the 1960's as part of a brilliant P.R. move by visionary real estate brokers. But it was too late: The young women had straggled off and vanished in the crowd of confused Saturday shoppers, curiosity seekers and aimless slackers like me.

Still, their question continued to bother me, particularly as I looked up from where I stood at the Astor Place tower, the 21-story glass-and-steel condominium that opened last month on what had been a parking lot in front of which, in the late 80's, I used to hawk used hipster lit. My wares were mostly transgressive trade paperbacks, and my customers the kindred 20- and 30-something semi-intellectual would-be author/artists who then populated the neighborhood.

"Architectural Lofts for Sale, From \$3.4 Million," proclaimed a large sign on the new tower. Another sign bore the words "Sculpture for Living," suggesting that people who bought into this building weren't simply buying real estate, they were buying "art." This promise presumably had something to do with the aura surrounding the area, the mythical East Village of yore, once the center of the art world and, during the early and mid-80's, home to more than 50 storefront galleries, all now vanished.

The young women's question came to mind again as I gazed at the giant bank of posters advertising the film version of "Rent," the scruffy Off Broadway rock musical about squatters in the age of AIDS. It was born and set on these very streets, then quickly moved to Broadway before making its way to the big screen, where it will open Nov. 23. "No day but today!" the posters proclaimed in stylized, fist-pumping glory as they marched along the scaffolding that stretched from the Astor Place Theater and seemed to wrap around the entire block. "No day but today!"

Another memorable lyric from the musical is "Bohemia, Bohemia's a fallacy in your head ... Bohemia is dead!" sung by the show's convert to capitalism, Benjamin Coffin III.

My thoughts exactly, I said to myself as I looked around the neighborhood and felt like a stranger.

## **No Day but Yesterday**

The commercialization of the East Village began long before "Rent" opened in the tiny (150-seat) New York Theater Workshop in February 1996; even during the previous seven years in which its creator, Jonathan Larson, was shaping the show, the neighborhood he described so vividly had begun to disappear. But the earliest and latest versions of the rock musical serve as almost perfect bookends for the neighborhood's increasingly commercialized transformation during the period they bracketed.

When "Rent" arrived at the New York Theater Workshop, much was made of how the world brought to life inside the playhouse was mirrored on the streets just outside. "One of the nicest things about seeing 'Rent' on East Fourth Street," Margo Jefferson, a critic for The New York Times, wrote shortly after the opening, "is that when you leave (Cafe La Mama is right across the street), you feel a genuine link between theater and life."

"Rent" accurately portrayed a neighborhood populated by transgender, gay and multicultural characters, and its subject matter dealt head on with issues related to a community in swift transition: gentrification, displacement, homelessness, AIDS, drug addiction, community activism and homesteading, aka squatting. The musical also touched on issues that related to me personally as a would-be-artist/loser: hanging on to your ideals and your creative integrity in light of ever more insidious commercial expectations, the absence of low-cost housing and the absence of health insurance, especially in the time of AIDS.

But to look back at the world from which "Rent" emerged, and to contrast it with the world in which the movie will open, is to look at a chasm. When it comes to the issues that were front and center in the little musical - AIDS, drugs, housing, poverty - practically everything has changed.

## **Epidemic? What Epidemic?**

When I think about "Rent" and about another theatrical classic of the era, "Angels in America," I often wonder, "What happened to the issue of AIDS?"

Was the subject displaced in the news media by the seemingly more urgent threat of terrorism? Or does the presence of new drugs that can prolong life make this illness less of a public issue, despite the fact that nearly a million Americans have been mortally afflicted, more than 500,000 have died, and according to Avert, an international AIDS charity, an estimated 40,000 new HIV infections occur in America each year?

In "Rent," no fewer than four major characters are infected with the disease: Tom Collins, the anarchist turned New York University instructor; Angel, the transvestite street drummer; Roger, the aspiring punk songwriter; and Mimi, the dancer in an S-and-M club whom he loves. The script has references to AZT breaks and Life Support meetings, and the specter of the disease hangs over much of the musical, like a dark cloud waiting to unleash its misery. When the characters sing "No day but today," the words ring in many ears as a cry of desperation.

In real life, the stigma of the disease was so great by the mid-90's that most people kept it secret, even with the first signs of emaciation and the lesions that were a telltale sign of Kaposi's sarcoma, a skin cancer linked with AIDS. Only drug addicts who hung out along the Bowery and in the fringes of Alphabet City were unable to conceal, or were beyond concealing, the ravages of the disease.

At restaurants where I sometimes worked, rumors floated and people dropped out of sight. When people failed to show up for shifts, for days on end, there was true cause for alarm.

Today, subway kiosks are plastered with posters that depict young men and women with glowing expressions and affirm the life-giving properties of the new AIDS cocktails. These days, to mention the disease in a trendy Avenue A martini bar is to attract the kind of looks you might get if you mentioned TB. Especially among a younger crowd, they have no clue what you're talking about.

## **In Recovery**

Another hot-button topic in the East Village in those days was addiction. Whether crack cocaine (in the 80's) or heroin (in the 90's) or alcohol (always), drugs have played an important part in bohemia, both as self-medication and as buffer against the disappointments one faces when pursuing the creative life. In "Rent," two main characters are afflicted: Roger is in recovery, and Mimi, as she confesses in the haunting song "Light My Candle," still likes to "feel good" now and then.

During the 90's, as crack cocaine gave way to the cheaper and more refined heroin, it was impossible to walk more than two blocks in the Lower East Side without being accosted by seemingly ordinary individuals hawking items with names like "Pachunga," "Benny Blanco" and

the ever popular "Hellraiser." There followed an avalanche of new and reissued books, like Linda Yablonsky's "Story of Junk," which involved heroin addiction followed by spiritual redemption.

Now and then, in a throwback to the crack cocaine days, shivering addicts could be seen in the twilight, waiting to hoist a bucket up the side of a dilapidated tenement building: first the money floated up, then the scag dropped.

Snort it, smoke it or shoot it up; for a time, heroin seemed part of the local landscape: as you looked north from the Bowery, the Empire State Building loomed like a huge, hot syringe.

Now, of course, the whole scene has changed. Former addicts are "maintaining" or dead. Whispered offers of "double-sealed works" are no longer heard in the neighborhood, nor is it common to see someone tie off between parked cars or at the foot of shadowy basement stairs or in the bathroom of Tompkins Square Park. Former addicts and even dabblers have gone the way of the Bowery bum; I haven't heard the drug mentioned seriously for years.

## **Changing the Locks**

"Everything is rent!" sing the characters in the musical's anthem title song. And today, even more than in the 90's, many New Yorkers find themselves deeply troubled by the growing lack of affordable housing in the area. The Real Estate Board of New York, commenting this year on sales of condominiums south of 14th Street, noted that "prewar condos surged to a median price of \$1.275 million." For the first time since the organization started tracking prices over all, median sale prices for condominiums downtown, the group noted, "have been higher than both the Upper East Side and West Side."

At a moment when living expenses in the neighborhood are stratospheric, I often ask myself: Who can still afford a place to sleep in its precincts, let alone risk taking the artist's path? Or, as *The Real Deal*, a magazine that tracks New York real estate, put it: "The gentrification sweeping Astor Place, a bridge area that was once the inviolate dividing line between the East Village and Greenwich Village in the late 1970's, now means condominium conversions are driving out the urban grit."

In my eyes, the Astor Place tower is the most potent symbol of the absence of urban grit. The developer is the Related Companies, which helped to develop the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle. The architects, Gwathmey Siegel, have created buildings for celebrated figures like Steven Spielberg and David Geffen, coincidentally one of the earliest supporters of "Rent" and the first to arrange for the musical's cast recording.

Does the mirrored glass tower, hard by the historic Cooper Union brownstone and the landmark Public Theater, look wildly out of place? Or is it just me?

## **Well-Scrubbed Sidewalks**

The original production of "Rent" was not only set in the East Village, it was performed there as well, and visually, the show perfectly jived with the area's grunginess and romanticized seediness; the set resembled a thrift-store patchwork quilt of the neighborhood, filled with the ragtag clutter of downtown.

That ragtag clutter, characterized by posted fliers, Xerox art/collage and graffiti art on St. Marks Place and elsewhere, was an important part of the raw aesthetic of the place. Most of the shining lights of the East Village art scene - Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jenny Holzer - had begun their careers as graffiti artists. Street posters and the stylized, expressionistic scrawls across a wide range of surfaces were more than an advertising tool; they were a kind of subversive art.

These days, as the neighborhood seeks to make itself ever more attractive to high-end businesses and developers of luxury housing, that kind of expression is strictly contained. Cleanup squads are assigned the task of removing pesky signs of local color, and virtually every light pole and the rare boarded-up storefront are routinely scraped of anarchic artwork and local political announcements or manifestos. Anyone caught posting handmade fliers can be charged with a "quality of life" infraction. Seediness is no longer to be relished.

And what of the local landmarks that defined this neighborhood? One by one, I see them tumbling down.

Variety Photo Plays, the neon-lit theater in front of which Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle parked in "Taxi Driver," was recently demolished. The Polish diner on First Avenue that was the site of a famous breakfast scene between Jodie Foster and Mr. De Niro is also gone, as is the building on 13th Street where the shootout near the end of the film took place.

Disappeared, too, is the complex of neo-Federalist houses at 23 St. Marks Place that served a trio of culturally significant uses; it was the home of the Dom, where Andy Warhol created the Exploding Plastic Inevitable; it was where the Velvet Underground first performed; and it was home to the Electric Circus. In recent years, the complex served as a drug-treatment and community center; the space has been replaced by condos.

Nearby, at 15 St. Marks Place, stood a nondescript two-story building that housed a bar frequented by Allen Ginsberg and other Beats, one that dated to the pre-Stonewall days, when, by order of the State Liquor Authority, it was illegal to serve alcohol to homosexuals. That space, too, has been replaced by condos.

And CBGB, the temple of punk? Stay tuned. The club is embroiled in a messy dispute involving money and is hanging on by its fingernails.

On the Bowery, where I used to see staggering derelicts of all stripes, I now see freakishly upscale restaurants and million-dollar lofts. And coming soon - amid the restaurant supply stores and commercial businesses between Stanton and Rivington Streets - is the 60,000-square-foot, seven-story building for the New Museum of Contemporary Art, for which ground was broken Oct. 11.

Space 2B, at Second Street and Avenue B, could have served as a set for "Rent." The building, also known as the Gas Station, was a scrap-metal sculpture garden and industrial, avant-garde performance space that played host to some the area's wildest bands and performance art. In March 1996, a month after "Rent" moved to Broadway, the outdoor art was bulldozed, and the performance space was replaced by a Duane Reade and luxury apartments.

The Palladium, the famous dance club on 14th Street, was bought in 1997 by New York University and replaced by a high-rise dorm.

That brings me back to Astor Square. The last time I sold my books on the sidewalk, on Thanksgiving 1989, my small inventory was confiscated by the police when I misguidedly included samples of my hand-drawn art. (At the time, books and printed matter were protected as freedom of speech; art was not.)

A few weeks later, I moved my wares down to St. Marks Place, in front of the old Deutsch-Amerikanische building, site of the old St. Mark's Bookshop. In my youthful, earnest folly, I was selling a self-published book of poetry, "Idealism and Early-Wishfillment," which despite my modesty in printing 2,000 copies proved to be an immediate flop.

Not long after that, booksellers who had been protected by the First Amendment found themselves the subject of new municipal restrictions on where and when they could set up shop, and thus, under the guise of public safety, were essentially barred from the streets.

*Richard Perez is the author of the novel "The Losers' Club," set in the East Village in the 1990's.*