



Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940

Jay A. Gertzman

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Bookleggers and Smuthounds vividly brings to life this significant chapter in American publishing history. Jay Gertzman offers unforgettable portrayals of the "pariah capitalists" who shaped the industry, and of the individuals, organizations, and government agencies who sought to control them. Among the most compelling personalities we meet are the notorious publisher Samuel Roth, "the Prometheus of the Unprintable", and his nemesis, John Sumner, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, a man aggressive in his pursuit of pornographers and in his quest for a morally united -- and ethnically homogeneous -- America. If the book is about individuals and the books they published, sold, or seized, it is equally about prurience: how it affects the mind, how it has been used to make judgments about proper and illicit behavior, and how it has been used to make laws. Gertzman contends that publishers of erotica and the moralists who attacked them during the mid-twentieth century had a subtle symbiotic relationship. As good businesspeople, erotica distributors necessarily appealed to prurient interests. They invited their clients to indulge curiosities that kept intact the association of sex with obscenity and shameful silence. He delves into the psychological and social pressures of publishing and selling erotica, and proves that whatever stage of a sexual revolution America may be in, prurience is just as powerful a catalyst to action now as it ever was. This first examination of the trade in erotica during the 1920s and 1930s provides a basis for understanding the evolution of both obscenity law and sexual explicitness in literature, and raises fascinating issues about the relationship between moral control, idealism, and the marketplace in ways that continue to resonate today.

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