

Book Reviews



Michael Kimmel, Christine Milrod, and Amanda Kennedy's (Eds.), *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Penis* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

Cultural Encyclopedia of the Penis (CEP) should be an intriguing read for both the general public and scholars dedicated to the study of men and men's issues. The CEP attempts to explain the fundamental elements of many cultural phenomena involving the penis from both contemporary and historical perspectives. It addresses the complexity of exploring and describing the male experience in various cultures as well as the impact of the penis and its associated cultural mythology on political and social policy. The CEP provides only a brief ($\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 page) introduction to each topic. This seems appropriate for a print format, though an electronic edition may have allowed for more extensive review of each topic.

For the lay reader, the sheer entertainment value of reading about lesser-known cultural practices involving the penis in various African, Hispanic/Latino, western, and eastern cultures will be worth the time spent. Seldom will the reader come across such an expansive resource that may introduce new customs or alternative viewpoints on those already known. For those less interested in entertainment and more concerned with scholarly pursuits involving male anatomy and related socio-cultural behaviors and beliefs the CEP can be a valuable resource. The CEP has the potential to expose scholars to new areas for study and encourage those set in their ways to reconsider beliefs about traditions and cultural practices involving the penis, men, and masculinities. Cautionary thoughts for those seeking scholarly inspiration follow below, but the CEP can be thought of as largely useful.

The CEP attempts to address not only the penis, but all things male. The title of the book is a bit of a misnomer in this regard, but it certainly may garner more attention than “Cultural Encyclopedia of Men’s Issues.” In this manner the editors capitalize on (and reinforce) some of the stereotypes and cultural mystique surrounding the male sex organ. The editors state that the purpose of the CEP “lies less in understanding the workings of an anatomical organ than in the *interpretation* [emphasis added] of the various meanings attributed to the penis over the centuries and across cultures” (p.3). To that end they invited contributions from scholars, researchers, clinicians and activists. The reader should bear in mind the stress placed on the “interpretation” of these meanings as described by the contributing authors. Not because the authors necessarily attempted to push a personal agenda through their entries, but rather because purely scientific exploration of the contents was not the essential pursuit of the CEP.

I encourage the reader to not mistake the CEP for a purely academic, empirically-based work that simply defines and describes various cultural phenomena. The goal for any informational source directed at the general public should be to provide unbiased, well-researched information that is useful to a broad audience with broad applications in mind. I believe this was largely what the editors had in mind for the CEP, and they have generally succeeded in this endeavor in many ways. An area of concern in this regard is that the editors admittedly invited “activists” to contribute articles. Activists, by definition, have a specific cause for which they act. They have dedicated their energies toward a specific outcome or social or political change. While certainly possible, it may be difficult for an activist to speak in a genuinely neutral manner to multiple perspectives on an issue. That said, no single philosophical thread has been blatantly weaved throughout the text. It is primarily the risk of being ideologically or politically influenced by singular entries and authors that the reader should remain aware. The great majority of the entries manage to remain informative and relatively free of propaganda. Thus the reader can view the volume as the editors reportedly intended: an informational starting point from which more detailed and thorough research might be conducted.

The CEP attempts to remain unbiased and research-driven as a whole. Some individual authors, however, weave in hints of their own biases and beliefs regarding their topics. These biases are often subtle and do not tend to detract from the generally useful information contained in the entries. Yet, at times, these personal perspectives disguised as facts—typically not distinctly supported within the CEP’s references and suggestions for further reading—may catch the reader unaware and lead him/her to place undue faith in the claims made in an entry. Due to their controversial or taboo nature some entries naturally carry a higher risk of being represented in this biased manner. The reader would thus be wise to minimize such influence by differentiating entries that consist primarily of historical or medical descriptions (i.e. codpiece, sperm, urology) from those that address controversial contemporary issues (i.e. feminism, circumcision, rape). A reader interested in any such controversial topic would do well to further investigate the specific claims in a given entry before fully accepting them as impartial. Additionally, several cultural practices discussed in the CEP are likely not particularly well-known outside the “Western” audience that presumably is the principal target of the volume (i.e. Qi Gong, Sambia turnim, *hijra*, lingam, *koteka*). There may simply be fewer published research studies available regarding these topics, perhaps the very reason they were included in the CEP. The editors hope to inspire further understanding of and research into these uncultivated areas.

To be fair, the practice of only minimally referencing entries seems to be common when publishing encyclopedias (see Britannica.com, encyclopedia.com). Authors of encyclopedia entries frequently reference a few select nonfiction books (secondary sources typically flooded with personal biases

that in turn cite several primary and secondary sources) rather than citing the multitude of individual empirical articles that would potentially substantiate their claims. Editors typically rely on authors' generally accepted status as experts in their fields to support entries.

Length did not seem to be a prohibitive factor for most CEP entries. The entries are collectively succinct and informative with few exceptions. Occasionally an author would attempt to cover a broad topic with too much depth and end up losing the intended introductory focus of the entry. One such example is the entry, "Bible" (Shore-Gross, pp. 24-26). In one paragraph the author discusses the tension for Hebrew men in defining the sex of God relative to their own, then shifts to coverage of a related incest taboo, then to associated ancestral linkage with Africans, finally concluding the paragraph with relationships of the previous story to slavery in America and Colonial Europe. In fairness to the author, a single two-page entry devoted to the broad religious associations of the penis and masculinity within Judeo Christian beliefs was probably shortsighted given the abundance of related material warranting discussion. Given the extensive global influence of these traditions the primary consumers of this text are likely to have been raised with some exposure to these faith traditions and their resultant social prescriptions. The problem is partially rectified by several other entries that briefly address select religious and cultural dimensions (i.e. circumcision, Holy Prepuce, foreskin, religion, intactivism).

The greatest strength of the CEP lies in its breadth. A reader unfamiliar with the surge in literature relating to men's issues and masculinity in recent decades may be surprised by the many relevant references to the penis across disciplines. Easily anticipated penile subjects receive their due (i.e. jokes, foreskin, orgasm, penis envy) while a wide range of nuanced and culture-specific subjects receive similar attention (i.e. papal testicles, *koro*, *shunga*). Covered categories include art (i.e. plaster casters, fiction), scientific associations (i.e. anti-androgens, aversion therapy), mythology/cultural rites (i.e. religion, Bhutan phallus), forensic and legal associations (i.e. barebacking, castration, penile plethysmograph), and ethical considerations (i.e. artificial insemination, intactivism).

A majority of the contributors approached their entries by considering multiple viewpoints and introducing potentially controversial subjects dispassionately. An example of this is the entry, "Feminism" (Kaufman, pp. 65-67). Feminism is defined as, among other things, a "diverse movement." The equality-oriented origin of feminism in the late 1960s is presented as being distinct in focus from second wave feminism. Discussion includes the tendency of many second wave feminists to emphasize attacking men and traditional masculinity rather than seeking gender equality. Elements of feminism that have the potential to be both beneficial and detrimental to men and expressions of masculinity are introduced. Those holding extreme positions on either side of the sociopolitical gender debate spectrum will likely find reasons to be unhappy with the contents of the entry. However, those who have not been inculcated in a particular gender movement will find themselves the beneficiaries of moderate, minimally biased language pertaining to multiple perspectives on a complex issue. This seems a positive outcome for an encyclopedia entry regarding such a divisive topic.

Considering these conclusions, which readers might find the CEP a useful resource? Certainly the lay reader will likely find it a "page-turner" for amusement purposes. Given the brief, introductory format for entries and dearth of citations, researchers looking to continue a project involving an already familiar topic will likely find little immediate value in the CEP. They may not encounter much new information about their topic of interest, but may receive an introduction to issues peripherally associated with their field of specialty. Each entry concludes with suggestions for further reading both within and beyond the CEP itself, thus leading the well-informed consumer to potentially unexplored topics. Students and researchers may find value in the CEP as a starting point for projects

regarding cultural phenomena involving the penis, masculinity, and related issues. They will find sufficient fundamental information in most entries to glean inspiration during the incipient stages of a research project. Like most encyclopedias, the CEP does not seem to be intended for cover-to-cover reading in numerical page order. Its approach is topical, and readers will likely approach specific topics separately and directly. The CEP would thus likely be useful mainly as a supplemental text in gender studies courses and men's studies courses, and would make a worthwhile addition to most university libraries.

All told, I found the CEP to be a largely interesting, informative, and at times provocative resource. I am pleased to have read it and, with appropriate expectations, would encourage others interested in gender studies to do the same.

Robert Pate

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