

Though I expected *The Last Jewish Virgin* to subvert some of the old standbys of the vampire mythos, the book instead seems to uphold them. For instance, when Lilith's feminist mother, Beth, meets Mr. Rock for the first time, she caves completely under the force of his charisma. The formerly frumpy, no-nonsense woman begins dressing like a sexpot and attending new-age past-life-regression classes with the professor. Never mind that she earlier dismissed as "absolute rubbish" the idea that "any woman, no matter how strong and assertive, when confronted by a powerful male vampire—that is, any powerful male, since the vampire is just a symbol—will beg the vampire to bite her, to make her his lover, his slave."

Eidus, with tongue firmly in cheek, has fun with this book. But while the storyline is playful and energetic, ultimately this "novel of fate," much like its namesake, feels a little rushed and confused about its identity.

—HAILI JONES GRAFF

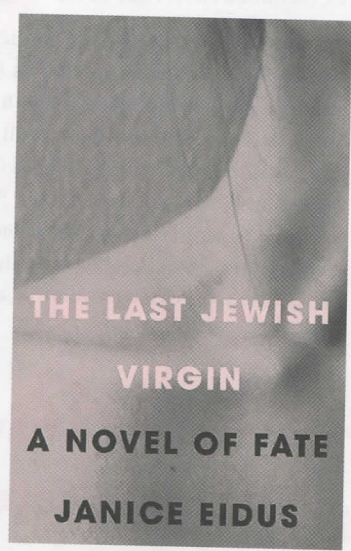
**READ IF:** You like your fang marks as meticulously applied as your eyeliner.

**WHAT WAS THE HIPSTER?: A SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION**

**n+1 Research Branch Small Books Series #3**  
{N+1 FOUNDATION}

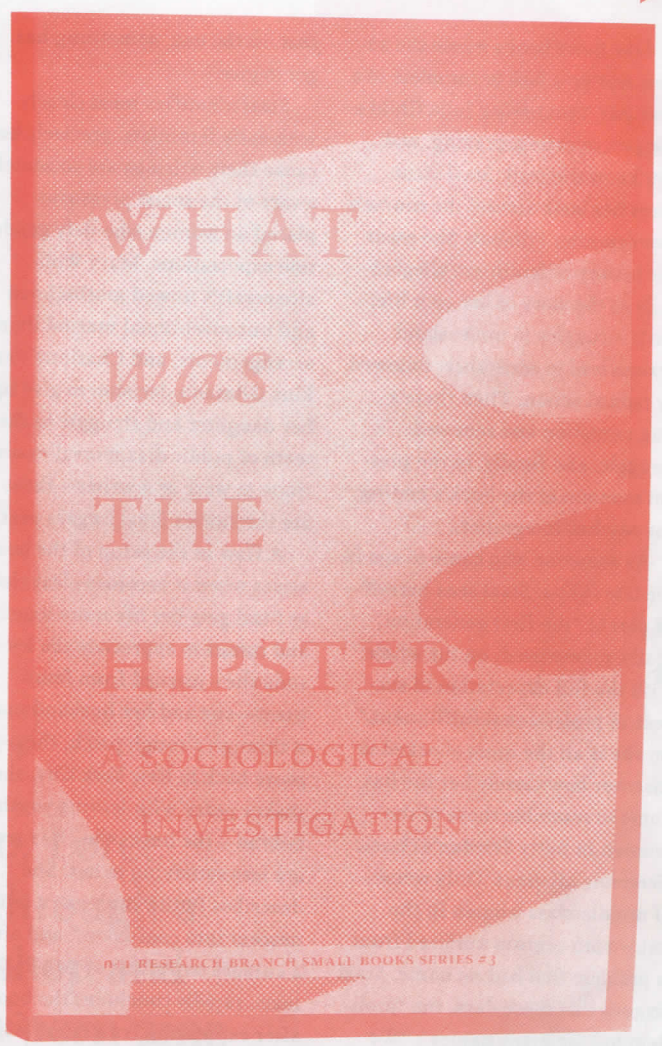
Hipsters are contentious figures. No one wants to claim to be one, but lots of people make sport of spotting them. And *n+1's* *What Was the Hipster?* was compiled by the editorial staff of the New York-based publication, itself a locus of hipster cachet—based on a 2009 panel discussion held at Manhattan's New School.

The book's first half is a complete transcript of the session,



beginning with opening remarks from *n+1* editor Mark Greif, *New York Observer* senior editor Christian Lorentzen, and Jace Clayton (better known as DJ/rupture). Greig seeks to define hipsters; Lorentzen claims they don't exist, and the floor is opened for questions. Some audience members raise issues about nostalgia, intellectualism, gentrification, and globalization, but readers have to wade through half-formed responses and accusations waged against the host publication to get to them.

The second half features essays that offer more insight into some of the issues addressed in the panel. Of particular note is Dayna Tortorici's exploration of women's proscribed gender roles within hipster culture. Arguing that women are configured as accessories for their male counterparts, Tortorici cites the ascendancies of photo blogging and socialite Cory Kennedy as evidence that female hipsters are represented as sexually available, hard-partying fashion plates. But she also ignores cultural figures that might contradict her thesis—Beth Ditto, Big Freedia, and M.I.A.—and fails to engage with feminist-identified bloggers and entertainers whose association with the term "hipster" could challenge her claims.



As a forum for building on previous hipster theory from the likes of Norman Mailer, James Baldwin, and Thomas Frank (all of whom are cited here), *What Was the Hipster?* could definitely have been better. But the essays' consideration of whiteness, ethnic identity, fashion, and music culture piqued my interest—even though (and perhaps because) I shudder at the thought of being labeled with the H-word.

—ALYX VESEY

**READ IF:** You're an American studies graduate student looking for something to tide you over between issues of *McSweeney's*.

**READING WOMEN: HOW THE GREAT BOOKS OF FEMINISM CHANGED MY LIFE**

**Stephanie Staal**  
{PUBLICAFFAIRS}

When Stephanie Staal faces an identity crisis in her 30s as a stay-at-home wife, mother, and freelance writer living in the suburbs, she decides to take action by returning to her own—and feminism's—roots. She goes back to college to audit a women's studies course that influenced her as an undergraduate, where, in the act of rereading, she seeks wisdom to reconcile the apparent contradictions between feminist theory and lived experience.

Like those books where the author sets up a task to complete in a year (say, conquering Julia Child's recipes, or eating, praying, and... you know the rest), Staal structures her book around the course's two-semester syllabus. She reads the history of feminism allegorically as the story of her own life: Early struggles to understand sexism lead to resistance, followed by radical action. Then there's fragmentation and renewed struggle, and finally, in the present moment of the book's ending, she reaches integration.

As someone who came of age in the late 1980s, Staal sees herself as part of "the first generation, really, to be raised, on the whole, with the full expectation of success or professional fulfillment." So she is all the more shocked to discover how closely her life has come to resemble those of the women in Betty Friedan's classic *Feminine Mystique*. Only worse—if middle-class women in the mid-20th century suffered from a problem that had no name, Staal argues that these days, the "problem has too many names": "We have been dissecting the feminine mystique, and its progeny, for going on five decades now and have become only too well versed in all the ways in which we can't Have It All, the limits that career and children place on us, the reality

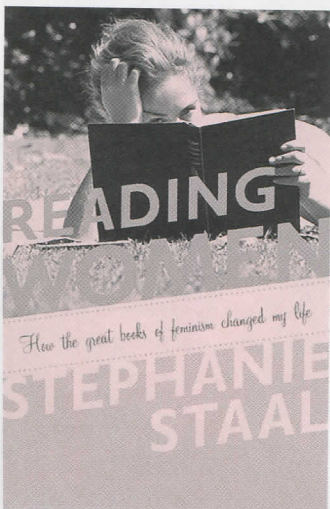
that, in the end, something has got to give."

Staal identifies most closely with early feminists, precisely because their writings are so acutely aware of the social pressures placed on women who defy gender role expectations. Mary Wollstonecraft's unwed motherhood and unconventional marital living arrangements, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's decision to give up her daughter and struggle in the teeth of public disapproval to continue to work as a writer—these are the stories Staal lingers over.

A flaw in the setup of the book arises when it becomes clear that as Staal gets her life more together and comes to appreciate the lessons she's learned from feminism—she and her husband make it through a rough patch, they move back to New York City, she makes peace with leaving youth behind—the books the class reads are less satisfying to her. She describes Judith Butler as a "steep descent into confusion," and after a cursory treatment of post-1990 texts, rapidly concludes the book after expressing frustration with most of the current trends in feminist writing.

While many readers will no doubt be frustrated by Staal's chosen set of "great books"—she doesn't offer much by way of diversity (and even though she is Chinese American, the cover model is decidedly Anglo) or interlocking systems of oppression—she's a good storyteller, and her competently narrated journey will appeal to book lovers and former women's studies majors who believe in the power of the written word to transform. —AUDREY BILGER

**GIVE IT TO:** Your former feminist theory professor, with a thank-you note and an update on your successful life.



ON THE PAGE  
» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

the trend of attractive female politicians of the GOP "Trojan MILFs." A cartoon by Ann Telnaes highlights her unique perspective: A hugely muscled guy, labeled "House War Resolution," flexes in front of a disinterested woman, shouting, "I will not cut and run!" She asks, "Is that supposed to impress me?" Telnaes further explains her thoughts on the viewpoint female artists can offer: "I think people sometimes misunderstand when I talk about the value of having a woman's perspective in editorial cartooning. I'm not only talking about women's issues, but about the value of having editorial cartoonists with different life experiences address *all* issues."

## Newspapers have an array of cheap syndicated material to choose from, and a desire not to rock the boat.

So why, then, does the editorial cartooning industry continue to produce cartoons of such consistent homogeneity? Part of the answer has to do with the hard times newspapers as a whole are facing. As print media continues to decline, newspapers are cutting staff positions for editorial cartoonists and opting to buy cheaper, syndicated material—or to run nothing at all. Veteran editorial cartoonist Pat Oliphant wrote in a 2004 piece in *Nieman Reports* that in a climate where newspapers are concerned with the bottom line, "Controversy, that life force behind the political cartoon, is...anathema to those nursing the books."

Newspapers have an array of cheap syndicated material to choose from and a desire not to rock the boat, so they will choose the cartoons that they want: those that line up with the status quo, and are as uncontroversial as possible. The marginalization of female characters and the wide inclusion of male characters is an accepted norm in editorial cartooning, so this is what worried editors will choose, "tossing aside anything that might give offense or distress," as Oliphant writes. Wilkinson touched on the same idea in her own 2004 *Nieman Reports* article, saying that when editors are considering a female artist, they often "see a woman rather than a cartoonist," and get nervous about turning her loose onto the editorial page to "write feminist screeds."

Giving favor to those who toe the line is, obviously, directly opposed to the very purpose of political cartooning. "If...we don't challenge and poke the pompous and the powerful," says Telnaes, "then all we do is illustrate propaganda." Of her own entry into the field, Mikhaela Reid says, "I wanted to skewer warmongers and homophobes and other assorted bigoted and greedy assholes with whatever language or images I chose, not just what might be 'safe' or 'appropriate.'" Attitudes like these won't get far if the status quo is king. For the sake of American politics, though, they had better get somewhere. **D**

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