

Who Does that Bitch Think She Is?: Doris Fish and the Rise of Drag by Craig Seligman

Book club Thursday 6/29/23 at 6 PM at Comstock Township Library

Discussion questions

- 1) Did you finish the book, and what was your overall opinion?

- 2) Some patrons have complained about seeing a title that they consider offensive displayed prominently in the library. What do you think the purpose of having a provocative title is? Do you think knowing about Doris's living memorial/end of life benefit event having that title would change people's opinions?

- 3) Seligman states that, "All gay visibility was, and still is political," (p. 41). What are your thoughts on this statement?

- 4) Seligman writes:

"The cultural moment was intoxicating worldwide. By 1972, the young urbanites who formed the Synthetics' audience had by and large shaken off the repression they'd grown up with, and they were inspired by the apparently limitless freedom of the psychos on the stage. Everything was permitted, including ineptitude," (p. 46).

What did the audience members get out of going to these shows where the performers would throw things at them, commit sexual acts on stage, and do wild, bizarre, and often violent things? Do you think it was freeing for them to see the performers without any inhibitions?

- 5) When Doris was brutally attacked by two other men (p. 58), the police were indifferent and his family became aware of the lack of civil rights for gay people. How does stigma create a situation where violence against some people is

permitted, and violence against others is responded to seriously? Who gets treated as perpetrators and who gets treated as victims?

6) Doris chose prostitution after hopping from job to job and not being happy with any of them. He enjoyed and earned a living through sex work, and considered it a vital service he was providing. What was your reaction to this?

7) Seligman reports that the gay community was conflicted about drag queens, who were a small but very visible portion of the community, and the image they provided of gay people:

“...an angry debate arose over the (gay) community’s image in the press and the harm that drag queens were doing it,” (87).

Later, during the AIDS epidemic, he explains:

“They went from being, depending on your perspective, weirdos, public embarrassments, or misogynists to keepers of the flame of gay culture, embraced for the courage it took them to be themselves. The erstwhile pariahs became heroes,” (222).

What are your thoughts on this change in perception? What were the pros and cons of drag queens being so visible in their nonconformity?

8) Doris Fish was one aspect of the total personality of Philip Mills. What did drag allow him to do? Why was it so integral to his life?

9) Doris died when he was 39 years old and lamented that he hadn’t done enough. Is this a common thought that all people have?

10) Why do you think it was important to the author to tell this story?

Articles

Brazil, Kevin. (2023). The queer art of cruelty. <https://thebaffler.com/latest/the-queer-art-of-cruelty-brazil>

Carmen, Lo. (2021). Acid, blood and police raids: The pioneering drag chaos of Sylvia and the Synthetics. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/feb/26/acid-blood-and-police-raids-the-pioneering-drag-chaos-of-sylvia-and-the-synthetics>

Flanagan, Michael. (2023). Craig Seligman's astonishing 'Who does that bitch think she is? Doris Fish and the rise of drag. <https://www.ebar.com/story.php?ch=bartab&sc=drag&id=324564>

Videos

Johnny Kat. (2010). DORIS FISH interviewed on "Pittsburgh 2 Day" 1986 Pt. 1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coiHZSHCaes>

Publicaffairsbooks. (2023). Before the race, there was the rise – Doris Fish and the rise of drag. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWH7_nVFsvk

(book promo trailer with Craig Seligman)