



# **Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo**

*Margot Mifflin*

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*Bodies of Subversion* was the first history of women's tattoo art when it was released in 1997, providing a fascinating excursion to a subculture that dates back to the nineteenth-century and including many never-before-seen photos of tattooed women from the last century. Newly revised and expanded, it remains the only book to chronicle the history of both tattooed women and women tattooists. As the primary reference source on the subject, it contains information from the original edition, including documentation of:

- Nineteenth-century sideshow attractions who created fantastic abduction tales in which they claimed to have been forcibly tattooed.
- Victorian society women who wore tattoos as custom couture, including Winston Churchill's mother, who wore a serpent on her wrist.
- Maud Wagner, the first known woman tattooist, who in 1904 traded a date with her tattooist husband-to-be for an apprenticeship.
- The parallel rise of tattooing and cosmetic surgery during the 80s when women tattooists became soul doctors to a nation afflicted with body anxieties.
- Breast cancer survivors of the 90s who tattoo their mastectomy scars as an alternative to reconstructive surgery or prosthetics.

The book contains 50 new photos and FULL COLOR images throughout including newly discovered work by Britain's first female tattooist, Jessie Knight; Janis Joplin's wrist tattoo; and tattooed pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber. In addition, the updated 3rd edition boasts a sleek design and new chapters documenting recent changes to the timeline of female tattooing, including a section on: celebrity tattoo artist Kat Von D, the most famous tattooist, male or female, in the world; the impact of reality shows on women's tattoo culture; and, therapeutic uses of tattooing for women leaving gangs, prisons, or situations of domestic abuse.

As of 2012, tattooed women outnumber men for the first time in American history, making *Bodies of Subversion* more relevant than ever.

"In *Bodies of Subversion*, Margot Mifflin insightfully chronicles the saga of skin as signage. Through compelling anecdotes and cleverly astute analysis, she shows and tells us new histories about women, tattoos, public pictures, and private parts. It's an indelible account of an indelible piece of cultural history."  
—Barbara Kruger, artist

## **Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo Details**

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# **From Reader Review Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo for online ebook**

## **Mads Whitmarsh-Jones says**

A necessary volume detailing the participation of women in the male-dominated world of western tattoo. Thoroughly educational, it does its absolute best to objectively handle a subject about which just about everyone has a strong subjective opinion. Mostly it succeeds, though a jibe in the introduction stuck with me for the duration of the book. The only drawback is that it occasionally reads like a laundry list of names, especially around the middle, but even so, it serves its purpose of illustrating the legacy of female tattoo artists and enthusiasts.

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## **Sara says**

I wish this book was longer. It has some awesome tattoo photos of both artists and their work, and is an interesting look at how women broke through this male dominated industry. It analyzes how gender plays a role in the industry. One thing that really stands out in my mind is how different women and men display themselves and their ink in industry events/contests, and how sexualized women continue to be, even in this "fringe" group.

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## **Grace says**

Not just a beautiful cover.

An in depth and well researched look at the modern history of women and tattooing.

It focuses mainly on the west, starting with The Tattooed Lady in the circus, to women as tattoo artists in the early 1900's and right up to the modern day industry and the struggles for female tattoo artists as well as tattooed women.

With a great selection of photographs and snippets of interviews from a who's who of female tattoo artists, this is a must read for anyone interested in the subject.

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## **Kat says**

This book is a fast read with mentions of tons of figures in the tattoo community with accompanying pictures. It also offers some analysis of trends in female tattoo designs and fashions. As well, it looks at the challenges female tattooists have faced over the years and how the culture has changed today. I quite enjoyed it but am thirsty to find out so much more. I wish the book was three times as long with more pictures of the people she mentioned and more in depth looks at certain women's histories.

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## **Leonard says**

Well illustrated with a lot of history about tattoos and women if you find that subject interesting.

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## **Sara Willis says**

If you are looking for a survey of women's tattoo history this might be your book. If you are looking for in depth analysis or anything other than superficial conclusions you may want to look elsewhere. Tattoos and women with tattoos are already a spectacle which draws interest, perhaps this book relies too heavily on that fact to present much else. To be fair, it is a good cursory glance at the history which I think is its purpose.

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## **Anna says**

'Bodies of Subversion' is a largely visual history of tattooed women, and thus quite a quick read. The narrative is more anecdotal than the academic-sounding title might suggest, but still informative. Perhaps most interesting is how the social acceptability of women getting tattoos has waxed and waned in the Western world. There was a fad in the 1880s for society ladies to get discreet tattoos, which is rather enchanting. Allegedly even Queen Victoria had one, although opinions seem to be divided on that. More visible in the historical record are the 19th century women whose tattoos were their livelihood, as they toured with circuses showing them off in freakshows. During the 20th century, more women began to do the actual tattooing, although the author notes that plenty of sexism remains the industry. In the late 20th century (my edition is from 2001), tattoos have become more mainstream for women, although Mifflin makes the good point that they still appear transgressive if not concealable beneath ordinary business wear. Getting a tattoo on your face or hands retains quite a powerful stigma.

The range of designs and styles shown in 'Bodies of Subversion' demonstrate how fashions in tattoos have changed over the decades. This made me think about their permanence on the body making it into a history book of sorts, whether this is an intentional feature of the designs or not. Mifflin doesn't speculate very systematically upon why women get tattoos, but there are some thoughtful comments and examples. The interview material can get a bit repetitive, as I felt that the underlying ideas weren't that clearly articulated. This book wasn't as in-depth a study as I might have liked, but it was still compelling and quite inspiring. The pictures of Elizabeth Weinzirl's beautiful tattoos were a particular highlight.

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## **Jillian McClelland says**

So good. This history of women in tattooing is a fascinating and very unexplored/undervalued aspect of society. I adored reading about its evolution through the early 20th Century as a form of torture into how it has changed in the contemporary period into a form of self-expression. Recommended for women to view how feminism is a varied concept, and recommended for men as well so they can appreciate the hard work and tenacity many women had to face to achieve recognition. Permanent place on my shelf.

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## **Carey Gibbons says**

I really enjoyed this book. It filled in the lady shaped gaps in the history of American tattooing. A lot of the literature on tattooing portrays women with tattoos as sluts, lesbians, or both. I don't mean in the good way either. In regard to other books, I kept thinking, "Hey, author, you really couldn't find any women to interview who weren't maybe drunk and getting a rose tattoo on their boob?" Oh no, they couldn't because all of those ladies were busy getting interviewed by Mifflin.

So, thank you, Margot Mifflin for writing a history of female tattoo artists and collectors. This book is both fierce and intelligent. It also has really amazing photographs.

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## **Brittany says**

Feminism + tattoos = INCREDIBLE BOOK. This is a fantastic, fascinating read. And the gorgeous pictures just make it that much better. I can't believe I waited so long to read this.

As a heavily tattooed woman myself, it really made me appreciate the rich history of tattooed women, and the role it plays in why, where, & what we get tattooed. The concept of using it as a way to own my own body in the face of abuse & the litany of legislation written by old white evangelical men to tell me what I can & can't do with my body was something I had never actually consciously THOUGHT about, but it really struck home with me.

This book made me even prouder to be a feminist, and a tattooed one at that. I bought a copy for my (female) tattooist as well. I hope she enjoys it as much as I did.

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## **Anne says**

A very interesting limited cultural history of tattooed and tattooing women in the US. Good pics although I wish there were many more.

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## **Melanie says**

The stories of female tattoo artists are interesting, but the overall history of tattooed women--from circus acts to today--is kind of slight. It almost comes across as more of a picture book of tattooed ladies.

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## **Jenny D. says**

Really interesting social and feminist history of women and tattoos. Lots of great photos.

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## **Anya Weber says**

Well researched and vastly entertaining. Margot Mifflin unveils the history of tattooing among western women, from roughly 1860 to the 1990s. I'd expected this to be regular-sized, but it's actually large, kind of like a soft-bound coffee table book. There are lots of photos of tattooed women from all eras and walks of life; Mifflin examines the reasons that women have been drawn (heh) to tattoo through the ages, and the significance of body art within the feminist, Pagan, spiritual, punk, mainstream, and biker-chick communities. Fascinating content here about women tattoo artists (those who tattoo others), as well as "collectors" (those who receive tattoos).

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## **S says**

There were some really cool older photos in this book. Tattooed ladies, I love them.

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