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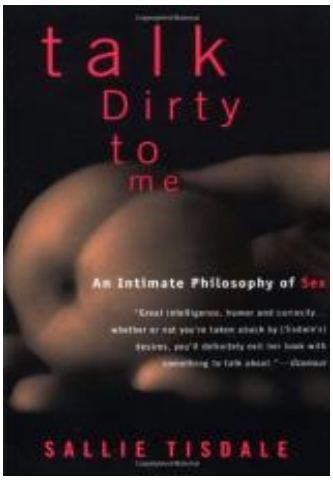
Talk Dirty to Me

by Sallie Tisdale



About the Book

This book is not about pornography. No writer likes that question--"What's your book about?" It's almost impossible to sum up a book in a few words. In *Talk Dirty to Me*, I discuss pornography, prostitution, orgasms, fantasies, and other things sexual, but the book is about why these things are significant. The result is a "philosophy"--an intimate, entirely personal philosophy about the role of sex in human life. I don't expect readers to agree or disagree with my ideas. (In fact, I hope I make most readers blush and complain at least once; that eternal elusiveness of explanation is part of what fascinates me about the subject.) My sexual philosophy is that of a bisexual woman of a certain generation and culture, and it can't encompass or explain much more than that. I consider myself "sex-positive," willing to celebrate the life-affirming nature of sex and to tolerate with cheer the enormous variations sex takes in human lives. Human beings will endlessly try to understand and explain sex to one another--and to themselves. That's what I've tried to do here.

--Sallie Tisdale

We live in a world in which almost every public image--every interaction--carries an element of sexual desire. And yet it is nearly impossible for us to talk openly and honestly about sex. *Talk Dirty to Me* is author Sallie Tisdale's frank, funny, and provocative invitation to the conversation we've been waiting for--but have been too afraid to start.

Sallie Tisdale shuns the dry style of academics and takes us on a journey through gender and desire, romance and pornography, prostitution and morality, fantasies and orgasm. She guides us through her field research of peep shows, XXX stores, and even the pornography collection of the British Library. Interweaving her own personal feelings, experiences, and revelations, she presents a brilliant, fascinating, and wholly original portrait of sex and sexuality in America, while encouraging us to explore and create our own "intimate philosophies."

Discussion Guide

1. "We all pretend to be more of a man or a woman than we secretly suspect we are," Sallie Tisdale quotes a friend as saying. In what ways have you felt not feminine or masculine enough? How did these feelings influence some of your choices in life?

2. "Pervert." "Nice girls don't." These are thoughts that often stop Sallie Tisdale short. Discuss how and where you see evidence of society imposing these values. How much do these cultural proscriptions affect you?

3. It's a lot easier to talk about tolerance than to be tolerant. Does learning about transsexuals, cross-dressers, prostitutes, and other people who may be different from you make you feel more tolerant, or do their differences still make you uncomfortable?

4. Sallie Tisdale describes several friends who decide to change their sex. How much does gender inform or influence how we relate to people? How do you imagine you'd feel if someone you'd been close to decided to change his or her sex? Could you be accepting of this changed person?

5. Many people oppose pornography on the grounds that it objectifies women--some even argue that it leads to violence against women. Why do many people who haven't seen adult films presume that most pornography is violent rather than erotic?

6. Some Americans defending pornography cite the First Amendment, arguing that censorship--any censorship--is a violation of our civil rights. Do you agree? Is protection of the First Amendment invaluable at all costs? Discuss other arenas in which this controversy comes into play.

7. Of the renters of adult videotapes, 59 percent are men alone, 19 percent are women with men, and 15 percent are men with men. Only 6 percent are women alone, and 1 percent are women with women. How much of this difference, do you think, is due to society's strictures as opposed to women's lack of interest in pornography?

8. Sallie Tisdale notes that "the one thing that is consistent in Western history is that any `loose' woman . . .is dangerous and must be controlled." Our society, like most through the ages, approves of a woman "marrying money," but disapproves of a woman having sex for money. It frowns less on the men who visit prostitutes than on the prostitutes themselves. Discuss stereotypical gender roles and how they influence these societal moral judgments.

9. Sallie Tisdale says, "Over the last year, and with considerable surprise, I've come to realize I can't define woman." How would you define what a woman is or what a man is? What aspects of your definition are biological and what aspects are cultural?

10.*Talk Dirty to Me* is divided into sections--Desire, Arousal, Climax, and Resolution. What do you think the author was trying to accomplish or express by organizing her book in this way? What does the organization of this book say about the development of a conversation, or the process of creativity?

11. "We learn virtually every skill by watching others do them . . . Everything but sex." Do you think children would find it easier to grow up--or be better equipped to deal with their sexuality than previous generations--if they were well-informed about sex and eroticism? Would you give this book to a young adult to read? Why or why not?

12. Do you find the image on the cover of the book erotic? Why or why not? What recurring themes do you find in the media/art/literature as metaphors for eroticism?

13. Sallie Tisdale argues that her "intimate philosophy" is not proscriptive, that "there are five billion sexualities in the world, one for each of us." How has *Talk Dirty to Me* influenced your own philosophy? Sallie Tisdale also points out that sex is something we all do but few of us talk about. After reading this book, are you more willing to express openly your sexual thoughts and desires?

Author Bio

Sallie Tisdale is the author of TALK DIRTY TO ME, STEPPING WESTWARD and WOMEN OF THE WAY. She has received a Pushcart Prize, an NEA Fellowship, the James Phelan Literary Award, and was a Dorothy and Arthur Shoenfeldt Distinguished Writer of the year. Her work has appeared in *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Threepenny Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Conjunctions* and *Tricycle*. Tisdale is a long-time member of PEN and was a judge for the National Book Award in 2010.

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