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Interview: Jillian Lauren, author of *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem*

Tuesday, July 13th, 2010
By Twanna A. Hines

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"I've found that all the exposure, all that radical honesty that really is writing a book about your life [and] having been very public with it, is nothing I could have prepared for."

Hooker. Prostitute. Sex worker. Whore. Our language reflects beliefs about women who exchange sex for money. Meet Jillian Lauren. As a teen, she fled suburban life in New Jersey to live among the twinkling jewels, wads of cash, and sparing concubines of Brunei's Royal family. Her prince: His Royal Highness Jefri Bolkiah. Hardly a fairytale, *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem* intoxicatingly lures readers along a siren's tale of heart break, lust, love, and redemption.

"When you find yourself doing things you never imagined," she writes, "it happens in stages."

What precursor led this bat mitzvahed brunette's journey to Southeast Asia based on a promise of well-paid sex work? Was it the 20-something camp counselor who made out with her 13-year-old body? Such questions inevitably render judgment and are based on fears that one's life, or daughter, might swerve the same path. Yet, painful stories about women's difficult relationships with men are not uncommon, and Jillian Lauren's life begins where all do–at birth.

Adopted by financially stable parents and raised Jewish, NYU accepted Lauren at age sixteen. Dropping out to work with Manhattan's smallest theaters, few friends knew she eventually stripped and turned tricks for cash. When a chance encounter with a woman named Ari opens the door to Brunei's Prince Jefri, Jillian Lauren walks through. That's the thing about the wild journey between our first and last day on earth: Whether easy, difficult, scary or safe, each choice has repercussions leading to unknown routes. In the

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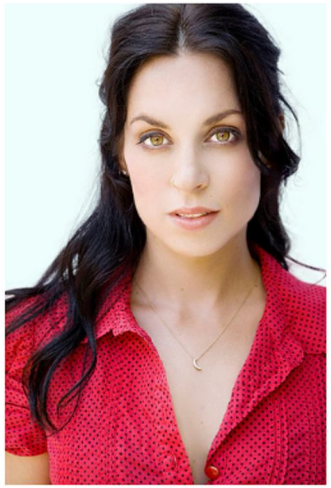
Everyone has an ex. Spill your guts, search your soul, and submit your story.

end, each person's life decisions are their own. Who is anyone to judge?

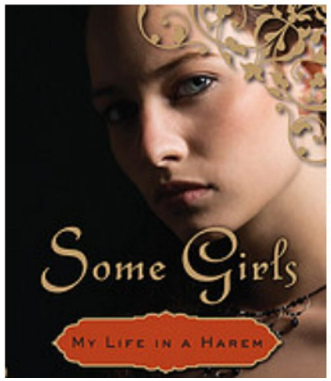
Some Girls is a fast and fascinating read by adoptee, mother, lover, and bestselling author Jillian Lauren. I talked to Lauren via phone from her home.



From personal experience, I know people often confuse critiquing personal narrative with judging the life choices the work is describing. Am I wrong?
My experience has been that. I believe it's because the book has a lot of sexual content that people ask me almost entirely about my life and not at all about the work itself. Usually, the writing is mentioned as an aside like: *Oh,* and *she's a talented writer.* The hidden parentheses are, "and I was surprised."

I was talking to Lily Burana who wrote *Strip City.* She said the greatest thing. She says it like, *They treat you like the talking dog.* One day the dog just started talking; this stripper just started writing**!** Of course, it takes a tremendous amount of craft and work and years of discipline and writing crappy stuff until you hopefully get to the point that you write a good book. It's not just an aside. It's not, you know, "You had a great story, so it must have been easy to write this book."

And, kudos to you. The book is extremely well written.
I've actually even been accused of having it ghost written, and I just think that's such a telling accusation. It's so misogynist. Because I have these experiences and, I believe, because I'm a woman and because I was a sex worker [some assume] I couldn't possibly also be a gifted writer. It had to be someone else who wrote it. It's very telling of how people perceive women who have this sort of a past. And, that was a big reason why I wrote the book. I wanted to really shatter some of the stereotypes and open up that dialogue.



I thought you picked *Some Girls'* title to tell us: *When you hear about sex workers, some girls could be like this, some girls could be that, or some girls could be a million different things you would never imagine.* So, I was surprised to discover the title was inspired by the Rolling Stones song "Some Girls" because those lyrics are so stereotypical. I mean, they basically say stuff like, "If you're a British woman, you are prissy."
There are a lot of different associations I have with that song. I think this is how things reveal themselves to artists. Sometimes things just

come in a flash or a Malcolm Gladwell blink or something. It's only later that you unravel the meaning. So, the phrase "some girls" kept appearing in the actual text and really made me think about the very tongue-in-cheek and intentionally provocative and politically incorrect song. But, it's also a song about a man with endless women with which he makes these generalizations. That seems a funny parallel to Prince Jefri. I think the book comes out of the same tradition: being politically incorrect and tongue-in-cheek and, also, having this raw kind honesty about what we exchange, the currency of sex. What's exchanged for love? In what direction does that flow? I think the song plays with that a lot.

What did writing the book teach you about every individual's desire to be loved? That's a theme in the book.
Writing the book was an exercise in compassion for me. To me, recognizing the universal need for love is part of compassion. That's the door that can get you there even if you might be really having a hard time having compassion in your life, [due to] someone who hurt you or hurt others.

Interestingly, air flow is another theme of the book. You talk about its presence and absence to key the reader into where you were emotionally at any given point. You mention feeling like you have a bag over your head in New Jersey where there is just not enough air. When you talk about Brunei, you mention flying, rooftops, and openness. Was that intentional or something I randomly picked up?
I think that is beautiful. It wasn't intentional, but I don't think it's not there just because it wasn't consciously present for me. One of the great gifts of being able to finally publish my work has been letting air–here we go, I was going to say, "letting it breathe." I guess it is a favorite metaphor of mine. But, [I enjoy] letting everyone who reads *Some Girls* come back to me and tell me what my book means rather than the other direction.

In writing the memoir, did you feel like your parallel paths–who you are and who you wanted to be–converged a bit?
Obviously, the life I lead now is incredibly different than what I wanted then. But I don't want the same things now, so it's not as divergent as it my appear. However, I think some people are constitutionally dissatisfied people and I am one of those. It doesn't matter what I get, I will always think that I want something different. And, that is something that's still very much alive in me, but at least I recognize it now. I am at least spiritually at the point that I know that my dissatisfaction comes from within and not from without. My life is super now, and I still insist on being miserable a good deal of the time.

I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing. It's the sign of a changing and evolving soul going somewhere different, being curious about the world, looking outwardly at what the world can offer. If you have that outlook, being dissatisfied is the by-product because you know there's always something more. You're growing, you're different. Or, at least that's what I tell myself.
The world needs its seekers. I don't think it's always a comfortable thing to be, but there's a place for it, and artists are seekers. You're kind of born an artist. If that's where you are [then] that's where you're going. I don't think it's necessary to suffer the way some people think it is to be an artist, but I do think there has to be a certain amount of always striving

to answer some question.

Early on you write, "What would it be like to live a life you didn't have to lie about?" Your memoir is a *New York Times* bestseller, and tons of people are reading it. So, I'll ask you: What is it like to live a life you don't have to to lie about?
That's a great question! Thank you so much for mentioning that line. I was sure that I was ready for this story to come out. I did a lot of therapy. I did a lot of preparation. I was really, I thought, prepared for a lot of backlash and negativity. There was less of it than I expected. It's actually way more on the side of positivity and support from women and men, but predominately women of all shapes and sizes and classes, from all over the country and other countries. That's just been remarkable.

But I am in transition–coming back from the book tour and settling into life as a writer and a mother. This life is way more quiet and structured. I've found that all the exposure, all that radical honesty that really is writing a book about your life [and] having been very public with it, is nothing I could have prepared for. I feel sort of exposed in a way that sometimes feels very freeing and other times feels very draining to me. So, I imagined having a life I didn't have to lie about being a freeing experience, but it's a lot of other things, too.

Are you still in contact with the people you met through experiences explained in *Some Girls*?
I'm still close with some of the people in the book. And, obviously some of them I don't talk to anymore. A bunch have surfaced since the publication of the book–that has been real intense and humbling experience. One woman in particular who found me wasn't portrayed entirely favorably in the book. She came to my book signing, which almost knocked me on the floor. She was so gracious about it and really lovely and it was a tremendously humbling experience. I'd been living with the character of her for 15 years, which is always a reductive thing. And, you know, this woman, who is obviously a whole different person now, shows up and is just really supportive of the book. She told me, indeed, she was hurt by it when she read it, but she understands what I was saying and would love to talk sometime in the future. It was just amazing and so educational to publish *Some Girls*. So, some people I'm still in touch with. Some, I'm getting in touch with. Some, I used to be in touch with now won't speak to me anymore. There's been a lot of surprises.

You talk about female relationships, mentioning warring girls go for "a quieter cruelty than fist fights and drive-by shootings" because girls "go straight for each other's souls." What made you write that?
Well, now I live with two boys, first of all. I think I was living in one world as a writer. On this other hand, witnessing my husband [Scott Shriner, Weezer bass guitar player] fighting with a friend of his, or my son in the playground–that observation came to me. We wage war in such different ways. It just seems that my husband's battles are much simpler than mine.

What's the one thing you wish people understood better about sex work?
I really wish people understood that there are lot of gray areas in sex work. I think there are really extreme stereotypes and judgments. [It's] a lot more complex and more like everyone's reality is. It's not this world completely set apart from society that we're all comfortable talking about. It's done by people you went to high school with and the same

people who are all around. There are so many more universal aspects to the emotions involved in sex work than most people are wiling to discuss.

I've had certain people level criticism at me like, *Pretty much you're still being a prostitute. You're still telling your story to make money. If you had really changed, you would have the decency to keep your mouth shut about that.* There's a lot of that. When people criticize me, that's a big part of it. *If you had really changed, you would be demonstrating that by not telling this story.* And, I just think that's a really interesting accusation and criticism because I don't think that you would say that about a gangster or a criminal who changed. And, I shouldn't even say that about prostitution because it's not like you're even doing anything wrong necessarily, although you are breaking the law. But you wouldn't say, *You're still a gangster if you're telling your story.* The parallel does not hold.

Finally, Jillian Lauren, What's your Six-Word Memoir?
Met a real Prince. Disney lied.

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BUY *Some Girls* at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or Powell's.

CHECK out Jillian Lauren's website for audio, video, and upcoming events.

JOIN Jillian Lauren's Facebook page for additional book information.

LISTEN to an interview with Jillian Lauren on Oprah Radio.

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