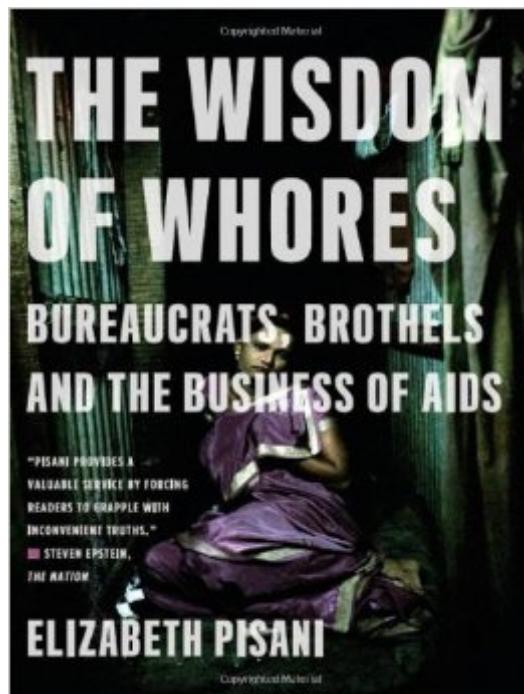


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The Wisdom Of Whores: Bureaucrats, Brothels And The Business Of AIDS



Synopsis

âœ[A] rollicking, eye-opening, hilarious account of the underbelly of international AIDS research.â •â "Carlin Romano, Philadelphia Inquirer As an epidemiologist researching AIDS, Elizabeth Pisani has been involved with international efforts to halt the disease for fourteen years. With swashbuckling wit, fierce honesty, and more than a little political incorrectness, she dishes on herself and her colleagues as they try to prod reluctant governments to fund HIV prevention for the people who need it most: drug injectors, gay men, sex workers, and johns. With verve and clarity, Pisani shows the general reader how her profession really works; how easy it is to draw wrong conclusions from âœobjectiveâ • data; and, shockingly, how much money is spent so very badly. 12 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

If Michael Moore were to dress up in women's clothing and prowl through the red-light districts of Jakarta, we might get a book similar to "The Wisdom of Whores." But this author not only has Moore's street smarts and a lively writing style, she also has a PhD in infectious disease epidemiology. Elizabeth Pisani knows whereof she speaks, because she has spent years on the streets and in the dingy bars where AIDS futures are traded. "Whores" is one of a rare species of book such as Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" or Jessica Mitford's "The American Way of Death" that has the power to reform an industry. In this case, the author exposes the AIDS prevention industry that sprang up when First World governments started to shovel money into the vital struggle against

the HIV retrovirus. Or at least, that's where they should have shoveled it. If you think that the U.S. Government's emphasis on chastity over latex is a great way to spend your tax dollars, you definitely need to read this book. I was particularly interested in learning why the AIDS epidemic in Asia has not taken off with the same alacrity as it did in South and East Africa. Elizabeth Pisani may resemble one of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's ethereal Pre-Raphaelite models, but she talks about sex, drugs, and AIDS in the language of her subjects: the sex workers of Indonesia, China, East Timor, and Africa (foreskin soup, anyone?). She describes how governments are wasting billions of AIDS dollars on "schoolgirls and housewives and Boy Scouts" when they should be concentrating on preventive measures for the people who are actually at risk for this deadly disease: "junkies and gay guys and the people who buy and sell sex."

Elizabeth Pisani's *The Wisdom of Whores - Bureaucrats, Brothels and the Business of AIDS* is a great book (along with a great website). Elizabeth Pisani is an epidemiologist with years of experience working on HIV/AIDS (or sex and drugs, as she puts, which sounds a lot, well, sexier) at a variety of agencies, including UNAIDS. The book is the story of her frustrations at the way the international community, national governments, NGOS and AIDS activists have dealt with the epidemics, as well as her hopes in some of the progress made. I got interested in the book when I read an interview Pisani gave to the *Guardian*. The interview kinda billed the book as a controversial work where Pisani would be the mean lady who said people got AIDS because of their stupid behavior and not enough was being done because of political correctness. So, I was ready to get really pissed off with the book. That has not been the case at all. Elizabeth Pisani is a scientist and that perspective is pervasive in the book. That's a good thing. I much prefer sober, "just the facts" perspective to touchy-feely stuff. Actually, one of the main frustrations that Pisani deals with in the book is the fact that AIDS had to be made about innocent wives and children for the international community to gear into action, as opposed to the real populations at risk in most parts of the world (except Africa, and she shows that even in Africa, the innocent wives and children trope does not work, as the data show): drug injectors and people who buy and sell sex. To me, precisely because the book is data-driven, it was not controversial. My reaction was more, "well, if that's what the data show, so be it."

It's difficult to offer a contrary view in the face of so much enthusiasm, but I feel like it's important to add something different to the discussion of this book. I should mention that Pisani and I are rough contemporaries with overlapping time in Asia. I don't think we've ever met, although Pisani and I

have known and even worked with some of the same people and they generally come across in a way that is recognizable to me. I came to the book via reviews on [...] and elsewhere. The book starts off in a promising way, mixing the personal and the professional and avoiding the dreaded "too much information." As the book continues, it becomes more polemical and despite an effort at structure, it begins to lapse into stream of consciousness, with important issues quickly raised, but with little follow-up and complex issues treated with oversimplification, as in the cases of sex work and poverty. The scholarship is spotty in places (e.g., recent history of sexual mores in Thailand, which had been changing for women even before the HIV epidemic). The scholarship also falls apart in small ways. For example, Pisani places her former employer's HQ in Washington, DC when, in fact, the DC area presence has been shrinking and the HQ always has been in North Carolina. I'd been hoping to get more wisdom of whores, but ultimately, it's too much of Pisani and her own melting down. The book is puzzling in places. Pisani complains about numbers and the difficulties of measuring HIV cases and risky behavior, but never really enlightens the reader about why this is important and how people treat soft data. Given her training in demography and epidemiology, she should have been able to do this better than someone who has learned epidemiology on the ground like me.

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