



The Shape of a Hundred Hips

by Patricia Cumbie

ISBN 9781945805646

Offering an insider's perspective into the world of belly dancing, this text goes beyond the glitz factor of the artform to challenge assumptions people may have about it as suggestive or exotic. *The Shape of a Hundred Hips* is a memoir that juxtaposes dance and sexual assault recovery that takes the reader into the living room, bedroom, and dance class. It promotes the idea that people can gain insight and take greater control of their lives through intentional movement and artistic connection.

From the author

Belly dance is how I gained confidence and compassion for my lost sense of self. Raised Christian in the 1970s, I was expected to be virginal before marriage, and demure forever after. When I'd heard about Women's Lib. I secretly wanted to be one of those so-called selfish women who were calling their own shots. When I took up belly dance to understand how to live in and accept my body, my grandma thought I was a stripper, and my feminist neighbor was convinced it was objectifying. I realized virtually everyone had a lot of misperceptions about what belly dancing was about and I wanted to change that.

Discussion Questions

1. How is a memoir different from journalism in which the author made her career? Patricia writes about ways that she felt restricted and constrained by her upbringing. How did her background set her up to potentially be victimized and make her feel ashamed? How did silence serve to suppress her physically and emotionally, in childhood and throughout her life?
2. When Patricia is followed to her dorm room and raped after a night of drinking, she has trouble processing what happened to her. She knew it was wrong, but didn't call it rape. Patricia felt guilty and at fault for what occurred. This was the early 1980s, when there was a burgeoning awareness of on-campus rape and violence against women. What has changed about how rape is addressed in our society and major institutions? What has not?
3. There are many themes in this memoir—sexual violence, class, female identity, family bonds, and overcoming timidity and self-doubt. Which themes resonated with you the most?
4. When Patricia falls in love and meets the person who would eventually become her life partner, she begins the relationship feeling emotionally guarded, afraid to share the truth of rape and her feelings of insecurity. How does she finally achieve greater physical and emotional intimacy? What were the situations that helped transform her relationship?
5. *The Shape of a Hundred Hips* offers an insider's perspective into the world of belly dancing that is perceived as outwardly fascinating, but rarely understood. This book goes beyond the glitz factor of belly dance to challenge assumptions people may have about it as suggestive or exotic. Have your thoughts or attitudes about belly dance changed? Why or why not?



6. Patricia also explores the questions of empowerment vs. exploitation in belly dance culture—the objectification of bodies, orientalist fantasies of female subservience, and appropriation of other cultures. How could people in Western or non-Arab cultures show respect for the art form? How could people address patriarchal and cultural norms that contribute to the misinterpretation belly dance?

7. How much of a person’s life experience is determined by the physical encounters they have living day-to-day in their own bodies? What is your personal experience with inhabiting your body?

About the author

Patricia Cumbie writes about women’s lives, dance, food and travel. She is also the author of a young adult novel, *Where People Like Us Live*, and the winner of the Carol Bly Award for Nonfiction. Patricia is a member of the belly dance and folkloric troupe Dans Askina. To meet Patricia and find out more about her writing, visit www.patriciacumbie.com.