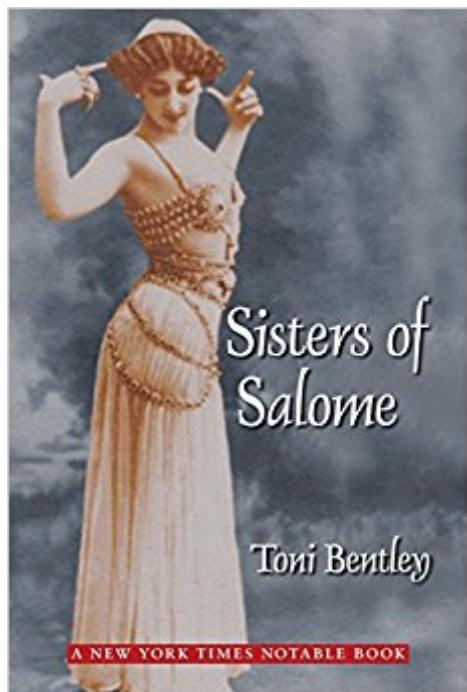


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# Sisters Of Salome



## Synopsis

The origins of the art of exotic dancing lie in English drama and Viennese opera: Oscar Wilde's 1893 play *Salome*, and Richard Strauss's 1905 opera based on it, brought onto the stage a female character who captured and dominated the audience with the raw power of her naked body. Her Dance of the Seven Veils shocked and fascinated, and *Salome* became a pop icon on both sides of the Atlantic. Toni Bentley explores how four influential women embraced the persona of the femme fatale and transformed the misogynist image of a dangerously sexual woman into a form of personal liberation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Former NYC ballerina and independent scholar Toni Bentley offers a study of four famous women who created versions of the legendary femme fatale *Salome* (popularized by Oscar Wilde) in *Sisters of Salome*, a cultural study and the story of an obsession. Bentley explores the experiences of women who have tapped into the power of the nude female body, particularly four who found fame by portraying *Salome*: Maud Allen, Mata Hari, Ida Rubenstein and Colette. Bentley gives a sketch of each woman's life and what compelled them to dance their own versions of *Salome*, showing how she was "not only a misogynist, masochistic male fantasy, but a heterosexual, sadistic female fantasy as well." (Yale Univ., \$27.95 288p ISBN 0-300-09039-0; May)Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Kindle Edition edition.

Bentley examines the cult of *Salome* that flourished in Europe and in North America during the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dubbed "Salomania," this craze had its roots in the Oscar Wilde play and the subsequent Richard Strauss opera based on the life of Salome, the biblical temptress. Popularized by Maud Allen, the progressive Canadian dancer; Mata Hari, the notorious Dutch spy; Ida Rubinstein, a Russian proponent of the modern dance movement; and Colette, the intoxicating French novelist, the daring Dance of the Seven Veils became an exotic symbol of female self-determination and liberation. In order to calculate the startling impact this cultural phenomenon had on Victorian sensibilities, the author recounts the personal stories of the four extraordinary women who embodied and embraced the freedom represented by Salome and her uniquely empowering striptease. This fascinating slice of popular culture will appeal to both social and dance historians. Margaret FlanaganCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Kindle Edition edition.

It is a while ago that I read this book, and I liked it, albeit not enough to go through it again. Ms Bentley described 4 dancers who did rather erotic numbers in the days that the Salomania rage was sweeping over Europe. She seemed more interested in the motives of the dancers rather than the quality of the performances. This, because of her own reaction to performing erotic dances. I think it is this that makes the book helpful. It is not really about dance, it is about the experiences and feelings of women who expose themselves, and use the dance as a vehicle. In the eyes of some this may be a taboo subject, and I admire the honesty wherewith Ms Bentley writes about her subject, and about her own feelings.

This is not really a book about dance. It's an informal work of history that focusses on 4 women who were prominent erotic dancers in the early 20th century, but the book sets out to describe the lives of these women in all their various aspects instead of just their dance careers. The common background for all 4 of these women is a peculiar cultural phenomenon, a widespread popular obsession (triggered by Wilde's play "Salome") with the dance of Salome. All 4 of these women exploited this Salome craze for their own advantage and self-aggrandizement, but in quite different ways (and often with tragic results). The book has a refreshingly informal style and the prose is direct and clear.

A former Balanchine dancer becomes a writer, gets interested in the bizarre Victorian/Edwardian phenomena of "Salomania," and finds a willing publisher in one of the most prestigious presses in the world. Talk about dreamland. And the book is perfect. After you read the first ten pages, you will

have trouble putting it down. Bentley moves swiftly from her own personal connections to her subject matter: dance, a poignant photograph of Colette, Balanchine's curious interest in Crazy Horse strippers, her own experiment in confrontational nudity. She writes a brief chapter on the historical and literary Salome that is, among other things, the most intelligent essay I've ever read on Wilde's play. She devotes a chapter each to the four centers of the fixation on Salome--Maud Allan, Mata Hari, Ida Rubenstein, and Colette--while providing a wealth of information on the changes in the history of dance between 1890 and 1920. And she finds in women's fascination with Salome a psychological core that is compelling and persuasive. This is an excellent book. Beautifully conceived, intelligently realized, well written, amusing and informative, it is a joy to read and recommend.

Oscar Wilde is responsible for striptease. Well, not directly, perhaps, but there is a surprising connection drawn in *Sisters of Salome* (Yale University Press) by Toni Bentley, an examination of four women who interpreted Salome around the turn of the last century. Wilde took his story from legend (not the Bible story), and invented the famous "Dance of the Seven Veils" for his French play *Salome*. It initiated the craze for "Salomania" and there was even a school for Salomes that churned out dancers to go into the variety halls. Bentley's introduction inserts herself into the history of striptease, and she gives a good account of ending her career as a ballerina and going onto the stage (just once?) as a stripper. She felt power; "... there was no victimization on either side of these footlights." It was a revelatory experience: "I was unmasked and, for a miraculous minute, thrilled in my body, unafraid of my life. I was in - for me - Paradise." Her research into how striptease originated centered on four women who had initially interpreted to the theatrical Salome. Maudie Durant was the sister of a serial killer, and escaped to Europe and to the stage as Maud Allan as a way to free herself from disgrace. She became "the least dressed dancer of our time," and she then portrayed Salome in 1906. She became involved in a ridiculous trial which she lost in large part because it was shown that she knew what a clitoris was. Ida Rubenstein was the child of Russian aristocrats, and the only Salome here who had few worries about money. She liked expensive, self-aggrandizing shows and ended up derided for her vanity. She did, however, sponsor artists of real ability; Ravel composed *Bolero* for her. Everyone knows the name of the spy Mata Hari, but everyone knows wrong. She performed all over Europe, and took lovers; she had a special weakness for those in uniform. As a result, she did take money for spying, but didn't do any. She was framed and executed in France in 1917. With Colette, perhaps Bentley is guilty of over-application of her theme, because Colette never played Salome, although she did once

perform on the same billing as Mata Hari. Unlike the other three women profiled here, Colette had a genuinely happy and long life. She graduated from virgin bride to lesbian, to happily married housewife, although she did seduce a former husband's son. She used her success in scandals, including her stage nakedness, to become an author whose fiction and memoirs have inspired far more readers than just Bentley. This is a book of a peculiar history, not only of four dancers, but of one period of the dance itself. None of them were very good dancers, but nakedness and scandal made up for that. All four reinvented themselves and used the Salome role for gains in power and money, although such gains were mostly temporary. None had a conventional life or marriage, and perhaps there is some sort of lesson in the sad ends most of them experienced. Bentley has not forced any didacticism from the four stories and her own. Her research and bibliography are good, and she has a light and amused way of telling the stories, full of detail. "Why did these women dance naked?" she asks, and the answers she gives, far from simple, but satisfying while undoubtedly incomplete, are wise and fun to read.

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