

A hustler's memoir

IN PRINT / An arresting self-portrait of a Vancouver sex worker

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Bottle redhead. Burlesque beauty. Femme dyke. Activist. Author. Survivor. Whore. No one has a better understanding of her labels than Amber Dawn. After all, she's the one who created them.

"I very much feel like my identity is like building a character," she says, "not that it's dishonest or fictional. I feel like I have a lot of choice in my creation."

Her self-portrait in *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir*, the follow-up to her debut novel, *Sub Rosa*, is flawed but beautiful. A platinum-blond Amber Dawn selling sex on the "kiddie stroll" of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in skimpy clothes and giant platform boots not only makes for an arresting protagonist, but is oddly easy to relate to.

"The more I humanize myself for my audience, the more they check any kind of stigmatized learning they've had [about sex work] and just start to listen," she says. "I've seen people go from being antagonistic to being like, 'Wait, you're a real human, so let's just try and take it down a notch and relate as two people.' And that's a beautiful moment. I don't always have the patience, but I've seen it happen, and it's great."

How Poetry Saved My Life is an unconventional cleaning-out-the-closet, composed of interwoven poetry and prose. "It really breaks from a traditional memoir. I mean, it ends with erotica!" Amber Dawn says with a laugh. "Who ends a memoir with erotica?"

Spoiler alert: The fist goes in.

Between tales of Parisian alleyway romps and other little-black-book confessions, she turns to her reader, pushing them into the vulnerability of introspection. "When this paragraph ends," she writes, "this story is all yours."

"I want people to see that sex work is just one of the many things we've been taught by society not to talk about and to keep hidden," Amber Dawn says. "Many of us hide, or feel like it's a risk to show certain parts of ourselves, and we go through the world showing some parts while downplaying, or even hiding, other parts. There's a real joy in being visible, of accepting those more stigmatized and secret parts of ourselves. So I'm inviting the reader, whether they do it as a day-to-day practice, or they just think about it for a moment, to really look at who they are holistically, as opposed to what's safe to show."

When the narrative switches from first to second person, the hooker heels are put on your, the reader's feet, and you're slightly horrified — but mostly tickled — to discover they fit.

Amber Dawn admits that taking the story off herself was a tool to get her through the emotionally masochistic task of facing her past. "It's me, the author, talking to myself," she explains. "Part of the reason is comfort, to be honest. To disassociate from the 'I' and hold my experience at arm's length. It's almost like when I say, 'You,' I'm writing to a past self, who I haven't quite reconciled with, as being me."



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(Courtesy of Arsenal Pulp Press (Sarah Race photo))

While sharing so much of herself can be a heavy cross to bear, she's determined to hold it up proudly. "Some of the pieces I wrote almost a decade ago and then just shelved because I was terrified," she admits. "I knew I had a book; I knew it for a good year or two before I went through with this.

"Fear's a big dissuasion. But I think whatever aspect of the queer community you're from, there's always leaders and champions speaking some pretty hard truths, taking risks, and being visible, so I thought I'd step up."

How Poetry Saved My Life is like watching Melhos Place (the nickname given to an apartment complex where Amber Dawn lived with other sex workers in the 1990s). The episodes are filled with scandal, struggle, and heartbreak, but you're eager for it to all play out, because this is Amber Dawn's show — and it has a happy ending.

How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir
Book launch
Fri, April 12, 7pm
Pat's Pub and Brewhouse, 403 E Hastings St