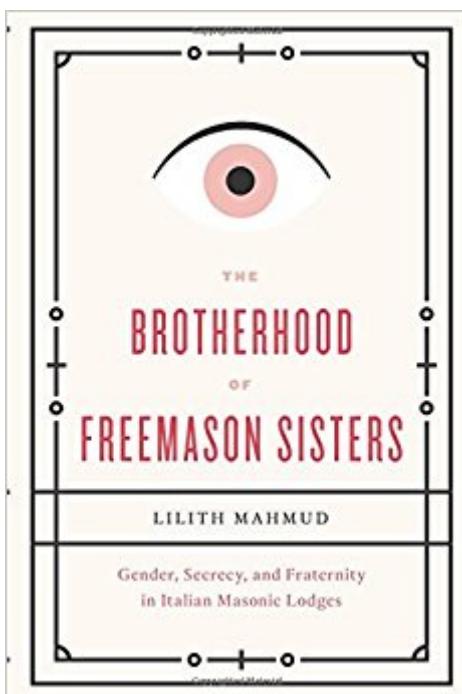


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The Brotherhood Of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, And Fraternity In Italian Masonic Lodges



Synopsis

From its traces in cryptic images on the dollar bill to Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol*, Freemasonry has long been one of the most romanticized secret societies in the world. But a simple fact escapes most depictions of this elite brotherhood: There are women Freemasons, too. In this groundbreaking ethnography, Lilith Mahmud takes readers inside Masonic lodges in contemporary Italy, where she observes the many ritualistic and fraternal bonds forged among women initiates of this elite and esoteric society. Offering a tantalizing look behind lodge doors, *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* unveils a complex culture of discretion in which Freemasons simultaneously reveal some truths and hide others. Women—one of Freemasonry's best-kept secrets—are often upper class and highly educated but paradoxically antifeminist, and their self-cultivation through the Masonic path is an effort to embrace the deeply gendered ideals of fraternity. Mahmud unravels this contradiction at the heart of Freemasonry: how it was at once responsible for many of the egalitarian concepts of the Enlightenment and yet has always been, and in Italy still remains, extremely exclusive. The result is not only a thrilling look at an unfamiliar—and surprisingly influential—world, but a reevaluation altogether of the modern values and ideals that we now take for granted.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (March 28, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 022609586X

ISBN-13: 978-0226095868

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #342,906 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #121 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Other Religions, Practices & Sacred Texts > Freemasonry #353 in Books > History > Europe > Italy #1565 in Books > History > World > Women in History

Customer Reviews

"Like all the best ethnographies, *Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters* inspires curiosity that increases, rather than diminishes, with the reader's growing sense of discernment. (American Anthropologist) "I commend this book not only for academic purposes but for

anyone seeking a broader understanding of elites. With her bold ethnography, Mahmud delivers an admirable contribution to a growing literature of provincializing Europe and questioning its normative centrality to discourses presumed to have travelled to other locales. Above all this is a further critique of a tendency to discard the ethnographic subjects as not poor enough, not suffering enough, not being marginal enough. By asking What about the unsympathetic subjects of ethnographic studies, whose right-wing or religious views on gender, class, race, sexuality, labor, nationalism, or the military, for instance might push anthropologists to the limits of our own cultural relativism, I take it to be part of a wider question contemporary anthropology faces, the hierarchization of worthy ethnographic subjects.

Mahmud takes a bold stance in answering this question by opening up the conditions of research and delivering a deeply humanistic and attractive ethnography about one of the most powerful global fraternities. (Reviews & Critical Commentary) Mahmud's analysis of masculinities and femininities in Freemason societies in Italy reveals brilliantly the power and practices of elite fraternities in contemporary Europe. The book demonstrates how and why feminist ethnographic research can both engage with the micropractices of gender and community making and shed light on larger issues about the role of transparency and secrecy, liberalism and humanism, in making Western democracies. This is anthropology at its best: reflexive, engaged, curious, and careful. (Inderpal Grewal, author of *Transnational America*) "The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges is getting accolades, and I can see why. In Mahmud's careful hands, this study of gendered elite becomes one of subtleties and contradictions. While she traces how fraternity as an intentional project reifies power differentials in practice, she never lets go of the belief that fraternity is in itself the heart of humanism. Freemason lodges may very well be gendered, racialized, and class-based organizations, but Mahmud reminds us that the pursuit of fraternity is nonetheless a profound source of meaning and purpose for us all." (Association for Feminist Anthropology) "A riveting analysis of the women Freemasons in Italy that illuminates the debates about and paradoxes of women's inclusion into a controversial secret brotherhood. Mahmud initiates us with wisdom into the contradictions of a liberal political philosophy that extols universal brotherhood but is embedded in exclusionary practices of community and ritual based on class, race, and gender. This feminist ethnography is sure to become a classic in the anthropology of Europe. (Lila Abu-Lughod, author of *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*) "In The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters, Mahmud takes the

reader on a journey of discovery that mirrors both her fieldwork experience and the initiation path of the Masons she studies. Her writing is clear and inviting, creating a sense of rapport with the reader as she transitions effortlessly from passages of descriptive narrative, to analysis and theoretical discussion, then personal reflection. (Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford) “Mahmud has crafted a stupendous ethnography of female Freemasonry in Italy. Her writing, sensuously descriptive at one moment and coolly analytical at the next, frames a sophisticated, counterintuitive, but radically persuasive analysis of a modernity that has silenced women even when its self-proclaimed humanism has conditionally included them; female brothers were as thoroughly excluded from state persecution as they have been belittled by their sometimes well-meaning but condescending male counterparts. Carrying feminist analysis into a resolutely antifeminist female domain to expose the self-satisfaction of liberal European humanism, Mahmud’s incisive critique does not preclude affection or respect for its targets. Indeed, her sometimes puzzled affection for her highly conservative subjects is one of the book’s many attractive strengths, as is the paradoxically revelatory discretion that she, as a talented ethnographer, shared with them. This rare synergy of style, scholarship, and ethical sensibility is a tribute to anthropology’s relevance for understanding the paradoxes of modernity. (Michael Herzfeld, author of *Evicted from Eternity*)“Beautifully written and staged, Mahmud’s is an extraordinary work of thinking through fieldwork materials and experiences. Self-disclosing as having produced profane ethnography, and by finding fraternity with women Freemasons, who were not thought to exist, she advances fresh insights across the range of topics and issues that have engaged anthropologists, and intellectuals generally, about the present morphings of liberal humanism, from within one of its most politically conservative expressions. (George E. Marcus, author of *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*)“In her brilliant ethnographic exegesis, Mahmud. . . persuasively links what appear to be the idiosyncratic predicaments of Freemason sisters to countless actors who have struggled and who continue to struggle in the great and small movements that punctuate the history of liberalism. (American Ethnologist)

Lilith Mahmud is associate professor of gender & sexuality studies and anthropology at the University of California, Irvine.

Would definitely recommend this book. I had to read it for a college course but I loved it.

Fascinating! Marvelous! Outstanding! I really enjoyed this book a lot. An inside look into the world of Freemasonry, and its little known women members, through eyes of a cultural anthropologist. Even though it's an anthropology book, it doesn't read like one. It's not full of jargon and I found it easy to read and comprehend. It is a fascinating look at a world completely unknown to most people, and yet discussed in a broader, modern context. Marvelously written, warm and inviting, Mahmud's words will seduce you into this world before you know it, dying to find out more about it, as you turn the pages! Also, woven throughout the text are marvelous personal vignettes (see Passwords) that are very intimate and unique, relaying the story as the author discovered it. Great read!

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