

Bright Lights, Flop City

Working at a glossy magazine, chasing women, reading colleagues' email and longing for lunch with the boss.

By Edward Kosner

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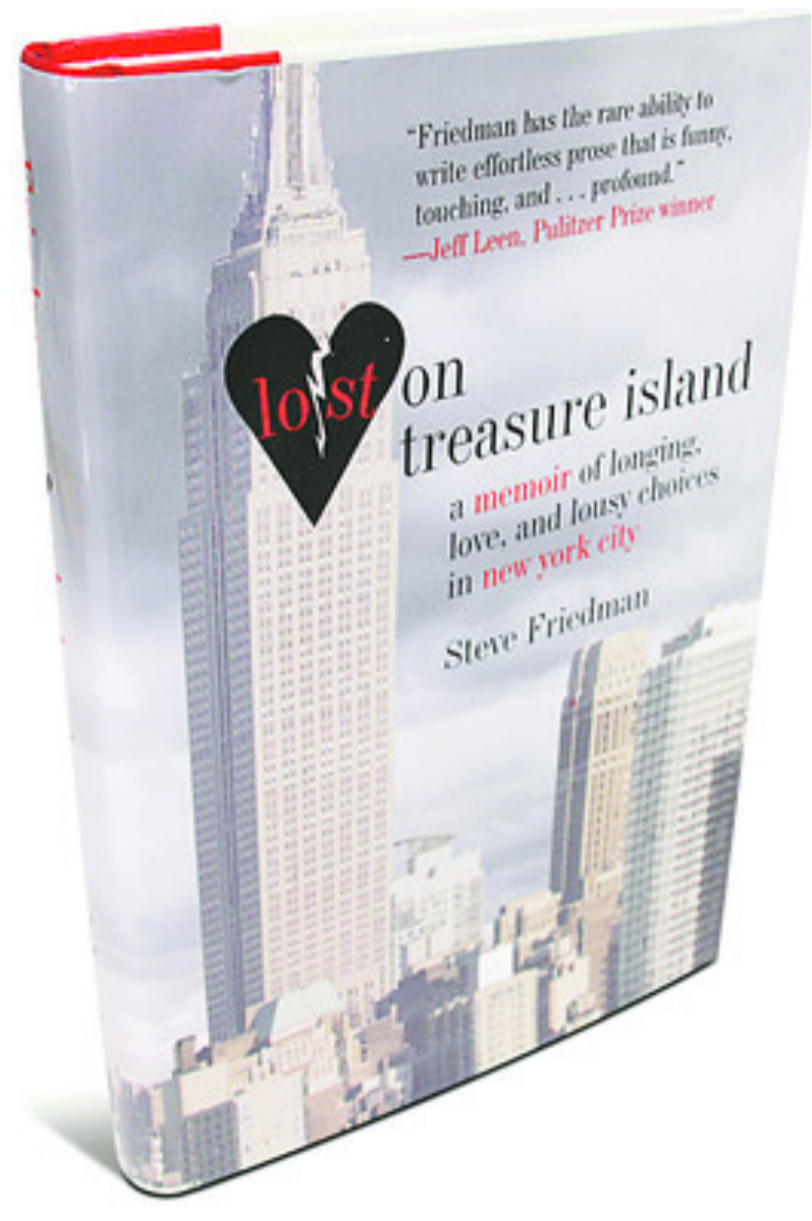
In the enduring quest myth, the plucky hick leaves the family hearth to seek his fortune in the big world. He encounters fearsome masters, avaricious sirens and other perils but survives and prevails with the love of a good woman. Then there is the counter-myth, in which he is crushed and ends up befuddled in a puddle of flop sweat. Guess on which library shelf "Lost on Treasure Island" should be stashed?

Steve Friedman's new book could be mistaken for a roman à clef about the magazine business called "The Devil Wears Zegna." A lot of it takes place in the sleek offices of GQ—Conde Nast's male counterpart of Vogue—where our hero alternately preens and cringes under the dread stare of the editor, Art, who, like Bono, needs only one name. But before long, it becomes clear that "Lost on Treasure Island" is actually an addiction memoir in drag.

Like other confessional authors, Mr. Friedman tries to disarm readers by a brave show of candor about the character defects his narrative is shortly to unfurl in punishing detail. "Everything here is true," he proclaims in a prefatory note. "True, as in, it happened. . . . Almost all of it. Just about everything."

We first meet Mr. Friedman, fresh off the plane from St. Louis (where he has been fired as editor of the local monthly slick for unspecified reasons) as he goes to an audition lunch with one of Art's deputies. "I don't mention," he reports, "that the writer who told the GQ editors about me is the old boyfriend of an editorial assistant I slept with when she was living with a different old boyfriend, or that at approximately the same time I also slept with the woman's boss."

He gets the job—editing GQ's grooming and fitness section—even though it turns out that in daylight the gray suit he wore to New York was lime green and that he is tormented on the way back to the GQ offices by a mocking street mime, who whispers "nice suit."



LOST ON TREASURE ISLAND

By Steve Friedman

(Arcade, 304 pages, \$24.95)

Embarking on one of the more ignominious careers in magazine lore, Mr. Friedman does 38 drafts of his maiden piece, an 800-word "Babe of the Month" on the "minxlike" actress Mary-Louise Parker. He turns in 6,000 words for a 1,500-word profile of another actress, Barbara Seagull (formerly Hershey). He savages the Christian pop singer John Tesh when Art instructs him: "Make it meaner!" Mr. Tesh sends a note: "You are a liar and a cheap imitation of a journalist." Mr. Friedman blithely hacks into his colleagues' email.

All the while, he is using his "Personal Best" section to meet perky PR women for grooming and fitness products and to get them into bed—which they seem crazed to do in exchange for ink in GQ. He even falls desperately in love with one, "a woman who looks like a major-market weather girl." In fact, when he isn't moping about why Art won't invite him for lunch in his "personal" leather booth in the Grill Room of the Four Seasons, Mr. Friedman is busy chasing tail.

We are introduced to a cavalcade of women he has sex with—younger, older, Russian, American, married, separated, single, smart, not so smart. He is ostensibly hunting for Mrs. Friedman. Even a decade of ministrations from his Hungarian therapist fails to help. This may be because her treatment plan offers a choice of psychotherapy or a psychic reading.

He thinks that he has finally found Ms. Right—on the Internet, as it happens—in "Violet," as he calls her, a celebrated poet and best-selling memoirist with a toilet mouth. Mr. Friedman and Ms. Right exchange voluminous email reading lists and have deli dinner at which the poet pulls pieces of hot pastrami from her sandwich and stuffs them in her mouth. In the end, she goes back to an old flame—as a remarkable number of Mr. Friedman's potential mates do after flings with him.

He drools over some of his conquests, especially that PR woman, who flashes him in her black silk kimono while instructing him how to flatter Art. But Mr. Friedman can't resist savaging or ridiculing practically everyone else he encounters. He describes in pitiless detail a nightmare Thanksgiving with the family of his latest love, a woman with an autistic child. He peeks as she takes furtive nips from airline miniature liquor bottles she hides in her purse.

He even rats out his boss—Art Cooper, the longtime editor in chief of GQ, who died in 2003 not long after suffering a massive stroke in the Four Seasons booth to which he'd never invited Mr. Friedman. "Art accepts free clothes from designers GQ covers," he tattles.

Early on, Mr. Friedman mentions that he had spent a month in drug and alcohol rehab while in his 30s and no longer drinks. Besides womanizing, he has a fierce addiction to programs whose daily meetings attract those seeking spiritual realization, especially troubled women.

In the last laps of "Lost on Treasure Island," banished from GQ and freelancing for women's and outdoor magazines, he is attending several of these meetings a day. Afterward, he and his wingman, an unappetizing fellow he calls "the Angry Belgian," repair to a diner where they slurp coffee and make fun of the other participants, among them "Clinically-Insane but Smoking Hot Melissa," "Soft-Talking Probably a Lesbian Stacy" and "Jesus Juliet."

At one meeting, he encounters "the Fat Man," a beefy grotesque in black leather, who shares a story about how he was talked down from a homicidal rage by a buddy who urged him to eat a cheeseburger and take a nap. It worked, and the Fat Man instructs the group: "We are all lonely cheeseburger whores."

Just in time for the last chapter, Mr. Friedman has a convenient, faux-Salinger epiphany. Standing before a large meeting, he realizes that "all we have is each other . . . love is what's important . . . I want to tell them that I'm the Fat Man, that the guy in the back row is the Fat Man, that we're all the Fat Man . . . and that we can all be saved."

But when he addresses the group, he can't get beyond: "I'm Steve . . . I . . . I . . ." Lost, indeed.

Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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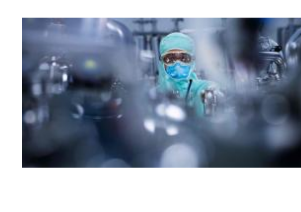
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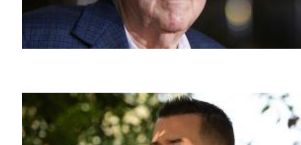
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