

From The Sunday Times

November 22, 2009

## The other belles de nos jours

**When an escort girl and blogger was revealed as a PhD scientist last week it challenged notions of prostitution. But she's far from the only one to be highly educated**

Steven Swinford and Helen Croydon

As a highly intelligent child brought up by a single mother of modest means, Anna was determined to succeed. She won a scholarship to an independent school and then a place at Oxbridge. She graduated with upper second-class honours and went on to complete a postgraduate diploma and an MSC.

What friends and tutors did not realise was that her stellar rise and education were largely funded by working as an upmarket call girl, sometimes earning thousands of pounds a week.

"I was raised by a very proud single mother after my father sold our house from under us, took all the money and abandoned us," she said last week. "I took up escorting at university to supplement my income and help with tuition fees.

"I was single, and actually started out looking for a sugar daddy.

"It was an easy transition, and it has the benefit of allowing me to be more autonomous and independent."

Having paid off her debts, Anna said she now fits her escorting around her other work as she chooses. "My clientele include international and domestic CEOs, politicians, Middle-Eastern royalty and home-grown celebs. It is rarely just about sex.

"I used to have a regular that would invite me over for one three-hour date per week to read the newspaper with him, drink some wine or go for a drive in his beloved Bentley. The most intimate we ever got was kissing each other on both cheeks."

Anna, a petite 28-year-old, is similar to Belle de Jour, the escort blogger who last week revealed in The Sunday Times that she was Dr Brooke Magnanti — not only middle class but also a research scientist with a PhD in informatics, epidemiology and forensic science. The revelation caused astonishment and fierce debate. Here was a clearly intelligent woman who had chosen to make money by selling sex, and had no regrets. "I've felt worse about my writing than I ever have about sex for money," she said. "I couldn't even go to my own book-launch party."

Critics swiftly accused her of glamorising prostitution and ignoring coercion, trafficking, drugs and violence. But is Magnanti an exceptional case? Is she deluded, or a reflection of how a surprising number of well-educated, intelligent women now regard selling sex as an acceptable source of income?

ANOTHER escort who appears to have made an informed choice of career is Ariana, a 30-year-old based in the West Country, who offers "holistic sex coaching". She has a first-class degree in a science-related subject, and lectured at Keele University on the "social role of an escort", arguing for the positive impact of prostitutes on society on the basis that they offer sex to all, regardless of race, gender or disability.

Dr Suzanne Jenkins, a researcher at Newcastle University, invited her to lecture there. Earlier this year, Jenkins completed an internet survey of 483 sex workers, more than half of them from Britain. More than a third turned out to have degrees.



“Many sex workers are in the industry through choice,” said Jenkins. “It suits them because of the independence, flexibility and earning capacity. It can make going back to a regular role more difficult. Many also enjoy the sociability of the role — it was almost like being paid to be part of a dating agency.”

The owner of one of London’s most expensive escort agencies, which charges up to £500 an hour, claims highly educated escorts are not unusual.

James, who runs the business, said: “There are lots of girls exactly like Belle; we have had PhD students on our books. Belle’s blog and the TV series did glamorise it. I noticed after the TV series our younger girls started to think it was cool. I call it the Belle de Jour phenomenon.”

Though such claims may be overblown, there is no doubt students discuss in online chatrooms the possibility of working as escorts. Last week one poster on [thestudentroom.co.uk](http://thestudentroom.co.uk) was advised she would have to be highly attractive to earn large sums. The poster replied: “I have thought about doing something like this ... I have been told I am attractive, but stunning à la Jessica Alba or Megan Fox? I’m not quite there yet. I am just tired of being poor. I want to have nice things now and I have no illusions of what the job will be like.”

Juliet, a 23-year-old escort who funded a degree in psychology and sociology as an escort, went through the same thought process. She was inspired by Belle de Jour’s novel, and says: “Halfway through my degree I was building up quite a few loans and started thinking about job options. I was reading Belle de Jour’s novel and thought, ‘hold on, I can do this’. I had a couple of hours of good conversation with my first client, followed by some awkward, boring sex, and I walked out with £300. I couldn’t believe it.”

Catherine Stephens, an activist for the International Union of Sex Workers, said: “In some ways Belle’s experience is normal. We always hear the stereotype that women are driven into prostitution by extremes of poverty and desperation. In fact, there are a lot of middle-class women who are very open-minded and aware that they can have sex without their emotions being engaged.”

For many escort workers, the nature of the work can make it difficult to leave even when they have paid off debts. Erica, 31, has a degree in French and Spanish from the University of Sheffield, and has been an escort since leaving university 10 years ago.

“It was a lifestyle choice,” she said. “I would get £1,000 in a bad week, twice that in a good one. Unless I was a lawyer or a doctor, where I’d be tied to my desk all day, what else could I do for that money?”

“I tried to leave the industry once. I got a temping job but I just couldn’t handle it. The nine-to-five lifestyle was restrictive. I had to readjust to counting my money. I soon went back to escorting. I see that all the time.”

The attractions of independence were also cited by Sienna, a 29-year-old with a 2:1 from a northern redbrick university, who has worked for an upmarket agency for several years. She said: “I am treated very well but I deal almost exclusively with long-term clients. They’re married men in well-paid, high-pressure jobs. They aren’t happy and they want an escape. I provide that.

“I love the flexibility. If I want to work, I do; if I don’t, I don’t. I’ve got my regulars, who I feel at home with, and to a degree I can pick and choose new clients too. That’s a luxury at the top end of the market.

“I pay my tax and my national insurance and I’m allowed to claim for my working wardrobe, mileage, subsistence — the usual things. I’m just a self-employed person at the end of the day.”

Despite such nonchalance, Sienna admitted that even for well-educated escorts at the expensive end of the market, prostitution all too often traps and damages its workers.

“I don’t have an endgame,” she said. “I know some girls say ‘two or three years then you’re out’, but few ever do manage that. It’s all too easy to be seduced by the money you can earn.”

MAGNANTI did stop, and when she revealed her true identity last week, she was fortunate. Her family, friends and colleagues rallied round. Her mother Susan defended her staunchly. “I am proud of her,” she said. “She is an accomplished scientist and an accomplished writer too. She is a wonderful woman.

“When she told me, I wouldn’t say I was shocked, I don’t think shock is really the right word. But I was a bit surprised. But she could always write. I haven’t read the blog. I want to read the book — I want an autographed copy.”

Her father Paul, who admitted he had used as many as 150 prostitutes after separating from Magnanti’s mother, was less sure, but not condemnatory. “She is a very intelligent girl and I wish she had become well-known under different circumstances,” he said. “I would rather things had worked out differently. But it’s her life to live.”

Nevertheless, the stigma runs deep. The graduate prostitutes contacted last week find the prospect of revealing the nature of their work daunting. Christine, a 27-year-old living in north London, has a degree in economics from Warwick University. She turned to escorting five years ago to supplement her salary when she was a trainee legal secretary. She earned £200 to £300 an hour and found it hard to “step away from going to nice hotels and having men hold doors open for you wherever you go”.

In the end she found herself torn between two worlds. “My real job became more demanding and the final straw came when I met someone and got caught in a whirlwind relationship.

“I was still escorting, but didn’t tell him at first — the impact would have been too immense. Then I couldn’t continue the lie, so I stopped.

“For a man to accept his girlfriend as a working escort he would need to be someone who isn’t bound by the constraints of monogamy. That type of person is rare. People can come to terms with Brooke Magnanti because it’s a recovery story. If she were still doing it, she would face criticism.”

To cope with the pressures of prostitution, some sex workers say they compartmentalise their lives. It is far from easy and Erica admitted the line between private and working lives can become destructively blurred. “You get trapped in a mix of the personalities that you create for clients,” she said. “Girls who do it part-time do it for the thrill of a new identity. But doing it full-time can really pollute relationships.”

And high-class prostitutes, no matter how clever and well-prepared, still face the risk of threats and violence. Anna, the Oxbridge-educated escort, said: “I’ve been secretly filmed and blackmailed — it would have meant an end to my career and my mother would have been devastated.

“I also once ended up stuck in a hotel room with a very mentally ill man who had a knife. He just metamorphosed once we were alone, and I knew that he was dangerous. I managed to talk my way out of being raped and hurt, or worse.”

You do not have to have a PhD to understand that when sex becomes nothing more than a commodity to be traded, your fortunes can go down as well as up, with enormous unpredictability. As one former prostitute observed in a student chatroom last week, the money might be easy to measure, but the psychological cost is not.

“I left the business,” she wrote. “Too many demands, uni wasn’t an excuse, and the ugly, 50+ fat clients far outweighed the young and tolerable clients. I can’t think about what I’ve done, I have been through traumatic times.”

*Names have been changed to protect identities. Additional reporting: Simon Trump.*

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your [advertisement](#).

**Times Online Services:** [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [E-paper](#)

**News International associated websites:** [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

