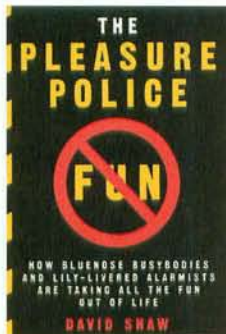


New Wave Puritans

In *The Pleasure Police*, David Shaw, media critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, fires off a joyous libertarian rant in which he attacks the neo-Puritan culture seeking to eliminate traditional vices such as sex, dirty words, liquor, and high-calorie food.

You can make a strong case that we are safer and healthier without any of these traditional pleasures — and a lot of people do. But the result of such a politically correct, sensitive, health-conscious culture can be, as Shaw's book points out, a humorless and self-righteous environment in which we are all continuously being scolded by what he calls the "Pleasure Police."

Shaw, a Pulitzer-Prize-win-



Lily-livered alarmists. . . ning critic, thinks we ought to lighten up. While acknowledging health, sexism, and other concerns, he is skeptical that some vices are as dangerous as they are made out to be, or that they need to be purged from our culture as thoroughly as they have been in recent years. Shaw's contrarian and free-spirited discussion is a valuable reminder. As for moral guardians, censors, and PC warriors, he offers these words: "May God have (some) mercy on their miserable fucking souls." — *Jon Katz*

The Pleasure Police: How Bluenose Busybodies and Lily-Livered Alarmists Are Taking All the Fun out of Life, by David Shaw: US\$23. Doubleday: (800) 323 9872, +1 (212) 354 6500, on the Web at www.bdd.com/.

Automatic Friend Maker

Firefly is a music and movie recommendation service that recently spun its way out of the MIT Media Lab into a Web site run by Agents Inc. The idea behind Firefly is simple: you tell the computer what music and movies you like, the computer matches up your profile with other people of similar tastes and makes recommendations on what you should buy.

Computer science geeks call this "reputation brokering," and it works pretty well in the lab. To the mix, Firefly adds interesting graphics, an oversized Netscape-enhanced user interface, and the option to act on the service's recommendations by typing in your credit card number and having the music delivered to your door. (The fulfillment order is done through an OpenMarket server and Newbury Comics Interactive. Albums are cheaper than retail but have a US\$4 shipping fee. Mine showed up in two days.) Firefly even asks you to rate its ads.

The underlying technology is "agents," the newest fad in artificial intelligence. Agents are autonomous software robots that go around doing their master's bidding. Firefly's agents, though, are simply a database of



The latest buzz on the Web.

preferences that are analyzed using statistical and clustering software.

The Firefly service is slow, however. On the day I tried it, the database took 30 seconds to repaint my Web page during the music-rating process. Quite a drag, considering it wanted me to rate more than 100 albums before it would give me a recommendation.

At last, Firefly made some recommendations. I like Kate Bush, The The, and Pink Floyd, so it suggested that I listen to The Beatles, The Monkees, and Spinal Tap. But when I probed deeper, I discovered that the service predicted I wouldn't like its suggested albums very much, anyway. Firefly did better picking movies, suggesting that I watch Fellini's masterpiece *8 1/2*.

Firefly offers a message box and Internet chat rooms, allowing you to electronically meet people who share your tastes. But its JavaScript crashed my Mac. I'm sure there's great technology here, but right now, Firefly just looks like an unwieldy front end to another online record store. — *Simson Garfinkel*

Firefly: on the Web at www.fly.com/. Agents Inc.: +1 (617) 234 5400.