

Book Review

JUST SEX? THE CULTURAL SCAFFOLDING OF RAPE

N. Gavey

London and New York: Routledge, 268 pages

ISBN 0-415-31072-5

Just sex? provides a stimulating and explicitly political account of rape and its relationship to normative heterosexuality in Western culture. Beginning with a short history of conceptualisations of rape, Gavey outlines the dramatic shift from seeing rape as rare and perpetuated by strangers to an understanding of rape as fairly common (experienced by around 15 per cent of women) and generally perpetuated by (male) partners within normal (actual or potential) heterosexual relationships. The historical claim – that an accusation of rape is both easy to make and difficult to defend against – is also evaluated in light of social science research suggesting that the exact opposite is true. Accusations of rape are uncommon, rarely make it to court, and only occasionally result in convictions. Even when convicted of rape, men are unlikely to go to prison (7 per cent of those convicted in one American study, p. 18). Gavey discusses this research in some depth, satisfying those with an interest in what these findings *mean* based on methodological issues and the justifications for particular decisions.

I loved the complications which Gavey skilfully introduced into the discussion. In particular, the advantages and disadvantages of ‘victim’ talk and the critique of viagra and ‘sexual dysfunction’ bring to life the complexity and humanity of this area. The problems associated with talking about men as victims and with gender neutral understandings of rape also enliven the later chapters and are balanced by other concerns, such as the paradoxical re-constructing of gender stereotypes which we arguably re-install ‘each time we continue to assert them as the very truths we seek to change’ (p. 219). Gavey also explored such issues as the ethics of labelling some women as ‘unacknowledged rape victims’ if they describe an experience consistent with legal definitions of rape, but also answer no to a direct question about whether they had ever been raped. Throughout, this book is fascinating but scholarly, well argued and well referenced.

As a student in a clinical psychology training programme, I felt that this book should be compulsory reading for mental health practitioners everywhere. However, I was also struck by its relevance to *anybody* involved in or with heterosexual society. Gavey is clear that not all heterosexual sex is coercive, overdetermined by gendered dynamics, or even problematic. However, I think that even for those most removed from experiences of rape and sexual violence, a working knowledge of the kinds of discourses about sex and rape that exist in our cultural milieu is useful in promoting responsible sexual choices. This book is for people who have had problematic experiences with sex, for those who want to have great relationships with (or without) sex, and for those who serve as ‘bottom of the cliff’ workers.

Although *Just sex?* is a very easy and involving read, mention of social constructionist ideas (e.g., language as constructive, identity as socially constituted) may not be entirely understood by some audiences. This is not really a limitation as Gavey gets her point across and doesn’t sacrifice the serious theoretical stuff, which makes this book interesting to people with a more academic background. Nevertheless, theoretical discussion is necessarily brief. Gavey’s position on the conflict between theoretical purity and social action is quite explicit: this book is about making changes in the real world, and theoretical sacrifices are necessary. Theoretical positions are tools; means to the political end of removing the protection of ambiguity in normative heterosexual relations and ending rape. I found the way Gavey draws on both traditional positivist research and social constructionist understandings (while simultaneously acknowledging their epistemological differences) both refreshing and sensible. Gavey’s suggestions that we attack rape on many fronts, rethink heterosexuality and remain reflexive seem likely to encourage further movement away from sexual violence and towards forms of just sex.

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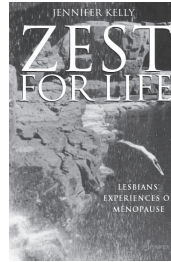
Zest for Life: Lesbians' Experiences of Menopause

Jennifer Kelly

Zest for Life is groundbreaking in its analysis of lesbians' experiences of menopause, showing how, particularly at midlife, lesbians are invisibilised in society, and how this impacts on their lives and the choices they make.

Zest for Life looks at Body Image, HRT, Sex and Sexuality, Health Services and Homophobia. It is an important, uplifting book both for lesbians and heterosexual women as well as health professionals, which shows that menopause need not be a time of despair.

\$34.95



The Butterfly Effect

Susan Hawthorne

There is poetry that seizes life, and poetry that merely inspects life. Susan Hawthorne's muse, asked which road she will take, answers: all roads. In *The Butterfly Effect*, Hawthorne presents an open world richly peopled from legend, literature, family and travels; but it is the forthright voice and the singular free play of energy and will, memory and perception that hold the reader. – Judith Rodriguez

\$27.95

Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women's Law

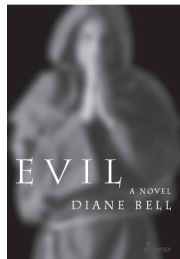
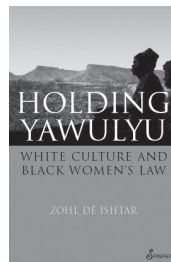
Zohl dé Ishtar

This book challenges White Australians to reconsider their relationship with Indigenous peoples. Unpacking White cultural practices, it explores the extraordinary difficulties which Indigenous women face when they attempt to maintain and pass their cultural knowledge, customs and skills on to their children. Zohl offers a deeper comprehension to those who aspire to be involved in collaborative projects with Indigenous peoples.

Zohl dé Ishtar has been nominated for the 2005 Nobel

Peace Prize

\$39.95



Evil: A Novel

Diane Bell

Evil. That's what it was. Elusive, but evil nonetheless. Having named it she felt fortified. It wasn't the obvious evil of bombing innocent civilians but a more subtle, pervasive thing. It lurked in dark places, shelves of musty black robes, folded not hung. Had they ever seen the bright light of the hard noonday sun or, like the bodies they cloaked, were they, too, denied? And so the novel begins...

\$34.95

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Cracks in a Glass Ceiling

New Zealand Women 1975-2004

This newly published book looks critically at developments in women's lives since 1975. Personal comments from almost 100 women flesh out the facts and figures, providing a provocative comparison of the present situation with the past.

Commissioned by the Otago Branch of NZFGW to follow on from the 1975 surveys *What Price Equality?* and *Women at Home*, the book is written by Joyce Herd, based on the research of Claudia Bell, and is published by the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women.

117 pages; 46 photographs;
7 page chronology; index

RRP: \$34.95 + Postage: one copy \$5;
Two copies \$8, more than two copies \$3 per copy.

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