

OUR WORDS



Our Books Now's
Literary Magazine
Issue 7

HELLO FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

I'm excited to introduce you to the seventh issue of Our Words Literary Magazine, where the theme for this month is gender-based violence.

In this issue, our contributors set out to define gender-based violence whilst remaining attentive to the slipperiness of the term and its vast associations. Our writers delve into the social, political, economic and creative implications of gender-based violence from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

Our writers explore feminist dystopian fictions and rape legislation worldwide, the sexualisation of women and the normalisation of abusive relationships in comic book fiction and film, and domestic abuse in the age of Covid-19. We also feature a review of Hallie Rubenhold's historical work shining a light on Jack the Ripper's victims, as well as an exciting interview with the debut author of *Rough*, a hugely important work of nonfiction tackling the relationship between systems of oppression and sexual violence in the bedroom. We are thrilled to be publishing the second chapter of Asha Askoolam's novella, as well as showcasing some excellent new voices in the creative writing and poetry worlds.

I hope you feel inspired and stimulated by this month's issue.

Happy reading!

Megan Pollard
Editor



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trigger warnings

This issue covers some sensitive topics and may be triggering for some readers. Each article will be marked with a specific TW and we advise readers to [seek support](#) if needed.

CRIMINALISING ABORTION WILL ENDANGER COUNTLESS LIVES

In 1973, following *Roe v Wade*, the United States Supreme Court legalised abortion in all 50 states. Protected by the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution, women were provided with the right to have an abortion up to 24 weeks of their pregnancy. The Supreme Court decided that the "right to privacy" extends to a woman's control over a pregnancy and that the State cannot determine an unborn fetus as a person (which was the main argument in defence of abortion restrictions). Although this was an incredible outcome (i.e., people finally had access to safe abortion care in instances other than life-threatening emergencies) various attempts and restrictions against abortions have threatened its success over the last few years. We must understand how detrimental the changes to *Roe v Wade* are for people, especially those in more marginalised groups, who want to choose if they keep their pregnancy, and how restricting reproductive rights is a form of gender-based violence.

From September 1st 2021, abortions in Texas after six weeks of pregnancy are illegal. Significantly, rape and incest are not considered exceptions for having an abortion beyond this timeframe. To complicate matters further, any person now has permission to enforce this law and sue anyone that assists a woman with getting an abortion beyond these six weeks for up to \$10,000. This 'anyone' can range from a nurse performing the abortion to the driver taking a pregnant woman to an abortion clinic. The threat of being sued if caught assisting someone with an abortion after six weeks means that fewer medical staff are available to provide the necessary care for these women. The Texas Ban will only raise the number of unsafe abortions as denying women abortion care and the correct facilities they need through this criminalisation strips them of their rights and can leave them in desperate situations. >>

What are the impacts of the Texas Abortion Ban? Our writer investigates this question and the effects it will have on different people.

Written by AREEBA FAHIM

Illustration by KRIZIABEL ALQUEZA

TW [abortion](#), [gender-based violence](#), [oppression](#), [reproductive rights](#).

meet our writer

Areeba is a 21-year-old recent English Literature graduate hoping to pursue a career in publishing. She likes to spend her free time reading, painting and playing the guitar.

>> It is crucial to acknowledge Donald Trump's role in approving the Texas Abortion Ban and how he, as an individual, and his Government, as an ideological platform, challenges Roe v Wade. Trump has publicly and vocally supported the anti-abortion movement, which includes speaking at the annual March for Life anti-abortion rally in 2020 and encouraging health care providers to deny patients basic health care based on their personal beliefs. Beyond this, Trump's changes to the Supreme Court have, and will continue to impact the Texas Abortion Ban directly. Over 220 Trump-appointed judges now occupy lifetime positions on the federal bench, many of whom are in favour of implementing more restrictive abortion laws and have the power to do so. This means that other states are likely to replicate the Texan Ban.

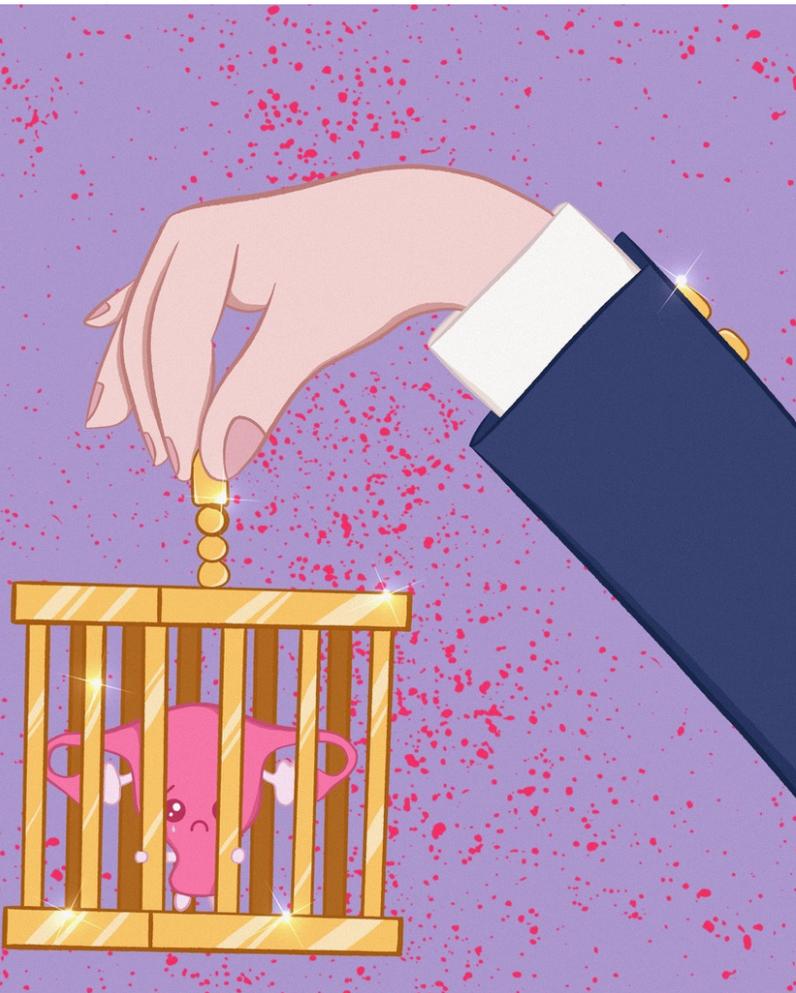
Eleven states have laws to ban nearly all abortions if Roe v Wade is overturned. Numerous 'heartbeat bills' have also been proposed in conservative Republican states such as Louisiana, Alabama, and Ohio in attempts to overthrow Roe v Wade. However, these were challenged, and Federal Judges have since blocked these laws from going into effect for reasons which include "defying the United States Constitution". Such laws aim to ban abortions once a 'heartbeat' is detected, around the sixth week of pregnancy. It is important to clarify that the term 'heartbeat' is incredibly misleading. As gynaecologist Dr Jennifer Gunter explains, "at six weeks of fetal development, there is no 'heart' that beats – instead, there is a detectable activity within a four-millimetre wide growth known as a fetal pole."

The Texas Abortion Ban, or any other abortion restrictions, do not save and protect lives. They are a form of gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is "based on an imbalance of power and is carried out with the intention to humiliate and make a person or group of people feel inferior and/ or subordinate". This includes but is not limited to acts that cause sexual, physical, emotional and/or economic harm. Denying reproductive rights oppresses women further by taking away their freedom to make decisions regarding their bodies and deepening gender inequalities. Without the ability to limit and time their pregnancies, women will always be disadvantaged at work and subordinate to men(1). Stripping these rights are not only coercive and controlling but also extremely violent.

The Texas Ban has the potential to have disastrous consequences. 90% of abortions in the United States are performed before 12 weeks(2). However, many women are not aware that they are pregnant at six weeks, especially if they are not actively testing or trying for a baby. To put this into perspective, six weeks is only two weeks after a missed period, meaning it is an incredibly small timeframe to arrange an appointment for an abortion, especially alongside other commitments. Lack of accessibility to abortion clinics is another big issue in Texas. Texas has about 24 abortion clinics, down from roughly 40 before 2013, when the State Legislature imposed a previous round of restrictions. These included requiring doctors to have admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles of the abortion facility and banning abortions after 20 weeks. With over 29 million people living in Texas, getting proper medical care within the short timeframe that the law offers is undoubtedly highly concerning.

The Texas Ban would prevent around 85% of women from receiving access to abortion care. This, in turn, would force most women to carry out their pregnancies, which can be extremely detrimental for a multitude of reasons including a person not wanting, or being in a position, to care for a new child. People in lower social positions, including people of colour (POC) and people with disabilities, will be impacted more negatively because they face even more accessibility issues through discrimination and institutionalised racism. Stereotypes about POC not needing the same level of care as their white counterparts already permeate the medical field. Even when access-to-care barriers (such as income and insurance) were controlled, racial and ethnic minorities received worse healthcare than white people. Black women have a maternal mortality rate three times higher than white women.

Another huge problem with this lack of accessibility is the anticipated rise in unsafe abortions. *WHO* defines unsafe abortion as "a procedure for terminating an unintended pregnancy either by individuals without the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to minimum medical standards, or both." There are many complications of unsafe abortions, including incomplete abortions (when contents from the pregnancy are still contained in the womb), haemorrhages, infections and even death as a result of carrying out this procedure without the correct equipment and skill. >>



>> So, you might be thinking, women should just leave Texas, right? If all these odds are against them, they should indeed move and get the help they need in another state. And they are. Abortion clinics out of the state are preparing to cope with treating more women seeking abortions. But not everyone has the luxury to leave the state at such short notice. Women with lower incomes already have decreased access to healthcare and birth control and will not be able to leave Texas and get the care they need easily. With demands like long work hours or childcare, travelling outside of their own state becomes a problem within itself. It is both time-consuming and costly to travel long distances. If we consider the extra financial demands of having and caring for a child, these pressures will undoubtedly affect the mothers and their children's quality of life.

In her non-fiction book *Without Apology: The Abortion Struggle Now*, Jenny Brown explores the fight for abortion rights in the United States by focusing on how the women's liberation movement publicised discussions of abortions which aided in legalising most abortions across the country(3). She highlights the importance of making radical demands such as demanding full reproductive liberty through uniting together as a collective force and how restricting abortions to certain circumstances undermines the movement, which is particularly important in light of the Texas Ban. Brown expresses that we can protect and advance abortion rights through actions including studying the radical history of the United States, joining and supporting feminist groups and continuing the conversation(4).

As Brown states, "a right is something you don't have to justify or explain to any authority"(5). We are all entitled to demand abortion as a collective right. The media purposefully hides countless positive abortion stories to create this false narrative that abortion is always a loss. This stigma makes it harder for people to recognise that this is a form of GBV. We must continue the conversation and educate others on how harmful these abortion restrictions are, especially for those in more marginalised groups. Instead of taking away reproductive rights, the US government could focus on strengthening and expanding effective measures of prevention and support. Such actions include the distribution of free contraceptives, campaigns to popularise the use of contraceptives, a more comprehensive sexual education curriculum accessible to greater numbers of young people, universal healthcare, childcare and parental leave. ●



- (1) Brown, Jenny. (2019). *Without Apology: The Abortion Struggle Now*. Verso, London. p.100.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p.18.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.11.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p.105.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p.24.

book information

TITLE Without Apology: The Abortion Struggle Now

AUTHOR Jenny Brown

PUBLISHER Verso

YEAR 2019

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Non-Fiction

WHY AREN'T FEMINIST DYSTOPIAS SCARING US?

Our writer looks at feminist fictional dystopias and how close they are to becoming a reality, starting with the erasure of reproductive rights in Texas and the apparent 'decriminalisation' of rape in England.

I found out about the Texas Abortion Law in the United States the same day I finished reading *Blue Ticket* (1), a feminist dystopian novel by Sophie Mackintosh, set in a world where women can no longer choose whether or not they will have children. In the story, tickets are randomly drawn from a lottery and picked by girls as soon as they start menstruating. For the society represented in the book, a blue ticket means a life unburdened with the responsibility of raising a child but perpetually looked down upon as the 'wrong type' of woman. In contrast, a white ticket promises what this particular society considers to be a perfect life: children, house and husband. Mackintosh's protagonist receives a blue ticket but wishes to be a mother. Her physical and emotional state is routinely checked by doctors, who pressure her to have an abortion after she illegally removes the metal implant that stops her from getting pregnant. After making it clear to her doctor that she is keeping the child, he reports her to the government, and she is forced into exile after neighbours break into her home.

Unfortunately, this situation could easily become a reality under the Texas Ban, which forbids abortions after six weeks of pregnancy and states that anyone believed to be helping someone seeking an abortion can be sued by any member of society. In Texas, the ban on abortions is one of the most extreme in the Western(2) world. Laws like this are put in place by the most privileged in society – white, rich, old conservative men(3) – but it is the oppressed groups, especially women living in poverty, that cannot travel outside of their home state for an abortion, who suffer the most as a result of these men's decisions.

Written by KERRIE DRAGHI

Illustration by ELISHA LABRIOLA

TW gender-based violence, abortion, reproductive rights, sexual assault.

I would like to say that I was terrified after discovering this, but that isn't entirely true. I have the privilege of living in the UK, not in Texas, but after 23 years of living in a misogynistic culture, where women's bodies and choices are constantly up for debate, I am no longer surprised at how this is reflected back at us by those in power and by society in general.

Often when women and marginalised genders attempt to describe the misogyny that marks our lives, we are met with disbelief and doubt because, for those at the top of the social ladder, it seems inconceivable that not everyone receives the same privileges as them. In 1963, Betty Friedan used the phrase "the problem that has no name"(4) to describe the indifference felt by mostly white middle-class housewives(5) towards their limiting role as women in a patriarchal society. In *Everyday Sexism*(6), Laura Bates notes that sexism is often invisible to those who do not experience its harmful effects. These effects include but are not limited to, gender-based violence, workplace discrimination, lower pay, and generally being treated as lesser in society. It is for this reason I find comfort in reading and watching works of women's dystopian fiction. It validates our reality – that this world is a dangerous place for women and marginalised genders(7) – whilst reminding us that things could always be worse.

Nevertheless, can women's dystopian fiction really be classified as such when there is a direct link between what is happening in them and current events? Recent events have shown that feminist dystopias aren't so far away anymore. Unfortunately, Trump's presidency and the recent refusal to grant women's reproductive rights(8) in Texas, which is currently due to be reviewed by the Supreme Court, have already exposed how history can always be reversed. Perhaps if we lived in a different world, where women and marginalised genders could trust the justice systems and governments to protect us, dystopias might scare us more. But we already live in societies that do not value our lives and instead condone violence against us. >>

>> Sure, we might not be living in Gilead yet. Still, rape conviction rates are at a record low in the UK, despite the number of rapes recorded by the police, more than doubling over a six-year period, with Rape Crisis UK declaring, "rape and sexual abuse have effectively been decriminalised."(10) The victim's commissioner for England and Wales has said that this is due to "the Crown Prosecutions Service's unwillingness to effectively prosecute rape cases." Only 15% of victims report their assault. For those who do, there are barriers to stop convictions from being made, such as the need for physical evidence and an immediate police report after the rape occurred. In the seemingly progressive state of California, in the US, there are exceptions to the laws regarding marital rape(11) that allows offenders probation(12) and doesn't require them to register as sex offenders.

The Handmaid's Tale's author, Margaret Atwood(13), has often talked about the "erosion" of women's rights and the fact that everything happening in *The Handmaid's Tale* has happened or is still happening in our world. In contrast, Mackintosh has said the genre "might be a trend but it's also our lives." Leni Zumas prefers the term "paratopia"(14) to describe what "is actually happening, maybe next week." Zumas's world of *Red Clocks*(15), where abortion is illegal everywhere in America, is perhaps closer to reality than most dystopian scenarios as it's speculated more states in the country could follow the Texas Heartbeat Act.

Considering how closely their plots can be linked to real-world events, it shouldn't come as a surprise that readers are turning to women's dystopian fiction for something that reflects our reality. In *Sex Object*, Jessica Valenti wrote of "naming the thing that happened so our stories are laid bare in a way that is inescapable and impossible to argue with."(16) This means that, for our experiences to be taken seriously(17), it is necessary to call them what they are and not to play down their effects. I believe this is something HBO's TV show *The Handmaid's Tale* does brilliantly. Too often, gender-based violence is overlooked in the media or, worse still, fetishised and used as a plot device to move forward the story or 'humanise' otherwise unlikeable female characters.

I'll admit *The Handmaid's Tale* can be a hard watch at times, but it was ultimately cathartic to see the topic handled in a way that depicted violence without giving in to gratuitousness. In a scene where one handmaid is subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM), the show's director makes a point of not explicitly showing "what has happened, but the emotional impact on her." This is unbelievably significant in a world overcrowded with graphic rape scenes where a common defence is that they are necessary for viewers to understand how horrifying the experience is.(18) As the director shows, one doesn't need to watch a potentially traumatic and triggering scene(19) in order to empathise with its victim.

Feminist dystopian fiction can be used as a form of engagement, linking activism and female solidarity.(20) However, the dystopian genre tends to ignore the experiences of Black, disabled, transgender and other oppressed women, focusing primarily on the problems of white, able-bodied women. Feminist dystopias are not dystopias for everyone. Statistics show that in England and Wales, disabled women are twice as likely to experience violence. Black women are less likely to report domestic abuse to the police in the UK, and transgender American people are four times as likely to be victims of violent crime.

Black women only need to look back in history for a time when they were kept as slaves, raped and forced to give away their children. Today, Black people everywhere are murdered by those appointed to protect them, serve longer prison sentences and are less likely to receive a complete education, not to count the symbolic violence that they receive daily due to structural racism and misogyny. With this in mind, their erasure from feminist dystopian stories is unrepresentative and inaccurate.

If the majority of books published are to reflect a wider range of experiences successfully, more diversity is needed in the publishing world and for publishers to invest in stories that are from perspectives different to their own. A recent study shows that the book industry lacks intersectionality, with just 11 percent of books published in 2018 written by people of colour. In publishing, 85 percent of editors in 2019 were white. For disabled authors, the statistics are just as bleak. A 2019 Publishers Association survey shows that just 6.6 percent of publishers identified as having a disability. Furthermore, only 3.3 percent of children's books published in 2019 featured disabled main characters. In terms of sexual orientation and gender, the result of a 2019 *Diversity Baseline Study* analysing the diversity of people working in the publishing sector found that 81% identified as heterosexual and 74% were cisgender women.

In both the book and TV show, *The Handmaid's Tale* fails to portray the realities of all women and marginalised genders. The topic of race is glossed over, not one transgender woman or non-binary person is ever present, and disabled women are shown only once, in a disturbing scene where they are led into gas chambers and murdered. The latter scene appears to serve for no reason other than shock value and, ultimately, disempowers disabled women by placing them in the category of helpless victims. Thankfully, the viewer is saved from having to watch them die, but the impact would've been more significant had we seen a disabled character rebelling and fighting against the system in the same way white, able-bodied women have. The entire premise of a feminist dystopia is the survival of the privileged where only the most privileged groups in society are able to survive and fight against the regime. Atwood said that fertility in Gilead "is higher in rank than racial feelings." The author imagines Gilead's society has moved past years of racism, as their bid for fertile women and more children is more important than that. >>

inspiring reading

Title The Power

Author Naomi Alderman

Year 2017

Publisher Little Brown and Company

Language English

Genre Thriller/Sci-fi



meet our writer

Kerrie Draghi is a writer and student passionate about supporting the VAWG sector and helping to end gender-based violence. She is also an [Our Streets Now's Higher Education Ambassador](#) and contributor to [Women's Aid](#) and the [Women and Girls' Network](#).

>> It's clear that more intersectionality is needed before the genre can accurately represent the lived experiences of *all* women and marginalised genders. In my opinion, the key message of feminist dystopian fiction is that freedom is always worth fighting for. And it is emboldening to witness [US campaigners of women's rights appropriate the costumes](#) described in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a form of resistance against the oppressive laws seeking to claim ownership over their bodies. Similarly, after a week of watching HBO's *The Handmaid's Tale* in its entirety for the second time, I was not left feeling exploited or sickened. Even though what happens on the show is unquestionably horrifying, I felt stronger, braver and more hopeful. ●

(1) Mackintosh, Sophie. (2020). *Blue Ticket*. Hamish Hamilton.

(2) [Though abortions are prohibited altogether in a few countries](#) such as Madagascar, Egypt and Iraq.

(3) Although some women who claim to be feminists [are identifying themselves as pro-life](#).

(4) Friedan, Betty (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W Norton. p.15.

(5) In American suburbs.

(6) Bates, Laura. (2015). *Everyday Sexism*. Simon & Schuster UK.

(7) Especially those within oppressed groups.

(8) Directly reflected in the Texas Abortion Ban.

(9) The fictional world where *The Handmaid's Tale* is set.

(10) What this means is that it feels as though rape is no longer a crime because law enforcement and rampant rape culture in our society do not treat it as such. Therefore, the crime is treated as one that has little to no effect on the victim and its offenders are protected. Therefore, the crime is treated as one that has little to no effect on the victim and its offenders are protected.

(11) Until the 1970s Marital Rape Law Reforms, [husbands could legally rape their wives](#) as they were considered their husband's property within marriage.

(12) Where it is not available to non-spousal rapists.

(13) Atwood, Margaret. (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage.

(14) Whilst there is no definition for the term in the English dictionary, it's safe to assume it means a dystopia that is closely linked to happenings in the real world.

(15) Zumas, Leni. (2019). *Red Clocks*. The Borough Press.

(16) Valenti, Jessica. (2017). *Sex object*. Dey Street Books. p.112.

(17) This does not necessarily mean that everyone has to 'come out' with their experience or report them to the police/other authorities if this is not something they are interested in or able to do. In an ideal world, we would be taken at our word.

(18) Another argument for defenders of rape scenes on shows such as *Game of Thrones* that take place in archaic time periods/war is "[to show how it was at the time.](#)"

(19) [If you are triggered by depictions of sexual violence, RAINN offers a survivors' guide for consuming media.](#)

(20) [The costumes have been compared to the suffragettes](#) wearing white, green and purple as both signal unity and a strong feminist message whilst standing out in crowds.

FORGOTTEN WOMEN:

THE VICTIMS OF A KILLER'S STORY

British historian Hallie Rubenhold shuns the traditional and often unquestioned narratives to focus on the forgotten figures behind the legends. In her Baillie Gifford Prize-winning book, she subverts long-held assumptions about London's notorious killer, Jack the Ripper and, more importantly, his victims.

Like so many of us, I am a glutton for true crime. I have a disturbingly extensive knowledge of serial killer trivia which I frequently disgust and/or dismay my friends and family with, and my bookshelf makes for some worrying reading. But whether you're a true crime fan or not, it's hard to get away from Jack the Ripper. Type 'Jack the Ripper' into Google, and you get 38,500,000 results. The legend around one of London's most notorious killers is pervasive and, to many, still romanticised.

Written by JESSICA BARNES

TW misogyny, substance abuse, murder, mental health, grief, rape, violence against women.

Jack the Ripper permeates the popular culture in the UK, reincarnated in comics, books, films, and TV series. He served as the inspiration for the murderer in Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger*,⁽¹⁾ which was later adapted into five films, including one by Alfred Hitchcock⁽²⁾, and he has been the blueprint for many a sinister character since. Countless documentaries have featured him, and there is already an exhaustive library of non-fiction dedicated to unmasking the Whitechapel Murderer. But what most of us, myself included, have been guilty of is focusing too much on the killer and his grisly crimes and not on the people that truly matter – his victims.

Hallie Rubenhold readdresses this balance in her book *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* through an in-depth look into the stories of Mary Ann "Polly" Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly. The book is split into sections, each with several chapters dedicated to exploring these women's lives individually. It also provides context for the social, economic, and cultural issues that profoundly affected their stories, even before Jack started his 1888 reign of terror. >>

>> This is not a typical true-crime book. Other than the reference to their autopsies in the opening chapter, the victims' deaths are barely mentioned, and the details of the crimes are not dwelt on at all. Even though their deaths have defined the victims for over a century, Rubenhold transforms their encounter with the Ripper into a footnote in the stories of their lives, rather than their lives being a minor consideration in the legend of their killer. By starting with a swift debunk of shared assumptions, Rubenhold tells the reader exactly what this book is about. Not only is she going to upend everything we thought we knew about this episode in history, but she's also going to present us with a new perspective based on a proper examination of the information, unhindered by bias or preconceptions.

For those not familiar with the crimes or who have only a basic grasp of the details, I will briefly summarise them here. During the Victorian era, London, where the crimes took place, was enjoying its position as the world's largest city. Yet, while parts of the capital flourished, others became overcrowded and almost uninhabitable. The divide between rich and poor grew as the most vulnerable and desperate in society were exploited in quickly-deteriorating and poorly-paid working conditions, helping to feed the city's economic growth. Slum areas like Whitechapel sprung up, home to those driven out of other parts of London following the destruction of more affordable housing to make way for "railway developments and broad new thoroughfares."⁽³⁾

Often, the only option for inhabitants of these slums was common lodging houses, which "provided temporary homes for the homeless, who divided their nights between the reeking beds on offer [there], the oppression of the workhouse casual wards, and sleeping on the street."⁽⁴⁾ Four out of five of Jack the Ripper's victims found themselves, for a variety of different and yet depressingly similar reasons, in such circumstances. Forced to sleep on the streets on the nights of their killings, Polly, Annie, Elizabeth, and Catherine were found around Whitechapel, all with their throats cut and their bodies mutilated. His final victim, Mary Jane, was brutally killed in her own bed on November 9th, almost three months after the first murder.

The clues to the truth were painfully obvious, even from the start. Reviewing the surviving police and coroner's reports, we can see that there were never any signs of struggle, and it is likely the women never cried out or made a noise; the neighbourhood was so claustrophobically overcrowded that if they had, someone would have heard. The autopsies also concluded that the women were killed in prone positions, leading to the evident conclusion that they were killed while they slept.⁽⁵⁾

Since the first reports started surfacing, the idea that Jack was targeting sex workers who lived and worked in the slums of East London was quickly accepted as fact. But even the briefest examinations puncture this myth, showing just how easily people bought into that narrative. Rubenhold writes that for "over 130 years we have embraced the dusty parcel [of Jack's story] that we were handed,"⁽⁵⁾ without even a cursory glimpse beneath the wrapping.

It was as if the crimes were already incorporated into a tale that made sense to the wider populace. Of course, sex workers were targeted. Surely their lives of vice and shame invited such violent conclusions and the normative idea that they deserved it, living as they did on the margins and outside society's moral boundaries. But did anyone bother to look into who these women were? Did they care enough to interrogate their own assumptions about who was most likely to be a victim and who wasn't? The surface-level explanation of an age-old occurrence - that women are punished for their sexuality - was accepted without a second thought.

This perspective of women can be summed up in a contemporaneous poem titled *The Angel in the House* by Coventry Patmore⁽⁶⁾, which presents the supposed contrasting view to sex workers; the ideal women as domestic, humble, and subservient. Victorian society had an incredibly harsh conception of women who stepped outside of the bounds of this idealised womanhood. Single women over 30 were treated as outcasts and social pariahs, regardless of their histories or circumstances. >>

meet our writer

Jessica works for a creative education charity in Leeds and crams as much writing as possible into any spare moment she can find.

>> Newspapers of the time used gossip and unsubstantiated rumours to jump to conclusions about the women's lives, censuring them for not fitting this feminine ideal. They focused on the 'immoral' characters of the five women, painting them as dissolute sex workers to justify their fates. *The Daily News* printed on September 1st 1888, that Polly Nichols had separated from her husband some years before her death and then appeared "to have entered upon a downward career." It conjectured that she must have been in a nearby house in a state of undress and then "huddled" into her clothes and "deposited in the street" before her body was discovered, hinting at prostitution or promiscuity with little or no evidence.(7)

One newspaper wrote of Annie that she "probably did not rise until the shades of night enabled her to ply her hideous trade", and then added that she "seems to have spent her time in passing from liquor shop to liquor shop."(8) Elizabeth, another victim, was an immigrant from Sweden, and no one cared enough to try and track down her Swedish family to find out more about her life or confirm facts for their articles, despite the sensational stir the crimes inspired. As Rubenhold writes, "there were no dissenting voices to object to [their] portrait [in the papers] and no attempt to paint a fuller one."(9) The women themselves weren't seen as valuable, only their fates. This is particularly galling when you think how much time, energy, and money was poured into trying to unmask a faceless killer, but not even a fraction of this was directed towards his victims.

At the time of their deaths, the fact that these women were on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder contributes in no small part to how they were depicted. It was immediately assumed they were sex workers, showing Victorian society's contempt for people in these positions. They were much more willing to accept that such violent crimes would be directed at destitute women of questionable moral character than so-called innocent ones. People wanted to believe that nothing so awful could ever happen to them, and so they desperately sought reasons why they differed from the victims. The women's moral depravity, poverty, and even foreignness were easy targets to show that most Londoners were safe because they didn't share these attributes. In a time where people were "highly suspicious of those of other nationalities, races and religions,"(10) believing that immigrants were natural victims of a serial killer was a comforting explanation for the public.

"Part of me wishes that Rubenhold would have more explicitly condemned structures like the police and the press that so effectively silenced these women and their stories, constructing narratives around them in an attempt to rationalise the actions of a psychopath. But then, the author does such a beautiful job of letting these women speak for themselves that a hint of vitriol would have spoiled the work and mishandled the message."

Rubenhold holds back from an all-out attack on a largely apathetic society, but she lets them betray their indifference in their own words. Instead of criticising them outright, she uses excerpts from newspapers, literature, and records to show the depth of people's lack of empathy. In her conclusion, she cites a letter sent to *The Times* by a senior civil servant named Edward Fairfield where he expresses his concern about the murders. It was not because of the crimes' horrendousness or the victims' fates, but because he was worried violence in Whitechapel would drive its "vicious inhabitants"(11) into more genteel neighbourhoods.

You would assume that Fairfield would be describing the killer with terms like 'vicious' but, despite the atrocious nature of the crimes, he reserves adjectives like that for the people who just happened to call these areas of the city home. Fairfield is much more generous in his description of the violent killer, referring to him as an "unknown surgical genius"(11) who has "at all events, made his contribution towards solving the problem"(11) of ridding the East End of so-called undesirables. And although his opinion may seem shocking, it was by no means unique.

Part of me wishes that Rubenhold would have more explicitly condemned structures like the police and the press that so effectively silenced these women and their stories, constructing narratives around them in an attempt to rationalise the actions of a psychopath. But then, the author does such a beautiful job of letting these women speak for themselves that a hint of vitriol would have spoiled the work and mishandled the message. I realised that this is a book of quiet rage, not wrathful condemnation. >>

>> Rubenhold herself threads a hefty dose of conjecture through her narrative, like the newspapers of the time. But where the journalists of the 19th century were content to spin libellous and lazy rumours into column inches, you can see the effort Rubenhold has put into finding all she can about the women's lives. She has to contend with apparent gaps, conflicting statements, or even lost records. Yet, what she lacks in facts she makes up for in educated guesses backed up with contextual detail. Combined with her sensitive and gentle handling of their narratives, her book draws a heartbreaking picture of systematic struggle, alcohol abuse, and undiagnosed mental health issues in almost all of the victims' lives.

Polly, Annie, Elizabeth, Catherine, and Mary Jane's stories are handled with care and understanding. Rubenhold doesn't whitewash these women's lives or mistakes; she lets them speak for themselves, to be themselves, probably for the first time since their names became synonymous with their killer. In order to understand the impact these violent crimes had, it's not enough to look at the data, the patterns, or the objective facts. Victims need to be seen as individuals, to give their lives and their losses worth, and help us empathise. How easy is it to dismiss the enormity of an epidemic of violence when the victims are just statistics? By giving these women their names and identities back, we can help dismantle the patriarchal system that tries to silence them.

Although there are similarities in their tales, usually because of the prejudice and unfair treatment they all encountered, they are individuals, and it's important to give each their own story. The author helps transform them from often faceless victims of a horrific crime into actual, complex individuals. By dedicating a few chapters to each woman, in turn, she doesn't dilute their stories by trying to tell them concurrently. Each woman has her own space, narrative, and the focus she deserves. As the reports can be relentlessly bleak at times, I also found this helpful as I could read Catherine's story and then take a break, steel myself, and come back to Mary Jane's.

The final tragic detail that Rubenhold leaves her reader with is a list of items. When the bodies of Polly, Annie, Elizabeth, and Catherine were found, their clothes and belongings were catalogued. The exception is Mary Jane, who was found in her lodgings and was dressed only in a chemise. Rubenhold lets the mundane list of items show the human side to these women; the petticoats still stamped with the names of the workhouses they briefly called home, the black bonnet stuffed with newspaper to make it fit, one single red mitten.⁽¹²⁾ These snapshots give intimate glimpses into what was important to these women, what little possessions they chose to keep on their person, and what items helped them get through each day. More than anything, it makes them seem more real.

If these women were all English, had been from middle-class families, were all well-behaved wives and mothers, would there have been more outrage for the lives that were lost? Almost certainly. Although this represents the commonly held views of a previous century, there are worrying echoes of our society here as well. There was a willingness to vilify women, especially if there was a hint of sexuality or independence attached to them, which is something we've still to unlearn. Just look at how women choose to dress is still seen as indicative of their promiscuity, or how the frank discussion of women's sexuality can be seen as taboo.

People who belong to marginalised sections of society, who "lack prestige or power and generally come from lower socioeconomic groups"⁽¹³⁾ are known as the 'Less-Dead' because of the value society places on them. Victims like the women killed by Jack the Ripper still slip through the cracks are still victimised even after their deaths, and sometimes even vilified almost to the same level as their attackers.

In recent history, Peter Sutcliffe - otherwise known as the Yorkshire Ripper - was another killer who is believed to only target sex workers. Although his crimes eventually caused a media storm before he was captured in 1980, after over a decade of violent assault and murder, the police "only started to take the case seriously once "innocent young girls" [...] and not just sex workers had been killed." It wasn't until his fifth victim, 16-year-old Jayne MacDonald, that his crimes began making headlines because she didn't fit the mould police had dismissively placed the other women in. His victims were scrutinised, judged, and the idea that sex workers were 'fair game' pervaded press coverage and police statements.

Identity erasure goes hand in hand with this culture of victim-blaming. There's a tendency to shift blame onto the victims as if they deserved their fate because they didn't lead blameless lives. An attacker and their crime monopolising the identity of a victim is an issue that many victims of violence suffer to this day. Many women and marginalised genders face first the indignity of violence, then the double indignity of becoming victims of lazy rhetoric, baseless assumptions, or dismissive anonymity. Too often, the perpetrators are romanticised or become the sole focus, and we lose the victims in a new form of violence not often discussed. Today, and throughout history, the lives and stories of men have been prioritised over those that identify as anything other than cisgender males. Men have traditionally been viewed as the leaders of many societies, so they can dictate the narrative, leaving others unrecorded, distorted, or purposefully erased. Patriarchal values also colour perceptions.

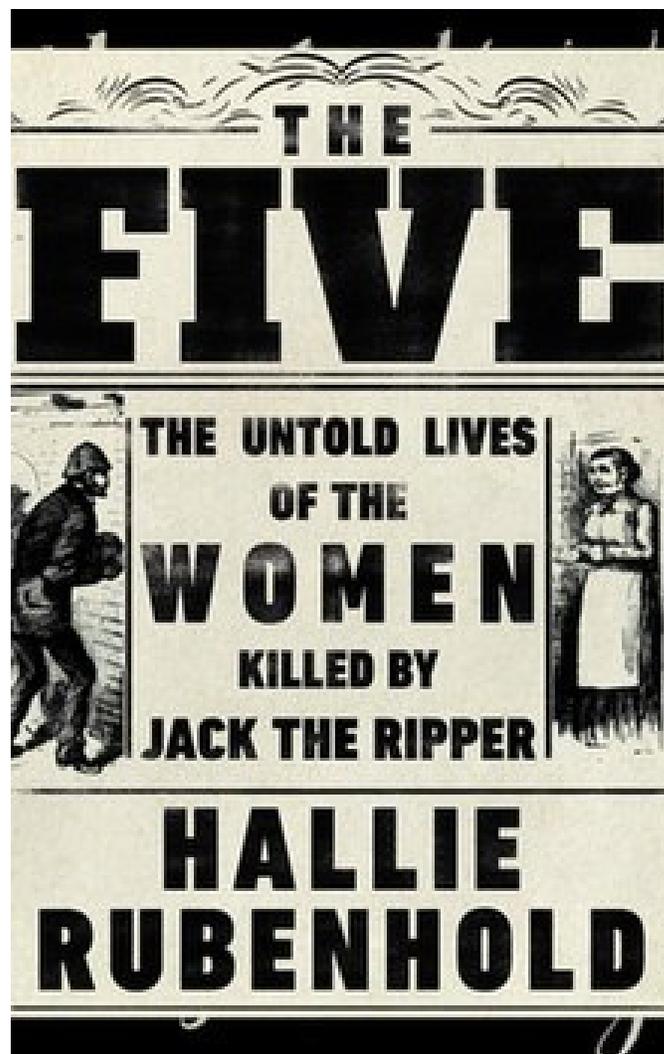
>>

>> Women that are seen to differ from the preferred system – who choose to assert themselves over men, live more independently, or express their sexuality more openly – are often considered deviant. In hundreds of years worth of Western literature and decades of films, these women are punished for this type of behaviour.

Although prostitution is not technically illegal in the UK and there is more awareness around – and open discussion of – these issues, there are still echoes of the structures and attitudes that contributed to the cycles of poverty and misogyny that these five women faced. Women who are out of options are often pushed into sex work, and once they're in this profession, they have to contend with societal stigmas and outdated attitudes, not to mention often exploitative or unfair working conditions. Even those who choose sex work face these issues, irregardless of the fact that they've pursued this career of their own free will or that sex work is a necessary service or an empowering job for many. When violence is perpetrated against them, it is often seen as unsurprising or even as expected. Or sometimes even deserved.

Like many great pieces of social history, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed By Jack the Ripper* holds a mirror up to our own society. The similarities between the five women's stories – the traumas, the substance abuse, the personal losses, the slow spiral downwards as they're trapped in a vicious socioeconomic cycle – show that their stories weren't unique. And sadly, they continue to be not uncommon today. By showing us their stories, by giving them a voice, Rubenhold isn't just unearthing their history. She's asking us what we're doing to make sure this doesn't continue to happen. Not just the crime but the violent erasure of women's identities. How are we helping them? How are we breaking down these oppressive systems? What are we doing now? The answer, sadly, is not enough. ●

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book information

TITLE The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed By Jack the Ripper
AUTHOR Hallie Rubenhold
PUBLISHER Transworld Publishers Ltd
YEAR 2019
LANGUAGE English
GENRE Biography

from Victim to Supervillain: The Reinvention of Harley Quinn

The future of women in comic books has been directly linked to Harley Quinn's storyline, from a victim of intimate partner violence to a subject with agency. How did two female writers manage to do it?

Comic book fiction has been popular with consumers since the very first publication of *The Yellow Kid in McFadden's Flats* in 1897. The comic book industry is thriving and continuing to capture fans with compelling stories and unforgettable characters. "DC comics sold 502,000 copies per issue of *Batman* in 1960 and raked in around \$1.28 billion in sales in 2020". Maryjane Dunne proposes that "comics have the ability to both shape and reflect the changes in society"(1). However, it may be argued that it is not the comics or stories within them which necessarily affect change but the characters themselves. The evolution of Batman supervillain, Harley Quinn, is an example of how one character has epitomised the changes happening for women in the 21st century.

Written by ALEXANDRA KNOWLES

Illustrated by SIMONA VORLOVA

TW violence, abuse and content of a sexual nature.

Harley Quinn is one of the rare comic book characters that started on television before being introduced into the comic book story arc. She was originally written as a one-off character to appear briefly in the 1992 televised episode of *Batman: The Animated Series* in an episode titled 'Joker's Favor'. The character's TV popularity caused the writers Bruce Timm and Paul Dini to introduce Harley Quinn into the comic books. Harley's origin story starts in *The Batman Adventures: Mad Love* (1994). Dr Harleen Quinzel is a psychiatric intern at Arkham Asylum prison. During regular therapy sessions, she becomes infatuated with one of her patients, the notorious supervillain, the Joker. The Joker uses his influence over Dr Quinzel to break out of Arkham Asylum successfully. In a bid to please the Joker, Dr Quinzel jumps into a chemical vat of acid, permanently bleaching her face and skin. She goes by the new name of Harley Quinn and trades in her psychiatrist uniform and glasses for a new red and black harlequin costume which highlights her curves and oversexualises the character. When Harley changes her physical appearance to please the Joker, it is the beginning of a longstanding abusive relationship between servant (Harley) and master (the Joker). >>



>>> Harley Quinn is a clever and cunning character, as well as a skilled acrobat and ruthless fighter. Harley outsmarts the Joker by doing something he has never been able to do: get close enough to kill the Joker's long-standing nemesis, The Batman(2). Although she shows immense skill, she is always reduced to the role of the harlequin, serving the Joker's every desire and violent whim. This portrayal of women is problematic because it suggests that gender equality is unreachable and women exist for the service of men. As the story progresses, Harley's subjectivity continues to be ignored, and she is treated worse by her male counterparts.

In multiple storylines, the Joker physically attacks Harley; he pushes her off a desk, kicks her out into the street, beats her up and pushes her out of a window(3). While the reader witnesses many scenes of violence, Harley's character remains faithfully infatuated; she believes that he loves her. In one scene, Harley sings the Joker a Happy Anniversary song, and he throws her into a back alley filled with hyenas. "Quinn laments...you're a certified nutso wanted in 12 states and hopelessly in love with a psychopathic clown"(2). Misrepresenting women as overly sexualised victims of abuse is highly problematic. The Joker consistently beats Harley down, yet she does not leave him or lose any love towards him. Instead, the Joker's violent behaviour goes unpunished. The Joker and Harley's relationship models behaviour that could be damaging for young boys and girls to see. It shows young viewers that gender-based violence is somehow acceptable and rewarded. It teaches the predominantly male readership(4) that women are playthings to serve and satisfy the desires of the male ego, be it in the real form of intimate partner violence or in fantasy.

The Joker's physical violence is unbridled and culminates in multiple attempts to murder his girlfriend. In *Batman: No Man's Land (1999)*, the Joker tries to kill his girlfriend by trapping her in a rocket and sending her into space. In another scene, he shoots her in the stomach with a gun concealed by flowers and stands on her fingers as she clings to the ledge of a skyscraper. In one disturbing scene, we see the extremity of Harley's unfaltering attachment to the Joker. At the end of *Mad Love (1993)*, she is admitted to Arkham Asylum; she is physically and emotionally broken and hates the Joker.

Suddenly, she notices a note from him reading "feel better soon - J" and a flower, her mind is instantly changed. The doctor asks her, "how did it feel to be so dependent on a man that you'd give up everything for him, gaining nothing in return?" and Harley answers, "it felt like a kiss". Harley's unhealthy devotion to her abuser is extremely harmful to young girls who look at comic books for examples of empowerment and loving relationships. It is hugely problematic that her storyline continued in the same vein for almost two decades. Harley's numerous male writers and creators seemed to increase the character's trauma over time, the Joker's rage reached new heights and her fragile mental state is never discussed seriously.

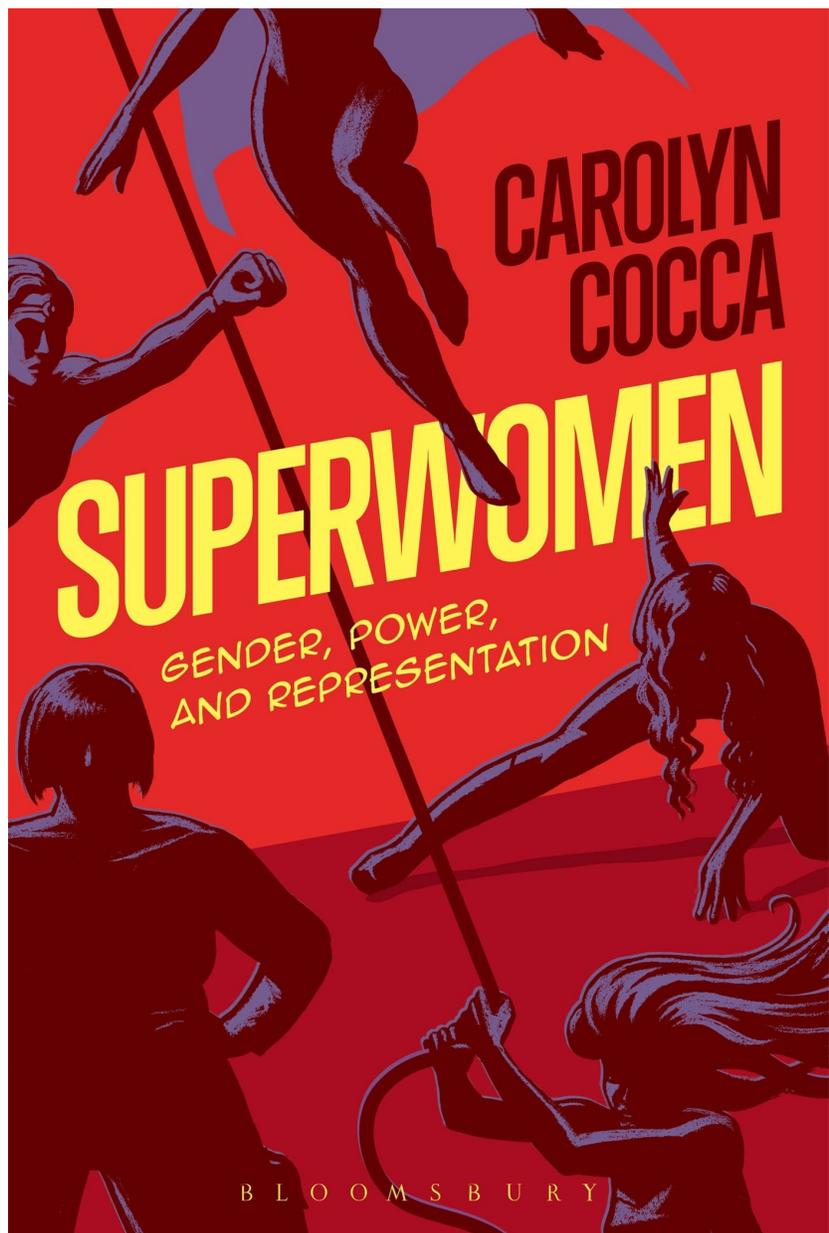
In 2009, writer Peter Calloway attempted to develop the character of Harley Quinn by teaming her up with fellow DC villains Catwoman and Poison Ivy, the three women form an alliance to protect each other. The DC series *Gotham City Sirens (2009- 2011)*, stands out as an all-female comic book that does not solely focus on the ambitions of a man. *Gotham City Sirens* was a critical addition to the comic book fiction genre because it displayed strong women working together in a team, albeit a dysfunctional group of scandalous criminals, but a team all the same. Harley's character developed a darker side, with her strength being manifested into hate towards the Joker. In one scene in *Gotham City Sirens Vol 1:24* she says, "you think I'm just a doll. A doll that's pink and light. A doll you can arrange any way you like. You're wrong. Very wrong. What you think of me is only a ghost of time. I am dangerous. And I will show you just how dark I can be".

In *Gotham City Sirens Vol 1 #21 May, (2011)*, (10) Harley hunts down the Joker and tells him, "I'm going to kill you. For everything you've done to me. All the times you've made me feel useless and small. For all the times I will never forget. For all the things I can never forgive". Disappointingly, she does not get her dues. She is overwhelmed by nostalgia, and her vengeance is short-lived. The series was disappointing because the character had many opportunities to cement her freedom but in the end, she was overcome by her devotion to the Joker. Peter Calloway never explained his reasons for continuing the abusive storyline, perhaps he felt that Harley was so deeply associated with the Joker that she wouldn't have much success as a stand-alone character. >>>

>> In the *New 52 Suicide Squad (2011)*, (5) Adam Glass included Harley in a team of misfits and criminals on suicide missions. Unfortunately, Harley's character went through some distasteful redesign in this series. She was drawn semi-naked in every scene. In the first few pages, it appears as though Glass has given Harley her freedom from the cruel clutches of the Joker. However, in the final pages, it is clear that we are seeing the same old representation of Harley Quinn. The Joker's face has been cut off by the villain, the Dollmaker. Harley finds out that his face is being held at Gotham City Police Headquarters. She breaks in and recovers Joker's face. Her teammate, Deadshot, awakens tied to a chair, and Harley approaches him, she covers Deadshot's face with the Joker's face. She begins yelling at him as if he were the Joker, asking, "why did you leave me?" and professing her love for him. Deadshot manages to stop Harley by shooting her in the stomach. The series did not do much in the way of liberating Harley or representing her strengths. She is portrayed as crazier than before, over-sexualized, darker and more vengeful but, ultimately, still a victim of abuse. The character's depiction begins to seem hopeless.

In 2013, hope for Harley Quinn was renewed. The character finally got the positive transformation she deserved at the hands of new writers, couple Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti. In *Harley Quinn, Vol. 1: Hot in the City*, Harley transitions into an empowered and fiercely enjoyable character. She is free from her abusive past with the Joker and able to leave behind her days of being a victim. The writers gave Harley a way out and, in doing so, unlocked her true potential. In this new chapter, Harley emerges with a new title as the 'clown princess of crime'. For the first time in comic book history, she is fully independent, does what she wants and of her own will. Palmiotti and Conner wrote storylines that encapsulated the character's fun and playful side whilst maintaining the character's iconic passion for mayhem. "She has packed up her entire life to make the big move to New York. When her motorbike and sack full of junk are stopped at a red light, she is disturbed to watch a man dragging his dog across the street. Angrily, she fishes for a bullwhip from her sack, and snaps through the dog's leash before wrapping it around the dog-walker's neck. Gleeefully, she adopts the dog on the spot, towing its former owner by the neck as she speeds through the now green light".

In fact, Conner and Palmiotti were the first writers (male and female team) to properly address Harley's problematic character development or lack thereof. The writing team freed Harley from the oppressive weight of years of victimisation and objectification. They breathed new life into her, and, with it, a new Harley was born. Palmiotti and Conner explained that it was important to change more than Harley's representation. "We had a fear of her being a secondary character in her own book. We took her back to Brooklyn and we gave her her own friends that she picks and her own enemies..it was really important to do that so that she could stand on her own two feet", Conner said. Unlike previous writers, Palmiotti and Conner understood that Harley could be a beacon of hope for survivors of abuse. Conner explains, "she not only leaves her situation, but she also finds her own group of friends and trustworthy family. We wanted her to grow and evolve and show that even somebody who has it rough and has been in a rotten relationship can get out on her own and make change for herself". >>



inspiring reading

TITLE Superwomen: Gender, power and representation

AUTHOR Carolyn Cocca

PUBLISHER Bloomsbury Academic

YEAR 2016

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Cultural Studies

>> In her new form, Harley is fun and chaotic, and her sexuality is no longer her most distinguishing feature. Instead, her mind, strength and super agility become her superpowers. As a result of these changes, she regains her power and her clothes. She still has her trademark characteristics but now they are celebrated in the form of colour, creativity, and ferocity. Harley Quinn is more than a comic book character, she represents survival for victims of abuse, she shows that change is possible and that it is never too late for a person's story to be rewritten. Palmiotti and Conner reshaped Harley into a strong woman who can inspire readers and affect change. She is able to make the transition from a victim of abuse to a strong independent woman, who lives on her own terms. Palmiotti considers how writing about a survivor of abuse could affect the readers of comic fiction. The writer says, "for some people, if they have something they are going through, reading about a character experiencing a similar situation and recovering from a similar history allows them to relate to their trial—even if the best real-life solution would never be the solution a character like Harley would choose". The writer adds that "a lot of times people don't have people that inspire them to [make] a better choice, so..they look to the things they love, whether it's comics or games."

Interestingly, in 2016, DC's screen adaptation of *Suicide Squad*, David Ayer did not take on Palmiotti and Conner's Harley Quinn. The film actively skipped over the abusive relationship between Harley and the Joker and instead romanticised the couple. All the elements of Conner and Palmiotti's Harley were gone. In fact, in the film's final release, the most poignant scenes of violence between the Joker and Harley had been cut in a last-minute decision to change the overall tone of the movie. Sarah Moran rightly criticised the studio decision, by saying, "the film doesn't appear interested in exploring the troubling and messy reality of abuse that's baked into Joker and Harley's dangerous push-pull dynamic...there is no pattern or cycle of abuse". As a popular comic book movie "aimed at teenagers..it verges on being irresponsible and comes dangerously close to glorifying what has been, historically, quite a toxic relationship – especially with merchandise hailing the pair as "relationship goals"". Ashley Callahan warns that "it is important not to forget the original character relationships from the comics as we cross over to different interpretations", especially one so prolific.

Unlike *Suicide Squad (2016)*, DC's newest cinema release, *Birds of Prey (2020)*, portrays Conner and Palmiotti's version of Harley Quinn. The story centres around Harley striking out on her own, having left the Joker and the abusive relationship behind for good. She teams up with the Birds of Prey, a team of strong and skilled female protagonists who defeat the male villain, Black Mask. This is a pivotal moment in the film, which represents strong women united against the patriarchy. Each member of the group is a self-made woman working to take down the patriarchy one punch at a time. In a moment of catharsis, Harley tells Black Mask, "your protection is based on the fact that people are scared of you. Just like they're scared of Mr J. But I'm the one they should be scared of. Not you, not Mr J. Because I'm Harley f***ing Quinn"(6). The *Birds of Prey* movie was a huge stride forward for women in comic fiction, "the movie doesn't mistake abusers for antiheroes or sexualize its female leads unnecessarily and it sets the bar for nuanced depictions of female comic-book characters on the big screen, and that's a huge win."

The story is a positive reinforcement of female empowerment and challenges the objectification of women in this genre of fiction. The film comes after the profoundly important movements of #MeToo and Time's Up in 2017, which has exposed sexual abuse and harassment worldwide and demanded gender parity and equality for all. If we consider for a moment the notion that life imitates art, then any story of abuse, whether digital or in print, should be dealt with carefully. Comic books typically attract younger readers at crucial stages of their childhood. "Harley Quinn has become a pop-culture force of nature...on Halloween, little girls are known to dress as the antihero", meaning that representation matters. We often look for ourselves in the stories we read, enjoy or watch. Writers must exercise caution when creating and writing characters because there is no control over the readership in the budding age of free information, and narrative can be the only difference between building a victim and a survivor. We have to create characters that reflect the changes that we want to see in society. With the help of writers like Conner and Palmiotti and social movements for equality, we hope to see more inspirational representations of women in comic books. Young readers worldwide deserve to see strong intersectional and diverse characters, who they can see themselves in. Comic books should represent people from different social positions and realities, representing a diverse range of identities in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, disability, religion, and so on. The female character must be afforded the same opportunities as their male counterparts; opportunities to evolve, diverge and exceed society's expectations. ●

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meet our author

Alexandra was born in South Africa and currently lives and works in Ireland. She is a literature and languages enthusiast interested in modern fiction, graphic novels, comic books and cinema.

INVOLUNTARY CELIBACY AND ITS ROOTS IN EXTREME MISOGYNY

Visceral, gruelling and unforgettable - Bates' *Men Who Hate Women* brings a new meaning to these words in the worst way imaginable. After a deep dive into the terrifying world of online Incel culture, a message of danger mixed with hope emerges.

Author [Emma Gannon](#) calls Laura Bates' *Men Who Hate Women* a "rallying cry to end suffering, for both men and women"(1). This statement could not be more accurate and apparent to me after I finished reading this book - this "rallying cry" runs throughout and perfectly sets the tone for this book's fierce call for reform and awareness. Reading this book felt simultaneously freeing and terrifying; while I learnt about the deepest and darkest spaces of the internet, I felt almost relieved that this information was at my fingertips. A reaction as visceral as this is a relief to me as a reader; it is often cited that any emotional response to a piece of literature, film or art means that one is invested in the topic discussed.

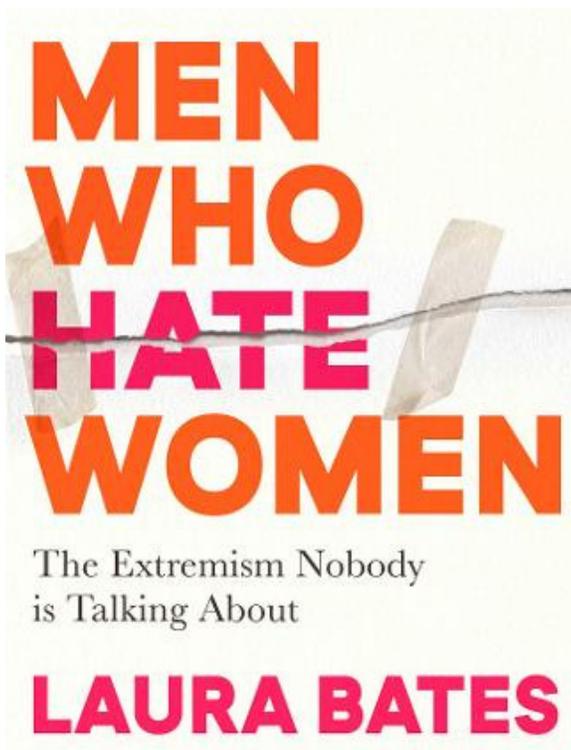
Written by JESSICA HILL

TW rape, sexual assault, mentions of sexually coercive language in the context of involuntary celibate culture, gun violence.

Laura Bates is a feminist writer whose notable contributions to feminist literature include the creation of the [Everyday Sexism Project](#) website. Bates created this website with the sole intention of letting individuals submit their own experiences of sexism they faced in their everyday lives. The website led to the book's publication under the same title, propelling Bates into the mainstream world of feminist writing. Her transition into the study of extreme misogyny is a logical one; it builds upon the base level misogyny that Bates has previously studied in the *Everyday Sexism Project* - applied to the context of far-right extremism and misogynist hate groups.

Men Who Hate Women is the product of Bates' months of research and undercover work into the underground network of men who believe their sexual and personal misfortunes are at the hands of women. To understand the book, it is important to note the context behind who these very *Men Who Hate Women* are. These are referred to a group known as 'Involuntary Celibates' ('Incel' for short), a collective of men embedded with right-wing and misogynist hate discourses. Incel culture is consequently composed of male supremacist hate groups that primarily exist in internet forums, centred on [spreading hate speech and horrifically graphic propaganda](#) about women as the barrier to their lacking sexual lives. >>

>> The culture's origins are relatively tame, with its beginnings with a handful of groups of men sharing their inexperienced sexual lives in a pseudo-safe space. Yet, alt-right politics and 'free speech' seeped their way into these forums, becoming the now 'normal' Incel rhetoric, relying heavily on right-wing extremism and sexual violence(2). The men who belong to these dark expanses of the internet are hard to define as one homogeneous group, but Bates finds that men have joined in order to seek solidarity with other men who believe that women are to blame for their sexual misfortunes.



book information

TITLE Men Who Hate Women
AUTHOR Laura Bates
PUBLISHER Simon & Schuster UK
YEAR 2020
LANGUAGE English
GENRE Non-fiction, feminist literature, law, internet culture

The societal context of *Men Who Hate Women* (e.g., the impact of Incel rhetoric on crime and violence) is just as significant as simply understanding the term 'Incel', as discussed in the previous paragraph. Evidently, the word 'hate' seems almost to simplify the actions and opinions of these groups, especially when their rhetoric has been propelled to the forefront of the UK public's understanding following the [Plymouth shootings](#) last August. Known as the UK's worst mass shooting in a decade, Jake Davison went on a mass killing spree with a previously removed firearm licence. [The debate about Davison's motives became controversial](#); it wasn't made particularly clear that Davison had been a frequent member of the Incel sub-culture. Davison would post *YouTube* videos of him ranting about his lack of a sexual partner and contribute heavily to *Subreddit* pages in correspondence with the Incel sub-culture. Scarily, it seems that Incel culture has made its way into the public's understanding, but little has been done to educate or counteract.

Bates then portrays her findings in this book, going undercover as 'Alex'; a pseudonym which she hides behind, by falsely presenting as a prospective member of these communities in order to join forums and *Subreddits*. Following her infiltration into the online Incel world, she goes into great depth about the language, trolling methods, and real-life 'baiting' that perpetrate these online Incel spaces. Through this, the reader is led through the murky waters of the online worldwide Incel community. The chapters which stood out to me were *Men Who Prey on Women* and *Men Who Blame Women*.

Men Who Prey on Women discusses the very real topic of a "buffoonish guy hiding his shyness behind a cheesy joke,"(3) versus the Pick Up Artist (PUA) mentality, which teaches men that if you push a certain combination of metaphorical buttons, your pursuit of sexual advances will be successful. I found this striking for several reasons, notably in the context of public sexual harassment (PSH), where such a culture of daily controlling, intimidating and objectifying women for sexual gain is reduced to a cheeky remark. It becomes concerning when these act as a facade for PUA mentality, where the lines between jeering and sexual harassment become blurred at the hands of Incel rhetoric. Bates goes to extraordinary lengths to expose the so-called "recipes" men in these circles follow - almost all of these being toe-curlingly reminiscent of the casual PSH that women endure all too often(4). She mentions the 'frustration' that some men feel not being able to say certain things when pursuing a woman. These men see this as a problem with women as a whole, which becomes an urgent problem in the context of gender-based violence and victim-blaming (e.g., 'she was wearing x, she was asking for that wolf-whistle') that underpins PSH acts. Seeing women as the problem is often what leads to misinformation and stereotypes surrounding PSH. This becomes particularly worrying when the legal protections against this kind of behaviour towards women is almost non-existent, especially in the UK legislation. >>

>> My second favourite chapter, *Men Who Blame Women*, deals with Bates' investigations into the response to social feminist movements (such as the #MeToo) by communities of men who actively blame women for such movements taking place. These are not, as perhaps anticipated, 'she was asking for it' lines that have become all too familiar. What occurred instead was a mass exaggeration on the point of the #MeToo and sexual harassment, where the 'manosphere'(5) decided it was easier to "avoid women at all costs"(6) - in the name of removing themselves from the risk of being accused of sexual assault - rather than contribute to helping the world become a better place for women. What stuck with me was that, in the face of women sharing their personal experiences with sexual harassment, many men in positions of power became all too worried about their own livelihood. One example is the 'Billy Graham' rule by which men, such as Mike Pence and the namesake of this rule, refuse to eat or meet alone with a woman other than their wives to avoid sexual harassment allegations(7). This reveals itself as strikingly misogynistic in a fast-moving political climate, where actions like this foster a culture that becomes hostile to women who are already under-represented in politics. Women do not need to be left out of political discourse due to a male ignorance of feminist movements.

Even though unbearable to read at times, Bates' book contains an important tone in helping the reader empathise emotionally with its message of awareness and zero-tolerance of the behaviours presented, no matter the gender of the audience: potential victims of Incel culture and potential targets of Incel infiltration (e.g., young men and boys who exist casually on the internet, who are at risk of stumbling across Incel rhetoric). The undeniably misogynistic themes within the Incel culture, as mentioned above, and their link to gender-based violence demonstrates the urgency behind Bates' work. Incel forums rely on the constant and very open harassment of women in every possible setting - internet translated into real-life situations. These forums can be challenging to regulate and investigate at their source in a legal context. Stopping the spread of these forums is a viable solution, which arguably relies on the concept of controversial internet tracking, making this problem overwhelmingly multifaceted. Overall, a note of warning sustains, but also one that is fiercely hopeful is that this kind of behaviour can be systematically changed. ●

(1) Bates, Laura. (2021). *Men Who Hate Women*. Simon & Schuster UK Ltd (inside cover).

(2) Ibid., pg.14.

(3) Ibid., pg. 63.

(4) Ibid., pg. 67.

(5) Bates describes this manosphere as "women-hating communities" and the "sprawling web of groups, belief systems, lifestyles and cults". See: Ibid., pg. 4.

(6) Ibid., pg. 110

(87) Ibid., pg. 112

meet our writer

Jessica is currently undertaking a Master's degree in Human Rights Law, having recently graduated with a degree in Law. As an intersectional feminist, Jessica believes that contributing to an organisation such as *Our Streets Now* is a great way of linking the sociological aspect of the law with legislative campaigns to give rights to the most vulnerable in society. When she is not studying, Jessica enjoys partaking in musical ensembles as a flautist and having a drink and a laugh with her friends.

SLEEPING BEAUTY

Written by NAOMI WILKINSON

Illustration by JENNIFER MCDONALD

TW rape, sexualisation, victim-blaming, mental health.

As I lay lips pursed in preparation
To decline once more
The act he asks of my fragile body
A gift for his cock
I lay lavished in vulnerability

I felt guilty. I asked to stay over
A tease; that name stuck
Latched to me as a mussel does a rock
And similarly
My cunt was shut, off limits for his cock

Laid on my side, he pretended to care
As he stroked and kissed
Caressed, cuddled, nuzzled into my neck
He laughed "it's okay"
"You don't have to do this for me today"

But his words weren't genuine and I knew
I drifted to sleep
A thrust and a groan I grew stiff. Alone.
"We're here now" I thought
I ached. I hurt. Half asleep but alert

I said I wanted to make him feel good
Not at my expense
But he was a feminist wasn't he?
Mighty self aware
So he couldn't have known I was sleeping

Or he didn't care. The man's bodies needs
Over the woman's
I shared with my friends the tales of the night
Felt no discomfort
Lied to myself as to not face the light

Yet I was in pain, not crushing but there
I had to tell him
My truth and how I couldn't comprehend
That this- this sweet man
Used me like a tool when I pleaded no

I hoped if I told him he'd realise
Him? Accountable?
I could only fantasise, for this man
That he'd know better
To not rape the girl and then forget her

He said the thought made him sick to the core
To do all that shit
When I wasn't one hundred per cent sure
But he didn't see
That's exactly what he did to me

He was sorry I felt the way I did
Not for his actions
Or for gaslighting me like I'm a kid
He knew right from wrong
And I had just not made it clear enough

Even though I was left with no closure
I was privileged
To speak without fear of not being safe
Unlike millions
Of women who are trapped and judged and scared

So before you ask "why not report it?"
Women's cunts are used
To keep us silent, restrain our power
We are not believed
And we are shamed to trust we led them on

Because of our underwear- "that red thong"
Our body language
Or the sexy dance we did to that song
Did we ask for it?
Or had we been sexualised all night long?



Addressing Sexual Violence

Interview by HANI THAPA

TW rape, assault, sexual violence, racism, misogyny.

Our writer meets journalist and debut author Rachel Thompson to investigate the pervasiveness of sexual violence and what we can do to tackle it.



book information

TITLE ROUGH

AUTHOR Rachel Thompson

PUBLISHER Square Peg

YEAR 2021

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Non-Fiction

From her time at university to a distinguished career in journalism, [Rachel Thompson](#) has always been fascinated by sex and gender politics. Thompson reports on the perils of modern dating and sex culture through a feminist lens, even coining the term ‘[cloaking](#)’ to add to its lexicon, which refers to being stood up and subsequently blocked from all contact by a prospective date.

In her debut non-fiction book, *Rough*, Thompson argues that sex is rarely exempt from or devoid of political responsibility, particularly in the overt and covert ways it intersects with wider systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, ableism, fatphobia, and homophobia. Taking care not to conflate the lived experiences of different communities, Thompson offers a comprehensive view of sexual violence and uses her privilege, as a straight cis-gendered white woman, to amplify the experiences of marginalised people.

As readers, we are urged to be nuanced, introspective, and empathetic in our conversations about sexual violence. Ultimately, Thompson reminds us that to eradicate sexual violence, we must simultaneously challenge all systems of oppression while also maintaining personal accountability for sexually violent behaviour.

Rough is timely and urgent; a thought-provoking book that demands to be studied cover to cover and then rapidly shared with everyone you know. Considering the recent national conversations about sexual and gender-based violence in the UK, exacerbated by the recent cases of [Sarah Everard](#) and [Sabina Nessa](#), it’s Thompson’s thorough analysis of rape culture coupled with authentic survivor testimonies that makes *Rough* a compelling and gut-wrenching read.

In the following interview, Rachel and I discuss how rape culture continues to be perpetuated in the UK and how we can build a counter-movement that reckons with all forces of oppression. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity. >>

HANI: The concept of violence is central to your book. Could you explain whether you're perceiving it from a structural perspective of violence intersecting with different forms of oppression, or you are referring to violent acts that occur during sex only?

RACHEL: Both. The structural violence creates a conducive context for sexual violence to take place. Sexual violence and microaggressions happen because of the wider context of inequality and power imbalances. They coexist. However, there are many abstract power structures that exist in society. In saying this, I'm conscious that it could be seen as placing the blame on an inanimate object which would absolve individuals to change their behaviour or to look inwardly. Therefore, I think it's also important to acknowledge individual choice. I speak to an academic in my book - Dr Fiona Vera-Gray - who says you can acknowledge that the conducive context exists, but you have to also see that not everybody chooses to act in that violent, misogynistic, racist, ableist way. There must be an element of personal responsibility within this context. This is crucial otherwise no one would feel an impetus to think they can do something about it.

We have seen the 'rough sex' defence being made in cases of sexual violence against women and marginalised genders. Abusers co-opt the language of BDSM to justify harming others. What part does the media play in perpetuating and commodifying harmful standards of sex?

The use of murky language is a problem. In the UK, for example, in the [Grace Millane](#) case, tabloid newspapers talked about rough sex interchangeably with sexual violence. But those terms aren't synonymous. It's great talking about BDSM and consensual rough sex, but there are people confusing that with sexual assault and sexual violence.

The tabloids have contributed to this confusion that now exists in the UK and in a lot of people's collective imagination when it comes to what constitutes sexual violence.

Tabloid media need to stop referring to sexual violence as rough sex because the subtext of that can potentially be 'if they like BDSM, then it's fine to abuse that person.' Interest in BDSM, kink, and rough sex doesn't mean that it's fair game to be assaulted and have your boundaries violated.

There's also an element of misinformation when it comes to TV programmes, books, etc., that claim to portray BDSM and the BDSM community. If they don't show the consent and the safety protocols that are at the heart of that community, it's essentially disseminating misinformation about these acts and presenting them as a mainstream thing that has no risks and doesn't require consent. It's dangerous to misrepresent a community that is, for the most part, extremely cautious and careful, has boundaries, aftercare, and safe words, which are all fundamental cornerstones of that practice. And yet, you don't see any of that represented, and if you do, it's a rarity.

In one of the later chapters, you talk about the normalisation of women experiencing pain during sex. You explain how this manifests itself in various contexts, with doctors and medical research failing to explore the issue enough and often, women themselves feel unable to stop sexual encounters when in pain.

Why do you think that we seem to regard female pain as an acceptable sacrifice for male pleasure as a society? Is it because men feel entitled to sex and women feel obligated?

My generation and 20th/21st-century women have been brought up to be people-pleasers, to make themselves small, quiet, do as they're told, not make a scene, and be polite. As someone who grew up in that environment of prioritising male feelings over my own comfort, I went out into the world thinking, 'if you're in pain, don't think about it because you don't want to embarrass the guy or tell them they're doing it wrong because his needs matter more.' This attitude exists in a heterosexual context, in particular, that it's unconscionable to tell a man to stop for a second because they're hurting you or that we have to grit our teeth for the sake of a man having an orgasm. It's an extension of the gender roles of women being expected to serve in society and sexuality as one form of that service.

In an article I wrote for *Mashable*, there were two women who had periods that lasted over nine months. One of them found out that they had Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) and was told by the doctor to get some more sun and stop using her phone late at night because she was so exhausted and lethargic. This was actually because she had been bleeding for nine months, and her symptoms were related to the fact that she needed to have her hormonal implant taken out because it wasn't interacting well with her PCOS. The lack of research and care really shows here. There isn't enough dedicated funding or resources for these common conditions that are wreaking havoc on people's lives, who are expected to just go about their day, carry on at work, carry on trying to have relationships. You're expected to figure it out on your own.

The stigmatisation of mental health seems to go hand in hand with the trivialisation of sexual violence. Could you explain why this is?

Mental health conditions can often be hidden and invisible to outsiders. That's comparable to sexual violence because you're relying on a person's testimony of their lived experience. Why do we find it so hard to take that at face value and believe a person when they're telling us that something happened or is happening to them? It comes from misogyny, which also intersects with many different identities. For instance, there's a [eugenics myth](#) that means we don't always believe Black women when they tell us they're in pain. So many power structures in society have a legacy rooted in colonisation and eugenics that are leaving indelible marks on our culture. >>

>> I talk in my book about having epilepsy, a neurological condition that is often hidden. I've had people question me, 'you don't really have epilepsy, do you?' Obviously, I do, but you just haven't seen me have a seizure or any of the visible symptoms. Just because you haven't seen it, it doesn't mean it's not happening. With depression, anxiety, and all kinds of mental health conditions, because people can't see it, they think it's not there. So, because people can't see what's going on behind closed doors, they think, 'I don't believe you.'

You write about how race can intersect with a person's sexual agency. It prompted me to reflect on how women and gender-variant Black people and People of Colour are often fetishised and exoticised by both individual people and the beauty/fashion industries. Could you expand on the role of white supremacy in cases of sexual violence against Black people and People of Colour?

This should be at the forefront of all conversations about sexual violence. Fundamentally, my book is about how our identity can be one of the ways that people can hurt us. I spoke to [Kimberly McIntosh](#), a *Gal-dem* reporter, about the first time she was going to have sex with someone, and the guy said he'd never had sex with a Black girl before. She then thought, 'you know what? This is not going to be my story!' So often, these kinds of experiences are erased from mainstream narratives about sexual violence along with other stories of non-consensual hair touching or comments such as 'if I can't get an erection, then I'll definitely know I'm racist.'

You can trace the hypersexualisation of Black people back to the Age of Exploration - when European ships arrived on African soil. You can see this happening on the recent *Love Island* with the way that the women were talking about Teddy's penis (a Black male contestant). People on Twitter were calling it the fetishisation of a Black man's penis, which ultimately stems from the Age of Exploration, and the way that white European 'explorers' were going to the continent of Africa and writing non-factual descriptions about Black people's bodies based on their own fantasies. Centuries on, we're still witnessing the impact of those words being perpetuated on mainstream programmes like *Love Island*.

The term 'fetish' is sometimes used to describe sexual attraction towards People of Colour but can also be towards fat people. I wonder if it's even useful to call these things a fetish or fetishisation because what we're essentially saying is that the desire for white bodies is default and everything else is niche or outside of the norm. Colonisation has created this idea of who is desirable in society and particularly that white women are desirable. You also see colourism playing a role in that. For example, we're seeing that if you're a dark-skinned *Love Island* contestant and you're a woman, night after night, you're not getting picked by male contestants because society tells everybody that that's a niche or not desirable.

One thing that really resonates from the book is the widespread frustration over the lack of robust sex education available to young people in the UK. Consequently, young people are turning to pornography to learn about sex. Why is this problematic for our understanding of sex and sexual violence? Are there any alternatives?

Ultimately, we don't have robust sex education in the UK. We have a long way to go before we destigmatise sex and find a way to talk about it in a non-awkward, constructive, and critical way in this country. This is a big problem because people will try to copy what they see from mainstream porn.

Mainstream porn is essentially a source of misinformation for young people. The main problem is that it portrays sex in an unrealistic way. That's a generalisation but if you look at mainstream porn and the free [aggregator sites](#), it's key to remember that porn is entertainment. People are portraying fantasies on-screen, and you won't get the most educational experience out of that because there are things that aren't included. For instance, consent negotiations, sexual boundaries, common considerations and conversations are rarely shown.

There's also a big element of the male gaze in a lot of mainstream porn - that's not being made by the feminist porn producers and ethical porn sites. That can be really damaging, especially for young women when they first learn how to do sex acts. I remember being a teenager looking at it and thinking, 'okay, this is what sex is'. You see a woman with an arched back, splayed across the bed in sexy and alluring positions, and you think, 'I have to look really good while having sex, it's not about me having pleasure, it's about me looking good to my male spectator.' In porn, even masturbation can be portrayed in a way that caters to the male gaze.

You talk about ethical pornography as a possible solution, but it can be quite alienating for those who cannot access it financially. Do you think that key elements of ethical pornography could be adapted to sex education curriculums or other forms that could reach young people?

It's such a double bind because tube porn(1) sites essentially make money from piracy, and as a fair-minded individual, you don't want to exploit sex workers. At the same time, that can be cost-prohibitive for some people. It's a luxury to be able to spend money on pornography. There are some ethical porn sites such as *Bellesa* that offer free options. As we start to talk more about ethical porn, and the more it becomes popularised, hopefully, it'll be more accessible.

In terms of sex education syllabi, in my book, [Beth Ashley](#) talks about educational porn, which is designed to be for young people who want to know how to do blows jobs and hand jobs etc. These are the reasons why young people look at porn when they have no idea what to do. Having that instructional content that isn't like a science video would be extremely beneficial. >>

RACHEL
THOMPSON

RUGBY

How
violence has
found its
way into the
bedroom

and what we
can do about it

>> From a school perspective, when I began researching academic studies about how pornography affects young people, one of the big issues that academics run into is that you can't show minors pornography. I imagine that might be a reason that would be brought up if (schools) were to explore something like this. If I were a parent and had a teenage child asking questions about sex, I would consider telling them about educational pornography. I think perhaps educational pornography is more suited to being delivered outside of the education system.

Rape culture can manifest in schools, on the streets, in workplaces, and elsewhere. Is sex education enough to dismantle it?

Sex education in the UK is so often shaped by lawmakers serving their own political agenda. That's concerning because we live in a democracy, and the syllabus can change if we elect a new leader. I'm hesitant to place all of my faith in sex education because if someone came along and said, 'we're going to start teaching about rape culture', that's great, but that's going to benefit the next generation. You will have all of these other adults in their 20's, 30's, 40's, so on who are still perpetuating rape culture. So yes, sex education is necessary as part of a cultural shift, but there needs to be a societal change too.

Social movements and activism can be useful in conversations around rape culture. For example, the movement that followed Sarah Everard's disappearance felt like a turning point in the UK. Even #MeToo hadn't happened on that scale in this country. Suddenly, we had people asking us, 'how can we actually tackle this in society?', and that's the question we all have to ask ourselves. It starts from challenging people in our social circles. If you come across people in your circle that's making rape jokes, call them out if you feel comfortable. But it has to be said if you feel comfortable doing so because not everyone is able to.

Looking to the future, how can we talk about masculinity so that it doesn't alienate men but calls them to action?

I think it's really important, especially with men of a certain generation, to avoid gender theory jargon terms such as toxic masculinity, patriarchy, gender roles. First of all, because those terms are being co-opted by certain alt-right media figures so those terms can be loaded. Also, for some people, it can be really alienating and an inaccessible way to have a productive conversation.

I'm guilty of having quite heated conversations with the men in my life about these things. It's really hard to not be angry, especially when, in my experience, my gender has shaped my lived experiences and some of the very bad things that have happened to me. It's hard to talk about those things and to have other people around you in certain conversations to almost invalidate that. >>

>> If you have a brother, father, or partner that wants to talk in a productive way, those kinds of conversations can be really helpful and could encourage them to talk to the men in their lives. Talking about it is an important first step.

I asked my dad that question I talk about in the book: 'what is hard about being a man?' It was interesting because he didn't have an answer. Even though my dad didn't have an answer straight away, my hope was that maybe he'd go away and think about the way that his gender has impacted his life experience. That would be a positive outcome of that conversation.

In order to eradicate sexual violence, we need an overhaul of societal and gender norms. How can we build a movement that simultaneously reckons with all systems of oppression, including racism, ableism, misogyny, classism, homophobia, fatphobia?

We need to have a coalition mindset. When we talk about privilege, some people will be very defensive and say, 'don't tell me I have privilege. I've had a hard life.' Of course, that's not what conversations about privilege are about. I feel that we need to lose the defensiveness and the comparison culture of 'I've got it harder than them because of X, Y, and Z'. We need to acknowledge that there is no hierarchy and accept that one person's experience is different to another's. It's not worse or better; it's not more or less serious. Moving away from that hierarchisation and recognising that our identities can present different ways that people can harm us is so important. As Roxane Gay explains in *Bad Feminist*, we shouldn't be playing the privilege Olympics.

Also, we need to have empathy. There are things in the book that'll be outside of some people's lived experiences. We are reading about other communities' experiences and the ways that sexual violence can manifest for people in that community. I think that having empathy is important, and saying, for example, 'I didn't realise that racism can manifest in this way. Even though as a white person, racism hasn't harmed my life, I should still care about other people because I don't want that to happen to people.' Fundamentally, it boils down to the fact that we should all care about other people.

When it comes to mainstream narratives of sexual violence, we predominantly hear white women narratives that are often one type of sexual violence. They're not necessarily disabled women and are often thin women. We're told that there's just one type of victim or survivor of sexual violence. That's not to say that the experiences of people who fit that description are any less valid, but it just means that's the experience we hear about so often.

When we hear about other experiences that don't fit that mainstream description, we find it less easy to conceive of that as violence. Nuance is really important. There's a flattening of discourse when it comes to this conversation. We only conceive of one type of sexual violence, and that's the violent stranger rape. But there are some forms of violence where you think, 'I don't really know how to describe that.' It might take you a really long time to come to terms with that, or you may never come to terms with it. We should hold space for that, for the nebulous experiences that don't fit neatly into the box of non-violence and violence binary. Real-life isn't quite as neat as that. ●



meet our writer

Hani is an intersectional feminist and literature enthusiast. She loves to write in her spare time and engage in conversations about gender and anti-racism.

(1) Porn tube sites allow users to stream explicit content for free. An example of this is *PornHub*.

SWIPING LEFT TO SAVAGERY AND RIGHT TO LIFE

Naina always fought against the oppression and injustice others suffered. But when it came to herself, she overlooked the violence and pain she was going through. What will it take for her self awakening? Will she be able to stand up for herself?

Written by AAYUSHI SHANDILYA

Illustration by JENNIFER MCDONALD

TW physical and psychological violence, abuse, mental health struggles.

It was a beautiful winter morning. Apricity was making the dewdrops evaporate and clearing the foggy weather when Naina decided to quit her job, wanting to travel and explore the world. She clearly remembers when she told her mother, Mrs Barua, about her plans.

"Mom, I've decided to travel the world, so I left my job", she brimmed.

"What! You left the job? Are you insane? You know about our situation! If your father asks for money, what will I say to him?" Mrs Barua shouted at her.

"I won't see him anyways. I'm leaving in an hour. All he does is take our hard-earned money and waste it drinking and gambling. If he wants money, he can get a decent job and be on his own. I'm done here", Naina defended herself. She added, "I don't want to end up like you, mom. I don't want to stay silent, accepting all the pain in the name of love from the one who doesn't even care about my existence. He just leeches off of us. And I can't take it. So, I've decided to move in with Atul and go travel the world together".

A tear trickled down Mrs Barua's cheek as though every word that Naina uttered pierced through her heart. Mrs Barua left the room without saying anything. A few moments later, she came back with a suitcase.

"Don't ever stay silent as I did. Pack up fast and leave as soon as you can. It's about time. Your father will be coming home any minute," Mrs Barua said quickly.

Naina apologised to her mother and hugged her with all her might. She packed up, left home and went to Atul's house. Time flew by as both settled. Soon, Naina started asking Atul to go travelling with her as they had planned. But he constantly ignored her. One day, she sat with him to talk it through.

"Atul, you know I want to travel with you, and that's why I left my job. And you agreed upon it. Then why do you always keep ignoring my words? Like hell, Atul, if you didn't want it to be like this, then why did you agree to it in the first place?" Naina said in disappointment, raising her voice a little.

"I know I promised you this, but there's too much work in the office. I asked my manager about the leave, but something urgent came up this month. And I can't take a holiday till the end of the year. Please, try to understand! And it's a long time till then, so I suggest that you find yourself a job. It'll help us to save a bit of money for the future if both of us work", Atul replied, calming her down.

Naina didn't want to do any nine to five gigs anymore. Instead, she preferred to travel the world with Atul with the small amount they saved working their fingers to the bone. Atul left the room without saying a word that day. Gradually he began pressing her to get a job, and every time she mentioned the travel plans, they argued. It became frequent and often so heated that Atul physically assaulted her. >>

>> Finally, tired of putting up with the frequent wrangling, Naina gave in and found a job. They seldom saw each other because of their work shifts, which created an emotional distance between them. Whenever they met, they'd get into arguments, each blaming the other for the chaos in their lives. Naina finally mustered up her courage and told Atul she wanted to break up with him.

The previous day, Atul had seen her entering a hotel with a male colleague. Now, Atul had been sure that Naina was cheating on him. This was not the first time that he suspected Naina of cheating. Atul was always jealous of Naina's male co-workers and questioned her relationship with them. He always tried to distance Naina from every other person who was close to her so that she would become more emotionally dependent on him. When he beat her, she felt that she couldn't tell anyone or ask for any help.

Enraged with jealousy, Atul grabbed a bottle of wine lying on the table behind him, hitting her straight on her head. Naina staggered and fell on the floor, unconscious and bleeding. Atul panicked and rushed her to the nearest hospital. When they returned home, Atul apologised for his mistake, promising he'd never hurt her again. He took her on a beautiful fancy date and professed how much he loved Naina. He also broke into tears while convincing her to stay with him. Those crocodile tears touched Naina profoundly, and she was convinced to stay with him.

As time went by, the arguments began again. Atul would often force her to give him all her money, just like her father used to. He did so to ensure she was not hanging around with anyone else and to undermine her travel plans, the plans she had dreamt of. If she refused, he became aggressive. There were bruises all over her body, not of love bites but scars from Atul's bashing. Whenever Naina mentioned that she would leave him, he begged her not to and promised to treat her properly. God knows how many times Atul broke his promise. He always yelled at her, body-shamed her, and diminished her. The physical violence, the hurtful words and his ear-splitting yelling often led to mental breakdowns. The smile disappeared from the face of the ever-smiling girl. Anxiety attacks, uncontrollable fear, and depression had become her shadow.

Often, Naina pitied herself for taking the wrong course in life. After enduring so much, she was still not ready to leave Atul, even if staying with him cost her self-love and physical and mental health. One summer evening, Mrs Barua gave her a call. Naina suddenly remembered the words that she told her mother when she left. She panicked, looking at the phone, and let it ring without picking it up. Finally, the phone stopped ringing. A few minutes later, a notification popped up. >>



>> "Sorry, did I disturb your trip or something? I'm sorry, beta, but I couldn't help it. It's been half a year since you moved out, and you didn't even call or text me once. I'm so worried about you. Oh! And I got some good news. I've finally divorced your father and am currently living in my hometown. I need to thank you, my brave little girl, for giving me the courage to do so! Come visit me if you're free. I miss you. Hope you and Atul are doing fine. Mommie loves you, sweetie <3."

Naina's tears were uncontrollable as soon as she read Mrs Barua's text. She was happy for her mother but hated herself for not keeping her word. Mrs Barua's words occupied her mind for almost a whole day when she decided that it was time to let go of this absurd life of hers and start anew. She left Atul's house with a note that said, "it's time to say goodbye to each other, Atul. You cost me my peace, and that's quite valuable. I don't want to choose you over myself this time. I've hurt myself enough, and I think it's time to embrace some self-love."

Naina had always wanted to visit the village, but she couldn't go there after her grandmother's death due to Mrs Barua's job as a government employee. It was challenging for Mrs Barua to take leave, and even if her leave was granted, Naina's father didn't allow them to go anywhere. Naina was happy there, working at the farm and often stopping by the lake to watch the sun setting. It was hard for her to forget Atul, but nature helped her do so. Naina felt that nature is probably the best healer for any and everything. During the six months that Naina stayed in the village, Atul searched for her in every possible place. He even went back to her house in the main town, but all he could find was a big lock on the door.

All this time, Naina contemplated what her plans would be. One evening, she was sitting by the lake, observing the sky turning shades of pink and azure, with Mrs Barua by her side, both drinking tea and chatting about life.

"So, what are your plans for the future? Are you going to continue living here forever? Don't you think of meeting someone?" Mrs Barua asked in a low voice.

"Mom, you know what I've been through in the past two years. I've survived a living hell. And you're telling me to experience it all over again? Never, mom!" Naina replied angrily.

"Not everyone in the world is the same, Naina. There's definitely someone who'd treat you kindly and make you happy. Happier than you are right now!" Mrs Barua calmed her down.

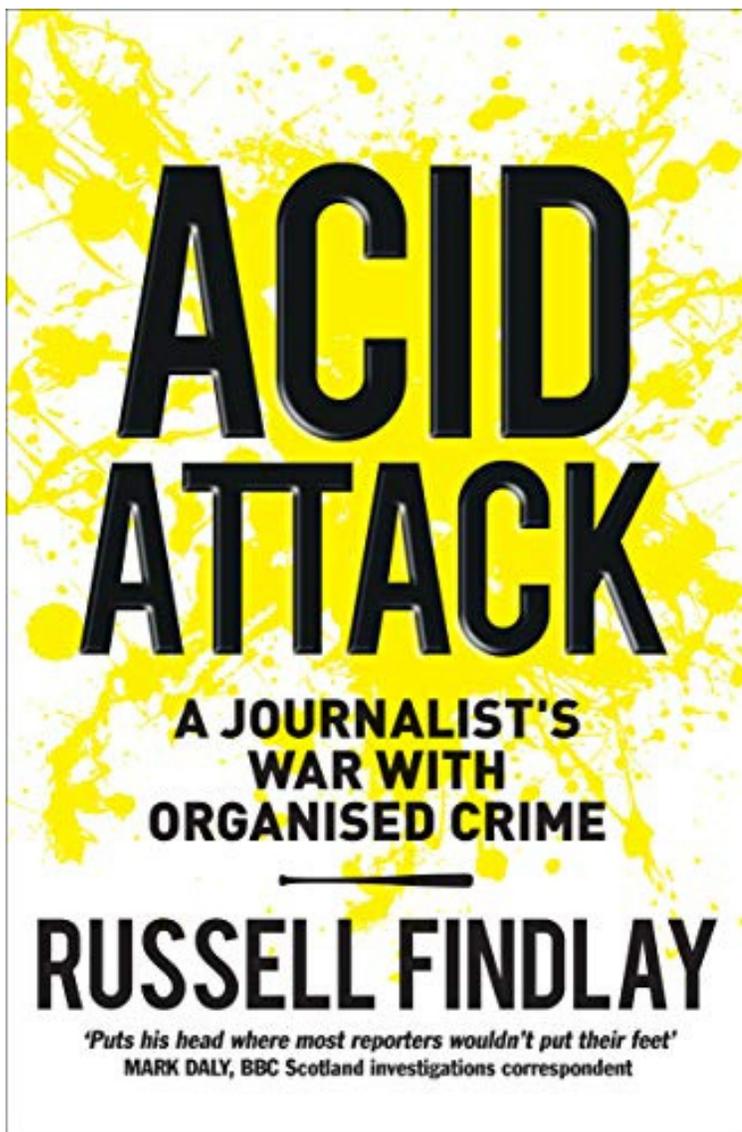
Mrs Barua left Naina sitting there, lost deep in her thoughts. After a few days, Naina returned to the city and found a job as a freelance writer for a comic book publishing house. She loved her new job because of the flexible work shifts, but the deadlines were brutal. Yet, she managed to do it because writing had been her hobby her entire life.

Months passed, and she felt secure enough to log onto a dating app. Naina was surprised to find a match that very night. His name was Paras and convinced by his decent-looking profile, Naina swiped right. Paras seemed to have bowled Naina over with his smooth talk, and they got along like two houses on fire.

After two months of talking online, they decided to meet at a Cafe near her place. Naina was wearing a beautiful sunflower yellow dress with frills, a jeans jacket, and boots to finish off the look. Her eyes sparkled; it was the sun reflecting in her beautiful brown eyes and the glimmer of a newfound crush.

Naina was waiting for Paras in front of the Cafe when Atul crossed the street and saw her. Suddenly, Paras appeared by her side and held her hand. Visibly angry, Atul left in a hurry. He could not believe that Naina was dating someone else. Fuming, he stopped at a nearby shop and bought a bottle made of glass, with a liquid bubbling inside it. >>

She had been avoiding the mirror all this time to escape the horror that lay in front of her eyes. Gathering the courage to see her reflection, Naina yelled at herself, 'no! I can't do this', and banged her hands on the wall opposite. Taking a deep breath and acting strong, she said to herself, 'but you have to do it, Naina! Either today or tomorrow.'



inspiring reading

TITLE Acid Attack: A Journalist's War With Organised Crime

AUTHOR Russell Findlay

PUBLISHER Birlinn

YEAR 2018

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Biography, Autobiography, True crime

>> Arriving back at the Cafe, Atul walked up to Naina's table and shouted.

"Hey, Naina!" staring at her

"Why are you here?" Naina growled.

"Can we talk outside?" he said.

"Excuse me for a minute, Paras", Naina said politely. "Atul, what do you want to say? Make it fast!" Naina asserted.

While Atul and Naina went outside, Paras remained seated, watching the two of them argue from a distance. Whenever Atul asked her for another chance, Naina assured Atul that she felt no love for him anymore and could never go back to someone who treated her poorly and violently.

"I've moved on with my life, and I ask you to do the same!" she exclaimed.

Slowly, unscrewing the bottle in his hand, Atul threw its contents on Naina, shouting, "you know how crazy I became after you left? I searched for you everywhere like a fool! Do you think I did all that just to listen to this shit of yours? If you can't be mine, I won't let you be anyone else's!" and he ran away.

Naina began shouting for help. Her face burned from the acid he had poured on her. Paras ran to her as she screamed in agony. He called an ambulance and rushed her to the hospital. Every day, until she recovered and beyond, he was a constant support to her, and they soon became each other's backbone.

Paras showed love and care for Naina in her most difficult time. In just a few months of knowing her, he supported her as if his life depended on it. So, when Naina recovered and was discharged from the hospital, Paras asked her to be his girlfriend. >>

>> It was difficult for her to accept after so much had happened to her in the past few weeks. She was scared of being friends with anyone, let alone getting into a romantic relationship. But after seeing his efforts to stay by her side, Naina decided to try, and they officially became a couple.

Seven months later, Naina woke up to the thin beams of sun sieving through the thick curtains of her window. She walked up to her window to draw the curtains aside.

"Oh, what a pleasant view!" she exclaimed as Paras entered with two coffee mugs.

"Don't you think it's a beautiful day for a new beginning?" Naina grinned.

"Indeed it is!" Paras answered, looking into her eyes affectionately.

They sat on the couch, watching the rainbow after a stormy night, taking small sips of coffee and talking about life.

"You know what, Paras, every sip of coffee with you gives me the courage to keep moving on in life. Or maybe it's not the coffee; it's just you sitting by my side", she chuckled.

"Indeed, I was there for you, and I will always be here, right beside you, but it was always you, my girl, who showed the courage to keep moving on in life. It was always you, who was brave enough to start anew." Paras hugged her tight, making her feel comfortable in the warmth of his arms, and kissed her on her forehead. His words only reminded her of what she already knew.

Finishing her coffee, Naina stood up and walked towards the restroom. She had been avoiding the mirror all this time to escape the horror that lay in front of her eyes. Gathering the courage to see her reflection, Naina yelled at herself, 'no! I can't do this', and banged her hands on the wall opposite. Taking a deep breath and acting strong, she said to herself, 'but you have to do it, Naina! Either today or tomorrow.' Her eyes were closed; beautiful brown eyes, a Grecian nose, beautiful scarlet lips and clear white skin, with a mole on the right of her forehead. That was the last picture she had of herself. A tear rolled down her cheeks as she turned her hands into a fist and opened her eyes.

Looking at the mirror, gazing straight at her half-burnt face, one eye distorted and a half mouth with a stitch, Naina broke down. She cried, feeling helpless, and screamed and banged her head on the wall and yelled, "Why did it happen to me? What did I do to him that he took revenge on me so brutally?" But she knew that she would have to accept and love herself.

Dwelling in the past was meaningless. So, after crying for a while and releasing everything stocked up in her heart, Naina pulled herself together and wiped away her tears. Swiping right the stream of tears, that day, Naina decided to love herself and her bruised face to eternity. This was the best 'Right Swipe' she could ever have in her life. And the next thing she remembered was her, standing by herself, for herself.

After throwing the acid on Naina's face, Atul deserved to be punished. Unfortunately, the laws in India are not so strict and instantaneous for such cases. Yet, Naina had made up her mind to fight everything in her way to get justice. She reported Atul, and the case ended in the Supreme Court. Weeks turned into months and months into years. Feeling emotionally and physically exhausted, the hearing process was one of the most challenging times for Naina, adding to her traumatic experiences.

Even so, she didn't lose hope, and finally, after four years, she got her justice. Atul was sent to jail for six years and ordered to pay a compensation of rupees 2 lakh. Yet, Naina felt that more could be done. For her, education from an early age was the key. Continuing her fight for justice, Naina got involved in educational courses for men convicted of crimes similar to Atul's and started teaching young boys and girls about gender-based violence. ●

meet our writer

Aayushi is a student pursuing a career in journalism. She loves reading literature of various genres and is also very passionate about writing and expressing how she perceives the world around her. Aayushi is the author of the book *Tangled Musings: An Echo of Emotions* and has won laurels for her quotes, poems and essays.

THE HIDDEN PANDEMIC

Domestic abuse is an ongoing crime that is all too common in the UK. How has the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the problem?

As COVID-19 cases soared across the UK, the entire population was forced into a lockdown to protect our own health and the health of others. The government message, 'stay home', was welcomed by a privileged section of society as a time to relax with their families and escape the stress of everyday life. Meanwhile, poorer families had a different experience. They had to risk their own health and the health of their relatives by going to work, as they couldn't afford to stay at home. For many women and marginalised genders, the impossibility of leaving the house meant they were trapped with their abusers with no means of escape. The pandemic hasn't been the cause of domestic abuse as the responsibility always lies with the perpetrator. Still, financial difficulties, increased time spent together, and the loss of control with the government introducing COVID-19 restrictions have only worsened pre-existing abusive behaviours and patterns.

Domestic violence and domestic abuse can be defined as "any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family, regardless of gender or sexuality". In the UK, domestic violence is a criminal offence. The legal definition comes from the Domestic Abuse Act 2020, which states that behaviour is abusive if it involves "physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; or, psychological, emotional or other abuse."

Written by KATE JORDAN

Illustration by KRIZIABEL ALQUEZA

TW domestic abuse, psychological and physical violence, mental health struggles, oppression.

Victims of domestic abuse can be protected by civil law and must have protection orders available to them, including non-molestation orders, designed to stop someone harassing, threatening or attacking the victim.

While both men and women can be subjected to domestic abuse in their lifetimes, women are disproportionately affected. Women and marginalised genders are more likely to be victims of coercive and controlling behaviours and killed by their abusers. Where female violence against males tends to take the form of responsive violence, often out of fear and self-protection, male violence against women and marginalised genders is often more about ascertaining power and control.(1) Controlling violence stems from the need to dominate, and when people with abusive tendencies feel they have lost control, they turn to violence. This can be linked back to the patriarchy, an oppressive system where men hold a hierarchical power over women, justifying their superiority by attributing it to natural differences between the two sexes.(2)

Men with patriarchal beliefs can assault their partners and pass off their behaviour as conventional practice because they have a sense of entitlement over women's bodies and feel they need to exercise their authority(3). Abusive behaviours can also be a direct result of many things: childhood experiences where the abuser has witnessed abuse themselves and understands it as a way to keep control within a relationship; economic circumstances where the abuser may have lost their job, leading to financial difficulties and increased stress; or the perpetrators' insecurities when the victim may try to leave, meaning they believe becoming more aggressive will help them to maintain their power. >>

How has the pandemic affected the domestic abuse scenario in the UK?

>> It is no secret that, throughout history, women have always been at an economic disadvantage compared to men. More specifically, single mothers find themselves more financially burdened than those women who have the help of a partner because they have no choice but to sacrifice their own economic viability in order to provide care at home(4). UK childcare is more expensive than in most other Western countries. The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)* conducted a study comparing childcare costs in different countries around the world. They found that, in the UK, the cost for two fully employed parents to send two children aged two and three to a nursery for 40 hours per week would cost them around 54% of their earnings. In comparison, two parents earning the same amount of money in the United States would have to pay about 35% of their earnings and 30% of their earnings in Australia. So, many women choose part-time employment over a standard 9-5 job where the wages may be higher.

Being the primary caregivers for their children (and potentially other elderly relatives) means they miss out on opportunities such as overtime at work, which their male colleagues can pick up instead. In 1995, sociologists Duncombe and Marsden famously coined the unpaid care, paid employment, and emotional support women provide for their families as the 'triple shift'(5).

At home, they do most of the unpaid work around the house, such as cooking, cleaning and supporting the emotional needs of their families. To add to this, once women are actually at work, they have to deal with the gender pay gap, which in April 2020 (in the UK) was 15.5% among all employees. Because of these reasons, women are more likely to depend on their partners for economic support.

Women who live in less well-off households (income of less than £10,000) are 3.5 times more likely to experience domestic abuse than those with a higher household income. A key reason for this is that poorer women are more likely to live in areas of high crime rates, so their exposure to violence increases(6). Additionally, women who depend financially on their partners have a reduced ability to leave because they don't have the financial support or bargaining power behind them to do so, meaning it's almost certain their economic situation would worsen if they did.

In August 2020, The Social Metrics Commission found that Black and people of colour (POC) households in the UK were more than twice as likely to live in poverty than white households. It also found that all families who lived in deep poverty, which is living at least 50% below the breadline, were more likely to suffer from reduced income since the pandemic.

This study has no evidence to suggest that women from any particular race, ethnicity or cultural community are more at risk of domestic abuse than other women. However, this study highlights that Black and POC women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, which means they are less likely to have the financial freedom to leave an abusive partner.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened this situation in the UK, with unemployment sitting at 4.8% as of March 2021 compared to around 4% pre-pandemic, and by 14 June 2021, a total of 11.6 million employees had been put onto the furlough scheme, which reduced their income. The furlough scheme meant they received 80% of their regular wage from the government without having to go to work. Hence, women were forced to spend more time with their abusers since there was no longer a break when they or their partners would usually work. The *Office for National Statistics (ONS)* reported that *London's Metropolitan Police* saw an increase in the number of calls relating to domestic abuse following the nationwide lockdown. Many of these calls were from third parties, which isn't surprising as most people were spending a lot more time at home during this period. >>

book information

TITLE Ghosts

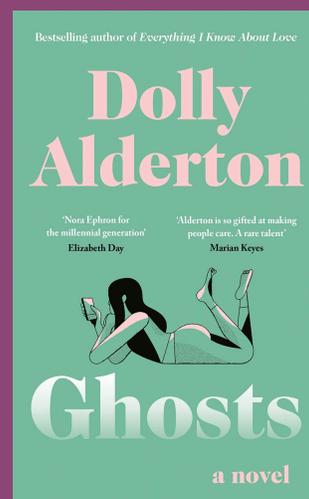
AUTHOR Dolly Alderton

YEARS 2020

PUBLISHER Penguin Books Ltd

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Domestic Fiction



Prevention is always the best method to stop abuse from occurring, so there is no question we need to build on what is already being taught in the national curriculum about healthy relationships.

>>The police recorded 259,324 offences relating to domestic abuse during March-June 2020, a 7% increase from 242,413 for the same period in 2019. It's important to note that many cases are not reported due to victims' fear of their abusers. Victims might have received threats of further violence if they reported the abuse to the police, or they often feel pity for their abusers, believing that they can help their abusers overcome their problems if they stay. Victims may also perceive that law enforcement doesn't take domestic violence cases seriously enough as prosecutions for domestic abuse cases fell by almost a quarter at the end of 2019 compared to the previous year. Hence, for many, it isn't worth the risk of the case falling through and being left with their abuser. Therefore, data held by the police can only provide a partial picture of the actual level of domestic abuse that occurs.

During the pandemic, one of the hardest-hit sectors has been the hospitality industry, where many of its workers are young people. Many pubs, restaurants and bars haven't reopened since March 2020 because of financial difficulties, leading to many job losses. A report by the BBC found that the number of under 25s on payrolls in the past year has fallen by 289,000. Therefore, more young people are being forced to spend an increased amount of time at home with their abusers. Typically, women of a younger age are more likely to face domestic abuse. The March 2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales highlighted women aged 20-24 were significantly more likely to be abused than women aged 25 and over. This could be due to younger women entering into their first serious relationships around this age, so they find it more challenging to identify or confront abusive and controlling behaviours. Some younger women may also mistake controlling behaviours as a sign they are wanted by their partners, so abusers can manipulate their victims into thinking they only act in such a way because they love them.

Besides, younger people are the more frequent social media users, meaning that many young girls are now experiencing tech-based abuse and, or alongside, physical abuse.

Tech-based abuse is when perpetrators of abuse misuse technology to monitor, harass, threaten and intimidate victims.

Perpetrators may exploit the location tracking features on certain apps, such as Find My iPhone, to track their victims' whereabouts. They may also use social media platforms to create a concealed identity so they can harass or abuse victims online. Cosmopolitan surveyed over 122,000 people to find out about their past and present relationships. Many noted their partners frequently logged into their phones or social media without permission and criticised their social media interactions. They also mentioned their partner would turn up unannounced after sharing their location online.

The most shocking outcome of the survey was most of the people who reported these behaviours believed they had never been in an abusive relationship. This is likely because most people associate domestic abuse with physical violence only when, actually, abuse also encompasses psychological elements such as controlling, threatening or intimidating behaviour. >>

meet our writer

Kate is starting her first year at university studying History after taking a gap year. She is passionate about women's rights and educating young girls about what it means to be in a healthy relationship, and she hopes to base her degree around powerful women throughout time.

>> Our society often trivialises these behaviours and passes them off as normal, especially in long-term relationships, meaning most people experiencing psychological abuse won't think to challenge it. Abuse is often a process of wearing women down. Often, the shift to abuse has been so gradual and subtle that victims fail to see themselves as so. What may be seen as 'protective' at the beginning of a relationship will often turn out to be 'controlling' in the long term, so when these red flags don't appear straight away, women find it hard to recognise them after being with a partner for an extended period.

Many male abusers have used the COVID-19 pandemic as ammunition against their partners and tactfully used it to restrain them further. A BBC report from July 2020 found that men were less likely to wear masks than women, most probably because they didn't like the idea of being told what to do. The roots of this can be linked back to patriarchy, in which men believe they hold the highest power so if any person tries to tell them what to do, they may feel their masculinity has been threatened.



This idea is backed by the June 2020 Survivor Survey, where of the 69 women who answered, 38% said their perpetrators refused to take precautions to stop the spread of the virus. This refusal to follow strict COVID-19 measures during the pandemic was likely done to instil fear into their victims about the virus, which could have led to arguments between couples, resulting in more violence.

Victims of domestic abuse have also had their support systems crushed by the pandemic as many support centres were closed and the contact with friends and family was limited. Understaffing and COVID-19 restrictions have meant many helplines haven't been able to operate in a pre-pandemic way and have had to reduce the number of calls they can take. This has been coupled with a lack of funding from the government, with only £19million promised in the budget this year. Although this is an increase of £10million from 2020, the charity Women's Aid has estimated £393million is actually needed to keep shelters and community services running sustainably. Women rely on domestic abuse charities and helplines as a safe place to discuss what they are going through, or often they use them to find refuge vacancies for themselves and their children. Without support from these organisations, many women have felt isolated and trapped.

There are also many programmes for perpetrators of abuse to attend, such as the Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Programme, which helps people who have been abusive towards previous or current partners create respectful and non-abusive relationships. Prevention is always the best method to stop abuse from occurring, so there is no question we need to build on what is already being taught in the national curriculum about healthy relationships. Currently, children from primary school age are being taught the meaning of healthy relationships in the context of respecting people's personal space and learning to share with toys or books. When they get into secondary school, pupils are being advised on the benefits of positive relationships on their mental health and how to feel empowered to call out negative behaviours. >>

>> One way of including these discussions within Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) lessons might be to watch clips of a film showing a diverse range of relationships and encourage students to talk about the elements of the relationships they think are healthy and the parts they think are unhealthy. This would then inspire students to have conversations about how to notice harmful behaviour from a partner and recognise their own negative behaviours in a relationship.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the effects of domestic abuse for women and marginalised genders of all ages, classes and races. The actual impact, though, will never be known as so many people suffer in silence, feeling they have nowhere to turn. That is why conversations on this topic need to be constantly happening. It must include not only the people who go through the abuse but all society members, so we all feel confident enough to recognise abusive and toxic behaviours and act against them.

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- (4) Stack, Rebecca Jayne. (2017). 'The Impact of Financial Hardship on Single Parents: An Exploration of the Journey From Social Distress to Seeking Help', Journal of Family and Economic Issues, 39: 233-242.
- (5) Duncombe, Jean; and Marsden, Dennis. (1995). 'Workaholics and Whingeing Women: Theorising Intimacy and Emotion Work- The Last Frontier of Gender Inequality?', Sage Journals, 43(1): 150-169.
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Are you worried that someone you know is experiencing domestic abuse?

Find out what you can do to help.

- Understand it has taken a lot of courage for someone to talk to you about the abuse they may be facing. Listen to what they have to say, and don't push for more information if they don't feel ready to give it.
- If they have suffered any physical harm, offer to take them to a GP or hospital.
- Allow them to express their emotions and make their own decisions.
- Offer information about organisations they can go to (Women's aid, Refuge, Citizens advice).

Do you feel you may be in an abusive relationship and are unsure what to do about it?

- Follow [this link to Women's Aid](#), where they have created a short questionnaire to help you determine if you may be experiencing domestic abuse.
- [Women's Aid](#) also has a page dedicated to providing up-to-date resources relevant to the COVID-19 crisis.
- In case of non-emergencies, you can call the free 24/7 domestic abuse helpline run by Refuge on **0808 2000 247**.
- The '[Ask for ANI](#)' scheme is active in Boots stores throughout the UK and thousands of independent pharmacies where you can discreetly signal to a trained pharmacist that you need access to help and support.
- [Galop](#) is a specialist LGBT+ anti-violence charity that has a free national helpline on **0800 9995428**.
- Call your country's emergency services number (**999** in the UK) if you need immediate assistance.

This is about him

Written by FERNANDA R. SOPRANA

Illustration by RIA BHATNAGAR

Photograph by [MAKSIM ISTOMIN](#)

TW gender-based violence, sexual assault, emotional and verbal abuse, sexism, misogyny, oppression, manipulation and death.

Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* dives into the internal struggles of intimate partner violence survivors. Based on the novel, our writer explores the power of discourse, both in fueling and counteracting gender-based violence and inequality.

"Where are all the people who wonder why the men are even abusive? Isn't that where the only blame should be placed?" is a question posed by the female protagonist and survivor of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the fictional novel *It Ends With Us*, written by bestselling American author Colleen Hoover(1). Hoover's portrayal of IPV and previous research on gender inequality investigates how normative discourses affect survivors' lives, including an analysis of how victim-blaming can reinforce gender oppression.

IPV is "any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship." (2) Examples of these behaviours are physical and sexual violence, controlling behaviours and psychological abuse. Statistics show that the most common perpetrators of IPV against women are men(3). IPV constitutes approximately 87% of global cases of gender-based violence (GBV) against women – 641 million in sum, as reported by the *World Health Organization (WHO)*. While men are more likely to experience violent acts by strangers or acquaintances than by their partners, reports of abuse made by male victims should be taken just as seriously as any other.

GBV is a global public health problem of epidemic proportions and a fundamental violation of human rights. GBV can be inflicted publicly or privately in many different ways, including sexual, physical, mental and economic harm, through violence, coercion and manipulation and threats. It refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender, according to the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*. The *CEDAW Committee and the Istanbul Convention* specifically categorises GBV as violence directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately(3). The oppressive system of male supremacy (i.e., patriarchy) that operates at the expense of women and marginalised genders, in which men hold hierarchical levels of power compared to other genders, contributes to GBV. However, the roots of GBV lies in the interplay of a myriad of factors, such as cultural gender biases, under-representation in politics, the lack of economic resources and ineffective justice systems. Although IPV isn't necessarily gender-motivated, it affects women disproportionately(3), and out of the many forms GBV can take, it is the most prevalent(2). >>

>> Preventing GBV altogether is a very complex and difficult challenge. The WHO notes that ending violence against women means "addressing systemic economic and social inequalities, ensuring access to education and safe work, and changing discriminatory gender norms and institutions." The organisation highlights the importance of ensuring essential services are available and accessible to survivors of GBV, along with strategies that support women's organisations, challenge gender-biased social norms and improve legal systems by reforming discriminatory laws and strengthening legal responses. According to the *U.S. Domestic Violence Hotline*, abusive behaviour, among many other factors, is linked to "learned attitudes and feelings of entitlement and privilege", both of which are extremely difficult to let go of. Although extremely hard, the path to unlearning these violent traits starts with understanding this behaviour, reflecting on it and taking accountability. It is challenging to achieve this alone – one could even say almost impossible. Certified batterer intervention programs may help with the first steps towards effective change, which is a lifelong battle.

At least one in three women globally experience violence in their lifetime. This accounts for around 736 million women in total. However, given the high levels of stigma and under-reporting of sexual abuse, the real figure is likely to be significantly higher. The risk is more significant where violence is normalised and where rigid concepts of gender exist. Further, according to *Plan International*, certain groups are more vulnerable to violence, primarily women from poor, rural or indigenous communities, those who are or are perceived to be LGBTIQ+, those living with disabilities, and girls and women who speak out about political, social and cultural issues and gender inequality. Racial profiling also poses another great challenge. In the U.S., for example, Latinas, American Indian women and African American women are less likely to seek help from law officials and law enforcement due to the historical abuse, mistrust and neglect they face from authorities.

meet our writer

Fernanda is a Brazilian journalist who enjoys writing about politics, international affairs and social justice. She is passionate about intersectional feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights, climate change and animal rights. She believes in change through information. "Universal access to information leads to knowledge, which leads to solutions, thus paving the way for a better world", she says.

Statistics play a vital role in understanding global issues and promoting change, but you cannot see the individual when staring at percentages or putting yourself in one person's shoes amongst millions. We must give faces to numbers. Reading can be an immersive experience, with storytelling being a powerful tool to promote empathy. That is especially true in first-person narratives, as the reader can either feel a really close connection to the main character or even picture themselves as part of the story. This is the case with the book *It Ends With Us*, a work of fiction, which provides a deeper understanding of a woman's psychological struggles – from the feelings of happiness intrinsic to falling in love to the grief and guilt brought upon the realisation of being in love with a violent man.

The book focuses on the topic of IPV through the relationship of its main character and narrator, Lily Bloom, and her boyfriend and future husband, Ryle Kincaid. The story begins in Boston (U.S.) as Lily, a 23-year-old business graduate, sits comfortably on the ledge of a 12-story building to admire the night sky. She is relatively new to the city, having moved there after college to open her own flower shop, which has always been a dream of hers. Lily had just gotten back from her father's funeral, wherein she was supposed to deliver the eulogy. Andrew Bloom was the mayor of Plethora (Maine, U.S.), Lily's hometown, and "the owner of the most successful real-estate agency within city limits"(4). Albeit adored by the townspeople, he showed a violent side in the secrecy of his house. Andrew was verbally, physically and sexually abusive to his wife, Jenny Bloom – Lily's mother. Jenny asked Lily a simple task: to mention five great things about her deceased father during the ceremony. Yet, she could not think of a single one and froze mid-speech. Twelve hours later, Lily meets Ryle, a successful neurosurgeon for whom she ends up falling into the same statistic as her mother's.

Ryle and Lily's first encounter is not the meet-cute you would expect from a romance. The quiet calmness on the rooftop ceases when Ryle shoves the door open so hard Lily expects "the stairwell to spit a human out"(5). Still unaware of who this person is, she thinks to herself, "the least the universe could do for me today is ensure that it's a woman and not a man. If I'm going to have company, I'd rather it be a female. I'm tough for my size and can probably hold my own in most cases, but I'm too comfortable right now to be on a rooftop alone with a strange man in the middle of the night. I might fear for my safety and feel the need to leave, and I really don't want to leave. As I said before... I'm comfortable."(5) Though fictional, this scenario is quite accurate – around 32% of women in the UK feel unsafe or very unsafe when walking alone in their local area at night. Meanwhile, only 13% of men expressed the same concern. This fear shared by women is usually due to the possibility of GBV such as public sexual harassment (PSH), rape and assault. Though it is often that cases of sexual assault happen at night, many times these crimes are committed in broad daylight, which obligates women to live in a constant state of vigilance. >>

>> As if being alone with a man on a rooftop wasn't enough, Ryle "appears to be on the verge of a breakdown." (6) Lily contemplates letting him know he is not alone, but faster than she could turn her thoughts to actions, Ryle forcefully kicks a patio chair. The screeching sound makes Lily flinch, and he does not stop. His repeated efforts do nothing to the chair, which keeps scooting further away from him. The incident reminded her of her father, who tried to back over an outdoor table made of the same material. Instead of being frightened, Lily confesses she is "a little envious" (6) of him. She says, "here this guy is, taking his aggression out on patio furniture like a champ. He's obviously had a shitty day, as have I, but whereas I keep my aggression pent up until it manifests in the form of passive-aggressiveness, this guy actually has an outlet." (6) Though unexpected to the reader, Lily's unbothered reaction may be due to her familiarity with more violent instances, when witnessing her mother being a target of her father's violence. After Ryle notices Lily's presence, she steps down from the ledge and admires Ryle's physical appearance, stunned by his beauty. Lily almost immediately bonds with him despite being reminded of her abusive father by Ryle's earlier actions. They start sharing "naked truths"; raw, unfiltered truths, things that they aren't proud of or wouldn't necessarily tell anyone.

Lily opens up to Ryle about the eulogy and her father's abuse. She recalls, "when I was a kid, I found myself looking forward to the nights they would fight. Because I knew if he hit her, the two weeks that followed would be great. [...] Of course if I could, I would have made it to where he never touched her. But the abuse was inevitable with their marriage, and it became our norm. When I got older, I realized that not doing something about it made me just as guilty. I spent most of my life hating him for being such a bad person, but I'm not so sure I'm much better. Maybe we're both bad people." (7) Children and young people living with domestic violence can be harmed both physically and emotionally, the latter being mostly the case for Lily. To feel guilt or self-blame for the violence in the household is one of the many impacts on the child, who may carry the psychological consequences for many years to come. Research shows that children are not just passive witnesses of abuse – they live with it and experience it directly just as adults do (8). Their brains are still in development, which means that children may respond to violence and coercive control by adapting and changing themselves to cope with these debilitating circumstances. Emotional abuse in childhood can influence a person's future adult relationships. Women who witnessed domestic violence as children may be at higher risk of being victimised in their own relationships.

Ryle says, "there is no such thing as bad people. We're all just people who sometimes do bad things", (7) in response to Lily's truth. He reluctantly tells her what happened that day to make him feel so frustrated. During Ryle's shift at the hospital, a five-year-old boy died after being accidentally shot by his little brother. The younger kid was holding a gun, which both children found in their parents' bedroom, and it went off by accident. The reader later finds out that Ryle went through the same thing – at six years old, Ryle shot his older brother in the head by accident. His parents weren't home, so he just sat there. "I tried to put everything back inside his head. I thought I could fix him" (9), Ryle explains.

That accident inspired him to become a neurosurgeon but, more importantly, changed him for life. He shared his trauma with Lily the second time he physically harmed her, emphasising he "would never say this" (9) to excuse his behaviour. "I can't control. I get angry. I blackout. I've been in therapy since I was six years old. But it is not my excuse. It is my reality" (9), he says. Devastating experiences in early childhood strongly affect a person's cognitive behaviour. Accidental homicide can lead to poor ego functioning, which predisposes some people to the periodic breakthrough of intense aggressive impulses that could reach psychotic proportions at times (10). Studies say that the emotional aftermath in cases like this could range from no apparent difficulties to psychosis, influenced by preexisting psychiatric conditions and their social relations with their community.

While Ryle and Lily have similar backgrounds, the outcomes from the trauma they experienced are different. Children witnessing or experiencing violence may become susceptible to violence or violent themselves. Ryle accidentally killed someone he loved. Unconsciously or not, he developed a pattern of hurting the people he loves most. We should not forget that all human beings are capable of violence in some way or another. However, not all of us harm our wives, husbands or children. As it has been established, violence stems from many variables, from a person's environment, set of beliefs to their psychological predispositions. Hence, while a trauma can offer explanations, it does not excuse abusive behaviour. Contrary to Ryle, Lily managed to maintain her caring and empathic nature in hardship, which involved watching her mother almost get cursed at, beaten, choked and nearly raped in front of her. Though her home life was not great, the then 15-year-old girl still found it in herself to help the homeless boy living in an abandoned house next door, Atlas Corrigan, her first love. Being so close to her, Atlas not only witnessed a lot of the abuse but was almost beaten to death by Lily's father. Later on, he moved to Boston with his uncle and reunited with Lily after she was already in a relationship with Ryle. That is when her relationship took a turn for the worst, as her teen romance became the source of her current lover's jealousy.

In the novel, during Lily and Ryle's relationship, there are three instances of IPV – each instance encompasses physical, verbal and psychological violence. The first was actually inspired by a true story that happened between the book author's parents. Ryle forgets to get a potholder and tries to take the casserole he made out of the oven, burning his hand and dropping dinner all over the kitchen floor. Lily, slightly drunk, bursts into laughter at the mess and his silliness of it all. Her laughter ceases as she is now on the floor with a painful cut on the corner of her eye. She describes, "in a matter of one second, Ryle's arm came out of nowhere and slammed against me, knocking me backward. [...]". (11) The neurosurgeon was days away from an important operation, which prompted him to curse at Lily and say, "it's not funny. This hand is my fucking career." (11) Seconds later, he's next to her, rubbing her back with sorrow. He apologises, claiming he didn't mean to push her. After an internal struggle, she decides to forgive him, thinking, "he's nothing like that uncaring bastard." (12) Lily let him off with a warning: "if anything like that ever happens again... I'll know that this time wasn't just an accident. And I'll leave you without a second thought." (13) But unfortunately, it wasn't a one-time occurrence, as is often the case. >>

>> Psychology classifies the never-ending cycle of abuse in four stages: tension-building, acute violence, reconciliation – or honeymoon phase – and the calm before the storm hits again(14). As researchers explain, "in this process, the partner abuser shows undue affection, showers the victim with apologies, and promises this will never happen again, giving tons of hope to the victim that everything is going to be okay." (14)

To Lily, their lives were "perfect how they are"(15). Then Ryle finds a piece of paper under Lily's phone case with Atlas' number on it – which Atlas gave her for emergencies after seeing the cut near her eye. Ryle chunks the phone across the room. He leaves, and she runs after him on the stairs, blaming herself for not throwing that paper away when she got it. Next, she is waking up in their bedroom – tears are running down her face, her head hurts, and Ryle is taking care of her. "*You fell down the stairs. But I didn't fall. He pushed me. Again. That's twice. You pushed me, Ryle.*"(16) She makes him leave, but they reconcile on the day after when he opens up about his trauma. Then everything is fine again. She even thinks that they "needed what happened on the stairwell to happen"(17) for them to work on his past together because "marriage is about compromise. It's about doing what's best for the couple as a whole, not individually."(18) Then comes the third and final wave.

Triggered by a fridge magnet, Ryle finds Lily's teenage diaries detailing her relationship to Atlas. Driven by both rage and sexual desire, Ryle bites Lily with strength. Scared of what's going to happen, Lily pleads multiple times for him to let her go, but "he's angry. He's hurt. And *he's not Ryle.*"(19) He yanks her and pins her wrists on the bed, climbing over her. He tries to muffle her screams with his mouth, and she bites his tongue. Ryle headbutts Lily, and she faints.

At first, the 'naked truths' they shared when they met became a way for both characters to have honest conversations with each other throughout their relationship; a great habit to nurture a healthy relationship. That is until Ryle realised he could use it as a manipulation tactic to gaslight Lily into staying with him after being violent towards her. As Ryle put it on that first night, the premise for sharing these truths, from the very beginning, was to make him feel "a little less screwed up on the inside."(20) Ryle takes advantage of Lily's empathy and love for him. Lily believes Ryle tries to be better for her. And so did her mother about her father. Wrongfully, we don't take verbal and emotional abuse as seriously as its physical manifestations. We must remember that it is abuse at the end of the day – no matter how it manifests. >>

Myths are propagated until they infiltrate and define the dominant popular discourse. These false ideas are spread to the point that many people can no longer distinguish fact from fiction. Instead of striving to change this narrative, most societies reinforce this agenda. Women adapt and adjust themselves to try and fit into the norm to keep living their lives. Considering the extent of the implications this oppressive discourse has for women, victim-blaming not only fuels GBV but could be classified, by itself, as verbal GBV.



>> Verbal, emotional and physical acts of violence drive one another and get worse each time, often leading to battering. This is a severe escalating form of IPV, in which "multiple forms of abuse, terrorization and threats, and increasingly possessive and controlling behaviours"(2) take place. In *It Ends With Us*, Lily's mother, Jenny, explains that we all have a limit, "but slowly... with every incident... my limit was pushed a little more. And a little more. The first time your father hit me, he was immediately sorry. He swore it would never happen again. The second time he hit me, he was even more sorry. The third time it happened, it was more than a hit. It was a beating. And every single time, I took him back. But the fourth time, it was only a slap. And when that happened, I felt relieved. I remember thinking, 'At least he didn't beat me this time. This wasn't so bad.' [...] Every incident chips away at your limit. Every time you choose to stay, it makes the next time that much harder to leave. Eventually, you lose sight of your limit altogether, because you start to think, 'I've lasted five years now. What's five more?'"(21) It is difficult for women in abusive relationships to accept that the man they love is capable of cruelty. When Lily runs away from Ryle, she equates facing this harsh reality to death.

Books that acknowledge and tackle challenging subjects like IPV, for example, can improve survivors' quality of life, who then become motivated to seek appropriate help from professionals.

Similarly, it is easy to judge other women in abusive relationships when you are watching from a distance. Several reasons contribute for women to continue in violent relationships, such as "fear of retaliation; lack of alternative means of economic support; concern for their children; lack of support from family and friends; stigma or fear of losing custody of children; negative associations with divorce; and love and the hope that the partner will change". When going public with their testimonies, not only are their motives and accounts put into question, but survivors are apprehensive in sharing their trauma. Women are significantly more likely to receive blame when they are sexually assaulted rather than the perpetrators who committed the acts. In the context of her country of origin, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once said, "it's easy for us to say, "oh, but women can just say no to all of this." But the reality is more difficult and more complex. We're all social beings. We internalize ideas from our socialization. Even the language we use in talking about marriage and relationships illustrates this. The language of marriage is often the language of ownership rather than the language of partnership. [...] Some people will say that a woman being subordinate to a man is our culture. But culture is constantly changing. [...] Culture does not make people, people make culture." Popular discourse may be tangled in culture, but that doesn't mean it is everlasting.

Research supports that "a conscious, mindful, and correct use of language" is essential to achieve gender equality – or at least to take the first steps for reducing inequity. Strategic discourse must "expose, oppose, challenge and reject GBV". But while information is powerful, we have to make sure it is accessible and propagated to the point it redefines common sense.

Victim-blaming is a discourse that portrays women as responsible for their own safety while little or nothing at all is said about the perpetrators of GBV. This narrative shifts the blame and frames women as the perpetrators of GBV, instead of the abusers themselves(22). The feeling of guilt that generally comes with experiences of GBV is reinforced and encouraged by victim-blaming. Researchers call this phenomenon a "female fear factory", in which "women are made to feel responsible for protecting themselves against GBV and are as answerable for GBV as the perpetrators, thereby suggesting that they are expected to develop and follow precautionary strategies to avoid attacks launched against their bodies." Propagating this notion not only places women in "an eternal state of unrest", for they always have to be vigilant around everyone in any place or social context, but it continues to "women's anxieties and alertness as part of their daily life." Myths are propagated until they infiltrate and define the dominant popular discourse. These false ideas are spread to the point that many people can no longer distinguish fact from fiction. Instead of striving to change this narrative, most societies reinforce this agenda. Women adapt and adjust themselves to try and fit into the norm to keep living their lives. Considering the extent of the implications this oppressive discourse has for women, victim-blaming not only fuels GBV but could be classified, by itself, as verbal GBV.

There is a misconception that most women in abusive relationships accept their circumstances and never leave – which inspires a question that often shows up when survivors share their stories. According to the *WHO*, however, there is evidence to suggest that most women who are subjected to abuse are not just "passive victims". That is especially true for mothers. More often than not, women adopt strategies to "maximize their safety and that of their children". The *WHO* also highlights that "what might be interpreted as a woman's inaction may in fact be the result of a calculated assessment about how to protect herself and her children." Unlike her mother, Lily not only had the financial stability to leave Ryle, but she had an informal network of support – represented mainly by Atlas, who took her in the night she left. The database *Health and Human Rights Info (HHRI)* offers a manual for helping survivors in the context of mental health and gender-based violence. They suggest how to approach a person whose life has been changed by trauma. For example, while sometimes it will be important to report violent incidents to the authorities, you must always do so with the consent and collaboration of the survivor. Assessing the risks involved in reporting is critical, for it may put the survivor or others in danger. The main goal is to enable a survivor to recover her life and dignity – she must be in charge of her story and her own life. The main priority is to return her to her community, family, social network and daily life as much as possible(23). >>

>> The efforts to dismantle systemic gender oppression take great courage, mostly from survivors of GBV. Women should never be held responsible for the violence that happens to them, nor should fear be weaponised, which keeps them from being free to achieve their fullest potential. Normative discourses must be countered to focus the narrative on the actual perpetrators of GBV. As Hoover says it best herself, "by no means do I intend for Ryle and Lily's situation to define domestic abuse. Nor do I intend for Ryle's character to define the characteristics of most abusers. Every situation is different. Every outcome is different."(24) *It Ends With Us* is a fictional book. Hence, it is not meant to be taken as factual. The genre of Romance frequently involves heavy romanticisation of abusive situations. Books that acknowledge and tackle challenging subjects like IPV, for example, can improve survivors' quality of life, who then become motivated to seek appropriate help from professionals. In this context, one great asset of fiction is the happy ending – the 'happily ever after' after escaping the abuser may reignite hope for survivors and show that there is a way out. Fiction allows us to dream, and that is even more important when facing bad times. ●

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(3) Council of Europe. (2011). *The Istanbul Convention and the CEDAW framework: A comparison of measures to prevent and combat violence against women*. p. 5.

(4) Hoover, Colleen. (2016). *It Ends With Us*. Simon & Schuster. p. 3.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

(6) *Ibid.*, p.5.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

(8)E. Katz (2016), Beyond the physical incident model: How children living with domestic violence are harmed by and resist regimes of coercive control. *Child Abuse Review*, 25(1): 46-59.

(9) Hoover, Colleen. (2016). *It Ends With Us*. Simon & Schuster. p. 240

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(11) Hoover, Colleen. (2016). *It Ends With Us*. Simon & Schuster. p. 185.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 188.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 190.

(14) Shanthy, K.; Nittala, Saritha. (2021), Intimate Partner Violence and Psychological Attributes - Violation of Right to Live. *Revista Geintec: Gestão, Inovação e Tecnologias*, 11(4): 5441-5453.

(15)Hoover, Colleen. (2016). *It Ends With Us*. Simon & Schuster. p. 223.

(16) *Ibid.*, p.231.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 245.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 247.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 264.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 16.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 335.

(22) Oparinde, Kunle; Matsha, Rachel Matteau. (2021). Powerful Discourse: Gender-Based Violence and Counter-Discourses in South Africa. *COGENT Arts & Humanities*, 8(1).

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inspiring reading

TITLE It Ends With Us

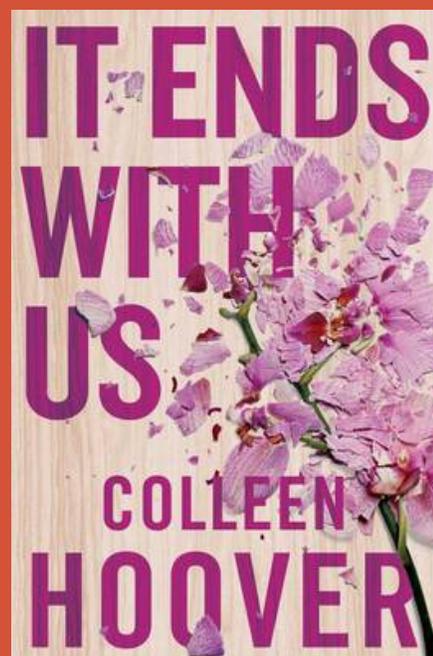
AUTHOR Colleen Hoover

PUBLISHER Simon & Schuster, Inc.

YEAR 2016

LANGUAGE English

GENRE Fiction, Romance



But, What Were You Doing?

Each month until March 2022, we will release one chapter of the Novella, *Her Story*. Follow Radha's journey as a young woman experiencing episodes of gender-based violence, including public sexual harassment and rape, acts of racism, navigating dating life, reflecting on her own body and her reproductive rights.

Chapter Two

Radha met him at a Halloween party. It was her second month at university and she had been settling in well. She had come dressed as Bellatrix Lestrange from *Harry Potter*; she had the curly hair for it. Radha had matched her make-up with the deranged witch's, making her brown eyes pop against the black eyeliner and eyeshadow. She had never worn black lipstick before. It complimented her skin, the smoky black against the deep, brown hues, like the dying embers of a fire. It was Radha's first Halloween themed house party, and she wanted to stand out. She had never been a big party person before and preferred the company of books to people, but she was in a new space and wanted to make friends.

The house was decorated to fit the creepy theme. Radha had met the hostess, Lily, a third-year student, during her fresher's week. Lily had been kind enough to invite her. There were cobwebs trailing the door and pumpkin lanterns that lined the pathway to the front door. The man at the door was dressed in a skull costume and wore a top hat.

"Good evening, Mrs Lestrange," he said as she approached, removing his hat as he bowed. His voice was silky, the kind of voice heard in horror films when the devil is enticing the hero or heroine to do something stupid, like go into an abandoned house or cave.

Radha smiled, "good evening."

Written by ASHA ASKOOLAM

Illustrated by LACUNNA

TW depression, domestic violence, controlling behaviour, slut-shaming, toxic masculinity, rape.

He opened the door, and she stepped inside. The first thing she noticed was the number of people. People were dancing, drinking and sitting in little corners, talking amongst themselves. The room was lit entirely by lamps and candlelight, with mist flooding in and trickling upwards from some kind of vent. Skeletons were hanging from the walls, cobwebs and bats. That's when she noticed him.

He was standing by the drinks table. He was tall and had long, curly hair that was pulled back into a bun. Radha recognised him from the welcome talk that she'd had on her first day. He had been her tour guide, and after they had exchanged numbers for her to contact him if she needed any help. He was 21 and in his last year. He was dressed as Captain Jack Sparrow, rings and all.

She took a deep breath and walked over to him.

"Hi Luke," she said, tapping on his shoulder.

He turned around and looked down at her with a smile. She thought he was beautiful. Luke had brown-green eyes that appeared darker in the candlelight and facial hair that made him look a bit older than he actually was.

"Hi," he replied, wrapping an arm around her, "how are you finding it?"

"Okay," she said. Luke smelt like freshly cut grass and mint leaves. "A little bit daunting. There are so many people."

"Don't worry about that," Luke said softly, squeezing her, "you can stick with me. I like your dress, by the way."

Radha blushed. She could feel the heat rising to her cheeks. "Thank you, I bought a black dress and cut it up a bit." >>

>> She had made the neckline lower and tattered up the hemline so that it was haphazard in shape, like the dresses that Bellatrix wore.

"Well, you look great."

She looked up at him and smiled, "so do you."

It was his turn to blush. The red-tinted his warm, ivory skin, and he looked away. Radha thought it was endearing. She hadn't known then, but it was his way of trapping her, of appearing sweet and unsuspecting, because how could someone so kind do something so cruel? She thought it would be the beginning of a lovely friendship. She couldn't have known how wrong she was.

At first, Luke was gentle. If Radha had any problems at university, he would be her point of contact. They would often hang out together. If they bumped into each other, they would have lunch or go to parties together. Often, she would spend time in his room, watching films together or listening to his band play at events on campus. She was in awe of him, and he seemed to take an interest in her.

The first time he kissed her, they were sitting in his room on his bed. She was lying down next to him as they watched reruns of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Her head was on his chest, and his hand was in her hair.

"Radha?"

"Hmm," she replied, focused on the tv show. She loved it; it had been her favourite show growing up and reminded her of her parents. They would pile on their sofa after dinner and watch an episode together.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked, his hand paused in her hair.

Radha lifted her head to look up at him. Her heart was thumping wildly in her chest. She had never kissed anyone before. She had never been in a romantic relationship either. Before university, she hadn't had an interest in dating. She was always focused on her work and doing well in her exams. Sure, she had had crushes on people, but she had never pursued them. Partly because she wasn't interested and partly because she knew they wouldn't have ever felt the same.

"I've never kissed anyone before," she whispered like it was a secret she was afraid of telling. What if Luke judged her?

Luke smiled, cupping her cheek, "that doesn't bother me at all. I can teach you."

Radha looked down and smiled, "okay, that would be nice."

Luke leaned forwards and rested his forehead on hers. And then his lips met hers, and Radha forgot how to breathe. His lips were soft and tasted like butter, sugar and popcorn. She could feel his hands everywhere, in her hair, stroking her cheek and at her waist. It was intoxicating and overwhelming, but at that moment, she felt safe.

It would turn out to be one of the only moments she felt secure with him. In months to come, Radha would think back on this memory and see the cruel irony of it all. He had asked if he could kiss her initially, but he never asked again after that. No, he felt entitled to her body from that moment onwards.

The abuse started with the little things.

On their third date, Luke took Radha to a nice restaurant in the neighbouring town by their university and told her to dress up for the occasion.

"I want you to wear something nice," he said over the phone, "I want you to look pretty. Do something else with your hair, don't leave it untied. It's unruly the way it normally is."

Radha had stared at the phone long after he had hung up. She hadn't realised she was crying until she looked at herself in the mirror. She always loved her hair. It was thick and curly. She liked the way it bounced around her face and complimented her features. It reminded her of her mother, of all the women in her family that had come before her. She had a heritage in her hair, in her skin, in the oils and creams they used for their skin, for their hair to keep it full of life. She had years worth of tradition in her natural hair.

Luke had made her feel insignificant and small by dismissing her hair and displaying such arrogance in overlooking her natural features. He didn't care about her heritage or the meaning behind her hair or why she never liked straightening it to conform and appear like all the white women. Historically, her type of hair was seen as messy, unruly, and wild, while white women's straight hair was considered neat, beautiful and proper. It is inherently racist to ask a person of colour to 'tame' their hair because of the connotation that anything ethnic was seen as dirty, other and uncontrollable. And to be considered beautiful, women of colour have been systematically demanded to change themselves, to appeal to the patriarchal, white gaze.

Radha didn't change her hair. And Luke saw that as a challenge.

The abuse only got worse from there. By the second month of their relationship, he started making comments on the clothes she wore. He didn't like it if she wore short dresses or skirts and would start an argument.

"Do you want other men to stare at you?" Luke barked as she walked into her room after a long day of classes.

"I'm tired. Do we need to have this conversation now?" Radha sighed, facing him. "So what if I'm wearing a dress. It's not up to me to pander to this idea that I have to be covered from head to toe not to be assaulted. I could be wearing a pair of tracksuits and a hoodie and still be looked at, harassed, or assaulted. My clothes have nothing to do with it."

"That's just bullshit. Men will think that you're easy and prey on you," Luke said. Whenever he got angry, he puffed out his chest and tried to take up the most space. >>

>> Luke wanted to feel powerful, dominating. When really, he was just a scared little boy who thought he was losing control, and his way of gaining it back was coercing Radha.

"That is not my fault. That is their fault. If these men can't control themselves around women, then they shouldn't be out in society. They need to go back and educate themselves on how to treat women as human beings," she rolled her eyes, growing frustrated. "It has nothing to do with my clothes and everything to do with control. It is about men asserting their power over a woman and making her feel unsafe, keeping women in their boxes," she continued, crossing her arms over her chest, "maybe if you were educated better, you would understand that rape culture starts from a young age. It is men thinking that they have the right to a woman's body. And maybe, if boys were taught about consent, rape, sexual harassment, and I don't know, possibly how to respect other people, rather than being pandered to and having everything at their disposal, they wouldn't grow up to believe that they owned a person's body."

Luke laughed loud and obnoxious, "wow, so you're saying that you're happy just being a fucking slut."

Radha stared at him. She had never seen someone miss the point entirely so spectacularly. Exasperated, she ran her hands through her hair and fought the urge to roll her eyes. She took a deep breath and glared at him. From the moment he opened his mouth, she could feel anger boiling beneath her fingertips, pumping her heart. She wanted to scream and shout at him, but she didn't have the energy to.

"Yeah," Radha said sarcastically, lacing every one of her words with as much bite to it as she could. "I'm happy being a fucking slut."

He only left her room because her friend walked in to check on her. But, she had seen the way he raised his hand. Still, the following day when Luke crawled back into her life like a kicked puppy, she forgave him. He would cry and beg, and she would accept his apology, feeling sorry for him. His behaviour made her think that it was her fault, and he was the one who had been hurt. Later, she would be able to see that this was a sign of manipulation. He would seize on her ability to forgive, on her kindness and use it against her. Luke had made it so that he could be as mean as he wanted but came back the next day moaning and saying that he would never do it again, and she would forgive him. He had made it so she believed he would change. That it would get better, and the cycle would end.

It never did.

By the third month of their relationship, Radha started noticing his behaviour around her when she was with her friends.

"You never seem to have time for me anymore," Luke said as he caught up with her, walking to her room. She had gone to her friend's room to have dinner, drink and watch a film.

"I do, but we've both been busy. We've had classes, and I miss seeing my friends," Radha replied, taking off her shoes before washing her hands and then sitting on her bed.

Luke came to stand in front of her. He never took off his shoes unless she asked him to. It was rude and obnoxious. She had been brought up to take off her shoes as soon as she stepped into her house or someone else's house. It is both a cultural thing but also just common sense. It was dirty outside, clean inside, so taking off her shoes was the rational thing to do. He didn't care.

"Am I not enough?" Luke said, grinning down at her. He cupped her cheek and lifted her face to look up at him.

"You are," Radha replied, "but I'm allowed to have a life outside of you too."

There was a flicker in his eyes, and his expression changed. A shadow grew over his features, his smile turned mean, and he laughed darkly.

"Well, if your friends are so important to you, why don't you date one of them?" he snapped, grabbing the back of her neck a little too tight.

"Luke, stop it! You're hurting me," Radha said, trying to move away from him. She managed to tug out of his grip and wrapped her arms around her body to protect herself. She looked at him, afraid. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Her voice was loud and strong, but she could sense a wobble in her voice as tears built up in her eyes. Her hands felt clammy, and she felt goosebumps over her skin. It was a familiar feeling. She had experienced it many times before with the men she had been harassed by as a child and a teenager.

"Get out," she said, "just leave me alone. I don't want to see you right now. You're being ridiculous and controlling."

Luke laughed again. There was a snarl to his laugh, a bitter edge to his smile. His eyes appeared dark in the dim lighting. He almost seemed like a shadow in the darkness. An omen for something truly awful waiting to happen. He ran his hands through his hair; it was something he always did when he was angry. There was a pink tint to his cheeks as he huffed. He was like a child who caused a tantrum when he didn't get his way.

"Fine, you want me to leave? I'll leave!" Luke shouted, storming up to her to frighten her. "You ungrateful bitch."

Radha straightened her back and glared up at him. She laughed, but there was no humour, no life behind it. It was as hollow as she felt. >>

>> “You are the ungrateful one,” she said. Radha didn’t need to raise her voice, scream or shout, not as Luke did. He always caused a scene, said horrible things to try and control the argument. She knew she didn’t have to sink to his pathetic level. And that infuriated Luke.

He stepped backwards, looked her up and down before leaving her room. Only when he left did Radha feel safe enough to cry.

Everything came to a head during the sixth month of their relationship. She had been studying with her friend, Avi. Avi was one of the only other South Asian people on her course and living in her block. The moment they saw each other in their first seminar, they had gravitated towards one another. There was something about being around people who had a shared history, culture and heritage that put her at ease. She didn’t have to explain anything. He just understood her. And being around the many, many white people on her course was challenging at times. The racism, microaggressions and just plain ignorance were enough to make her want to scream.

“Are you okay?” Avi asked her. They were sitting on the floor in her room, with their books and wrappers of popcorn, chocolate, and a lone banana peel spread out between them.

“I’m fine,” she replied, looking at him. Radha could see the concern on his face. Avi would often furrow his brow and stare at her like he was trying to solve the problem just by looking at her. “Avi, seriously, I’m fine.”

He sighed and looked away, “you know you can tell me if there is anything. I’m always here to listen.”

Radha smiled, reaching across to take his hand. “I know. And thank you.”

Avi shrugged, “nothing to thank me for.”

Radha squeezed his hand, and they went back to studying.

A moment later, the door burst open, and Luke stepped in.

“Radha!” he shouted, “I’ve been calling you. Why don’t you answer your phone?”

Luke was like a constant presence in her life. An unnerving, controlling grey cloud that would never leave her alone. She wanted him gone so that she could spend time with her friend.

Radha sat up and looked at Avi, “we’ve been studying. I turned my phone off. We have an exam tomorrow.”

“Oh, so you’ve been with him,” Luke rolled his eyes, gesturing to Avi as if he wasn’t important.

“We’ve been studying,” Radha sighed. She hated repeating herself, growing tired of his behaviour, “we have an exam tomorrow, and we have been helping each other.”

“Why do you have to help him?” Luke said, voice growing louder. He still spoke as if Avi wasn’t there.

“Look, man, I’m her friend, and we are in the same class. What is your problem?” Avi asked, glaring at him, “you’re acting like a child. You don’t own her.”

“Avi, it’s okay. I’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Radha said, smiling at him. “I will message you later.”

“Are you sure?” Avi asked, “I don’t want to go if you’re scared. He’s dangerous.”

Luke started laughing, “what do you think I’m going to do, hurt her?”

But that is precisely what he did once Avi left.

Radha had never had sex before, and her first sexual experience was one of fear, pain and disgust. When it happened, it was as if she floated out of her body. As if she wasn’t really there at all. There was only the person she was before and the person after. The woman before screamed, cried, fought, and bled. She kicked, punched, bit, drawing blood of the man who thought he had a right to her body. Luke kept saying, “this will teach you a lesson.” As he took something from her; her right to choose. He left invisible scars on her body, ones that would take years to heal. He touched her in places she had never been touched before, harshly, violently. Luke tried to take her voice, her dignity. But the woman after had nothing left to lose. This woman was hollow, empty and vengeful. She grabbed a textbook and hit Luke over the head with it. He fell off her, leaving behind a trail of blood on her thighs and her neck from where he had left teeth marks. She stood and stared at the man now crying, like all the times he had wept before. Only this time, she felt nothing but sorrow and rage.

“I’m sorry,” Luke begged, trying to grab her.

Radha stepped back, tears leaking from her eyes, but she could no longer feel them. Her body was not her own as she was floating elsewhere. She stared at the banana peel. How insignificant it was, on the floor of her room, just as she had been. As he now was.

She looked at the man on his knees. She put her clothes back on and left the room, leaving behind the sobbing, pathetic, weak little man.

The police said Radha did the right thing reporting it. Her body was evidence of the crime, inside her, under her fingernails, on her skin. Luke got fifteen years. And still, there would be men that would say

“But, what were you wearing?” >>

>> "What did you do to provoke him?"

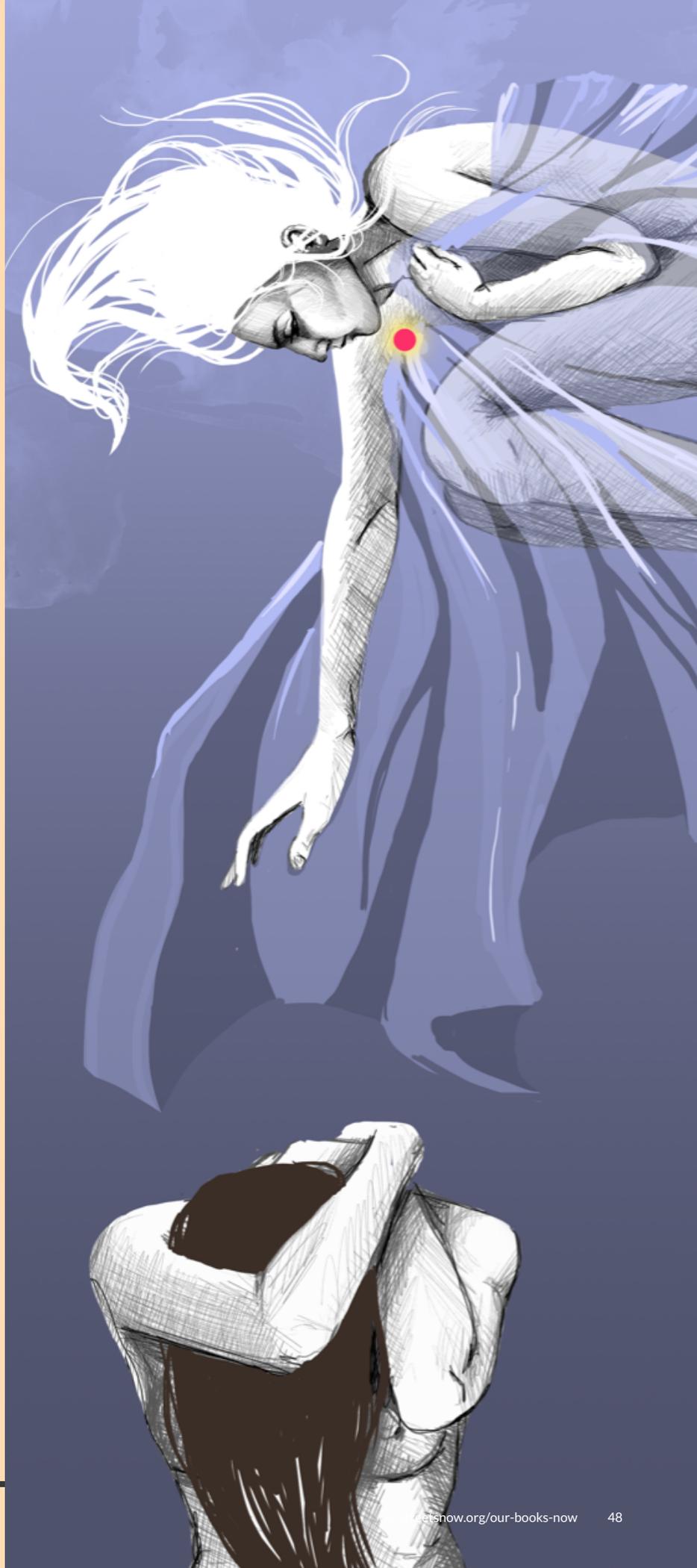
"You were asking for it."

"You know that his whole life is ruined now, right?"

Radha was certain that the woman she was before it happened died at that exact moment. The woman that emerged after the rape, who rose from Radha's despair, had to carry on living.

What about her life? ●

Do you want to find out what happens to Radha? Stay tuned for the next chapter of the Novella, *Her Story*, in the following issue of Our Words Literary Magazine.





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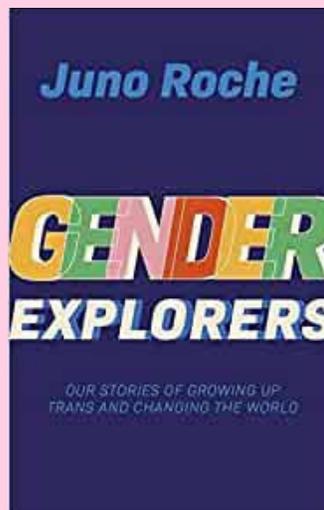
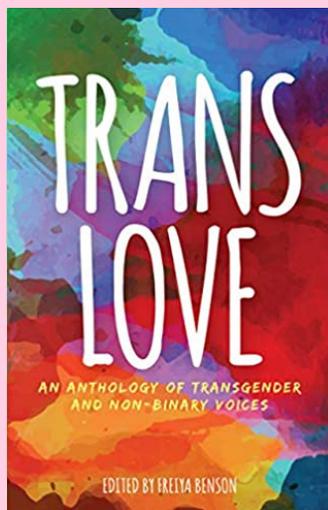
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