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Not That Bad: Lessons Women Learn in a Rape Culture

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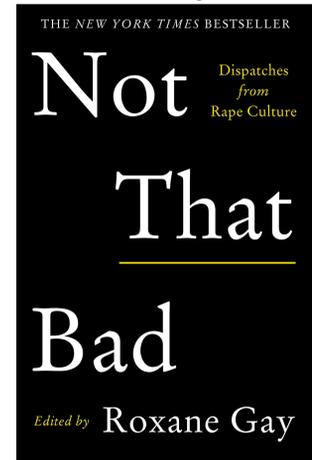
43. *Not That Bad*: Lessons Women Learn in a Rape Culture

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Introduction

In 2018, Roxane Gay assembled an anthology that addresses the severity of rape culture, rejecting the common belief that some sexually violent acts, compared to others, are *not that bad*. This collection, titled *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, compiles pieces from 30 authors and sheds lights on how the notion of *not that bad* contributes to a broader structural social problem involving sexual violence. This social problem, known as rape culture, trivializes sexual violence and shifts blame onto the victim. In the anthology, authors xTx and V. L. Seek recount their experiences with rape culture and the notion of *not that bad*, unveiling the distinct ways this culture is



Source: HarperCollins Publishers

reproduced throughout childhood and within the legal education system. This project uses their testimonies to guide our interpretation of rape culture so we can begin to understand just how bad it really is and start working toward a future free from sexual violence.

What is Rape Culture?

RAPE CULTURE: a society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes normalize sexual violence and blame sexual assault victims

- Second-wave feminism first coined the term *rape culture* in the 1970s to draw attention to society normalizing sexual violence
- Rape culture saturates every corner of our society so thoroughly that people struggle to understand what constitutes rape culture
- Includes rape jokes, cat-calling, policing women's dress, sexualized banter, hostile juries, gendered violence in video games, hospitals refusing rape kits, and paltry sentencing
- Rape culture has become so trivialized, our society has adopted the belief that some rape behaviors are not as bad as others

Social Implications

- Rape culture manufactures a system of categorizing certain acts as more acceptable than others, where victims who do not fit within the “real rape” stereotype are less likely to be believed
- The cultural insistence on trying to distinguish between types of rape amplifies *not that bad*

DATE RAPE: rape committed by a person involved in a romantic or potential relationship with the victim
GRAY RAPE: sex that falls somewhere between consent and denial regardless of relationship

- These terms admirably convey the idea that not all rape is a masked stranger in the bushes, but they erroneously reinforce the idea not all rape is equal
- They also inherently shape a young person's understanding that some forms of rape are not as bad as they could be, where children and young adults internalize the belief that women are objects and rape is their fault

A Legal Perspective

- The presumption of innocence until proven guilty is a sacred principle in the U.S. legal system and requires the State to carry the burden of proof
- Rape is one of the few crimes where people equate this presumption to actual innocence; in other emotionally charged cases, the public preemptively decides whether the accused committed the crime
- People struggle to believe that celebrities, political figures, or people they know could ever rape; however, this turns rape not into a “victimless” crime but into a “perpetratorless” crime
- Victims are viewed as liars who must be disproved instead of supported, opening the door for victims to undergo grueling questioning that systemically dismantles their credibility
- These questions become new ways to blame victims for the assailant's crime

“How much did you drink? What were you wearing? Did you ever have sexual relations with him before? How many, would you say? Did you ever say no? You didn't scream? But it's hard to remember what happened that day, isn't it?”

“The Ways We Are Taught to Be a Girl”

By xTx

xTx explores several lessons she learned throughout childhood on “just what happens when you are a girl” (116). These lessons reveal the prevalence of rape culture, showcasing how it shapes a person's beliefs and how everyone can play a role in ending rape.

A Lesson on Why Children Keep Quiet

- xTx describes a time in elementary school when her friend's brothers “felt [her] perfectly flat chest, their slimy hot tongues pushing into [her] mouth, alien and gross” where she did nothing but learn that “sometimes [girls] will be forced into things [they] don't want to do” (117-118)
- Children don't tell others about what happened to them out of fear they may be punished and find that staying quiet is much easier
- She shared only some details with her parents because she feared telling everything would “make them see the bad” in her (118)
- We must establish ourselves as safe spaces for children, so they do not internalize their discomfort or assume rape is just a fact of life

A Lesson on How Rape Victims Feel Responsible

- She blames herself for seducing her father's friend when he begins petting her, because she wore shorts and a halter top, but decides that it was not as bad as other rape experiences (119-120)
- Addresses the idea that girls are responsible for their rape because of how they dress, despite the reality that rapists will rape regardless of outfit
- Schools that enforce dress codes propagate institutionalized slut shaming and rape culture
- In a rape culture, victims find self-blame in arbitrary reasons; the only way to change is to label these reasons as irrelevant to why rapists rape

Experiencing rape is not just how it is in life and “it's not just ‘what you get’ for being a girl” (127). Even trivialized acts are traumatizing, and these acts must be identified as products of rape culture in order to end collective tolerance and change the status quo.

“Utmost Resistance”

By V. L. Seek

V. L. Seek writes about her experience in law school, concentrating on how legal precedents undermine rape and how law school may validate rape culture.

A Lesson on Memory

- Seek blames herself for drinking and normalizes her rape because “it was not that bad” (181)
- Alcohol plays a role in dismissing rape because victims often cannot remember all the details
- Case precedent illustrates how the legal standard undermines her experience because the lack of “utmost resistance” deems her rape as less legitimate than others
- If we take all rape allegations seriously and teach people not to rape, we can resolve this problem

“There must be the utmost resistance by the woman by all means within her power.” *STATE V. MCCLAIN (1914)*

A Lesson on How Victims are Discredited in Court

- Law students learn to ask intrusive questions that discredit victims, not to empathize with them
- Accusatory questions shift blame onto the victim rather than the rapist, creating an unreasonable burden of proof for victims
- Our culture presumes innocence on the part of the assailant while finding any possible reason to demolish victims' credibility
- To create a world free from rape, the law must adapt to support victims who come forward and schools must teach their students exactly how

Seek's testimony shows there is not one specific way to combat sexual violence, but it can start with trusting victims and accepting just how bad rape culture is.

Conclusion

Both essays can serve as a tool to guide our understanding of rape culture, using their experiences to identify products of rape culture in our lives every day. Their testimonies provide an outline for readers to reflect on their own contributions to rape culture, so that in the future they may step in and speak up for others to ultimately help put an end to sexual violence.

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