



The Sex Myth: The Gap Between Our Fantasies and Reality

By Rachel Hills



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From a bold new feminist voice, a book that will change the way you think about your sex life.

Fifty years after the sexual revolution, we are told that we live in a time of unprecedented sexual freedom; that if anything, we are too free now. But beneath the veneer of glossy hedonism, millennial journalist Rachel Hills argues that we are controlled by a new brand of sexual convention: one which influences all of us—woman or man, straight or gay, liberal or conservative. At the root of this silent code lies the Sex Myth—the defining significance we invest in sexuality that once meant we were dirty if we *did* have sex, and now means we are defective if we *don't* do it enough.

Equal parts social commentary, pop culture, and powerful personal anecdotes from people across the English-speaking world, *The Sex Myth* exposes the invisible norms and unspoken assumptions that shape the way we think about sex today.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Hills argues persuasively that when our value is tied to sexual desirability and performance, we live with a new kind of shame...*The Sex Myth* provides a clarifying framework for understanding new versions of old contradictions...Hills makes a smart argument against that strain of neo- or anti-feminism that would have women rebel against objectification by objectifying ourselves.” (*New York Times Book Review*)

“Rachel Hills has written a bracing and brave interrogation of contemporary assumptions about sex – how and with whom and why we have it, and what it means if we don't. Here is a fresh voice and a welcome perspective, cutting through attitudes that are supposed to be progressive and liberating, but can too often oppress and stifle us just as effectively as older taboos.” (Rebecca Traister *author of Big Girls Don't Cry*)

“A thoroughly engaging new book...one filled with as many “aha!” moments as this one, is going to be enough for plenty to pick it up. If you're interested in beauty and physical appearance on top of that, *The Sex Myth* has even greater wealth. Hills skillfully lays out the ways that sex has become entwined with people's images, including how we use appearance to give a managed vision of sexuality.” (*The New Inquiry*)

“Based on interviews, research, and her own observations, Rachel Hills proposes, in *The Sex Myth*, cutting edge ideas about – and smart solutions for – the gulf between the lofty and often warped ways our current culture depicts and views sex and the way modern sex actually *is*. A pragmatic, refreshing, and interesting look at and discussion of the way we live and love today.” (Cathi Hanauer *author of Gone and editor of The Bitch in the House*)

“Rachel Hills intelligently and ably dissects the myth that to be satisfied and sexually relevant we must diligently exercise (and enjoy!) the freedoms of our supposed sexual liberation. Through the stories of real men and women, she lays bare the truth that despite its advertised “empowerment” and “adventure” this new prescription is no different than those past: by imposing a narrow definition of sexual relevance, it implies that most of us are not measuring up. *The Sex Myth* offers an inclusive alternate definition of sexual freedom, in which we are at liberty to enjoy whatever pleases us. Rachel Hills is bound to find a place on the shelf alongside Ariel Levy, Naomi Wolf, and Jennifer Baumgardner.” (Melissa Febos *author of Whip Smart*)

“Hills adroitly reveals how sex functions individually and collectively in identity formation.” (*Bustle*)

“Pretty much everything you think you know about sex – from magazines extolling mind-blowing orgasms in positions only Cirque de Soleil can accomplish, to sit-coms' nudge-nudge allusions, or fifty shades of any color – is wrong, says Rachel Hills. And thank goodness, too! The gap between these media-spooned fantasies and our actual sex lives is enormous, and is designed to leave most of us feeling like sexual losers – which keep us consuming more fantasies. In a book that is both assured and reassuring, Hills reminds us that there are as many sexualities as there are people, and that most of us find sex fun, intimate, communicative, and pleasurable. Which means – big exhale – we're probably doing it right.” (Michael Kimmel, PhD *author of Manhood in America*)

“Feminist and journalist Rachel Hills spent seven years researching the limits of our cultural understanding of sex. In what may bring huge relief to readers, the resulting book, *The Sex Myth*, proves through scientific and anecdotal evidence (Hills conducted almost a thousand interviews around the Western world) that when

it comes to sex, there is no normal...Part of the beauty of *The Sex Myth* is that it unearths interviewees who, unlike in the single story, are experiencing a dry patch...Hills' work is important; as well as giving us the language to deconstruct enforced sexual norms, she allows us to discover the sex lives of hundreds of different people. And in this, *The Sex Myth* dismantles the single story." (*Kill Your Darlings*)

"Hills, a feminist, goes directly to where many feminist writers don't—right into the hearts, rather than the hormones, of men." (*Mother Jones*)

"Rachel Hills thinks complexly about a subject we all too often simplify and helps us better understand the true diversity of sexual experience. We can never understand sex fully if we mythologize and misunderstand either its pleasures or its perils. She's helped me think in new ways about the intricacies of cultural representations of sex and eroticism as we're living them right now." (Carol Queen, PhD *co-founder*, *Center for Sex & Culture* (sexandculture.org))

"New York-based Australian journalist Hills explores the sex lives of Millennials across the English-speaking world in this incisive look at contemporary sexual realities..." (*Publishers Weekly*)

"Hills teases out an admirable amount of concepts in the span of a short text... accessible language and a balanced perspective create a valuable introduction to problematic discourses around sexuality...A strong argument for reevaluating and further revolutionizing the framing of sex in contemporary society." (*Library Journal*)

"Of course we want to hear someone smart talk about sex." (*Slate*)

"Hills demonstrates again and again how very narrow our supposedly liberated sexual norms are... Some of the most gripping accounts in *The Sex Myth* come from devout young people under pressure *not* to have sex outside of marriage... It's carefully crafted and well evidenced." (*Book Slut*)

"Rachel Hills debunks the Sex Myth – “everybody and all the time” – through incisive interviews combined with Hill's own insight, compassion, and common sense. Individual choice is validated as the true path to sexual satisfaction: “Free to be You and Me” meets “Whatever gets you through the night,” and the result is joyful, inspiring, and, best of all, comforting." (Nina Sankovitch *author of Signed, Sealed, Delivered*)

"An in-depth look at sex and sexuality that explores the attitudes, ideas, misconceptions, and cultural influences that guide millennials. Written by New York City-based journalist Rachel Hills, *The Sex Myth* is by turns scholarly and intimate, revealing the innermost thoughts and feelings of a small sample of interview subjects." (*RH Reality Check*)

"*The Sex Myth* is a very welcome addition to the many books about the changing culture of sex." (*Metapsychology*)

About the Author

Rachel Hills is an Australian journalist living in New York City. Her work has been published widely both in print and online, in publications including *Vogue*, *NYMag.com*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Atlantic*, *The Daily Beast*, and many others. Her blog, *Musings of an Inappropriate Woman* (RachelHills.Tumblr.com), has more than 100,000 subscribers spanning the globe. *The Sex Myth* is her first book.

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The Sex Myth

Introduction

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I was consumed by sex. Not by the physical urge to have it, although I had my share of crushes and unfulfilled desires. Nor was I overly concerned with the particulars of how I might go about it, although I studiously read *Cosmopolitan* each month so that I would know what to do when the occasion arose. My obsession was more esoteric than that. I was consumed by the idea of sex—by what it meant and by what it might reveal about who I was.

If I didn't have sex, did that make me frigid or a loser? If I did do it, but with someone I didn't love—or worse, with someone who didn't love me—would I regret the decision later? What if *Cosmo's* thirty-six hot new sex positions failed me in practice? (Friends had reported that some of them were tricky to pull off.)

I had grown up on a diet of teen magazines that treated sex with cautious reverence, followed by women's magazines that celebrated it as a symbol of female empowerment. In the sitcoms I watched on TV, the single characters dated (and by implication, slept with) new people each week. In the conversations I had with acquaintances, sex was at once a subject of nervous excitement and an unspoken assumption—Sex is an act bound up in the body, but the way that everyone was doing. I, meanwhile, had made it not only through high school a virgin, but through four years of college as well.

This was not an outcome of my own design, and it was not something that most people would have guessed about me. From the outside, I looked like a normal girl—or at least I hoped I did. I did “normal girl” things like go to parties, flirt, and exchange dirty jokes with my friends. In some arenas, I even fared a little better than normal. I didn't just go to the occasional party; I was a veritable social butterfly. I didn't just try to make myself look “presentable” for class; I got up an extra forty-five minutes early to wash, dry, and straighten my hair. But beneath the facade, I felt unattractive in the most literal sense of the word: incapable of attracting anyone I was interested in, regardless of how many friends I had or how much I manipulated my appearance to match what I thought I was supposed to look like.

These two states—“girl about town” and “secret sexual loser”—seemed irreconcilable to me, each one canceling out the other. My lack of a sex life felt like a mark of failed moral character, the physical manifestation of every flaw I had ever suspected I had and of every defect I feared that the people around me were all too aware of but were too polite to mention out loud. Why else would I be uniquely incapable of an act that everyone else appeared to navigate with ease?

In an era in which most of what we hear and read about sex tends toward the sensational, my story might seem unusual. But my concerns weren't unique to me at all. To the contrary, they were a reflection of broader social and political trends. They were a product of a culture that tells us that we must be sexy, sexually active, and skilled in bed in order to be adequate human beings—and that teaches us that the truth of who we are can be found in our sex lives.

Sex is an act bound up in the body, but the way that each of us experiences it is driven by more than just biology. Everything about sex—from the stories we choose to share with our friends to the people we choose to do it with to the remarkably standardized sexual playbook that starts with kissing, followed by touching, and finally penetration—is influenced by social and cultural forces. Sex is not just physical but symbolic, employed as a barometer of the success of our relationships and the degree to which other people want to be intimate with us. It serves as a proxy for our physical attractiveness and how well we fit in with the people around us.

What each of us believes about sex is a product of our particular time and place. The second-century theologian Clement of Alexandria advised Christians not only against engaging in nonreproductive sexual acts such as oral and anal sex but also against having sex at especially pleasurable times of day—such as the morning, the daytime, or after dinner (that is to say, at virtually any time of the day). The Victorians delighted in cataloging every variety of possible deviance: from bondage to bestiality to having sex from behind rather than face-to-face. Even the ancient Greeks, regularly praised for their open-minded approach to carnal matters, operated within a complex and contradictory code of sexual ethics, in which sexual relationships between boys and men were treated as a rite of passage into adulthood, but it was considered demeaning for a man to be penetrated by a man of the same age and social status.

But despite our long-standing preoccupation with sexuality, most people know surprisingly little about the sex lives of others. One result of this information gap is that, like I did, many people assume that others are having better sex, and more of it, than they actually are. While researching his book *Guyland: The Perilous World in Which Boys Become Men*, sociologist Michael Kimmel asked male college students across the United States what proportion of their classmates they believed had sex on any given weekend. The average answer they gave was about 80 percent. In fact, according to the Online College Social Life Survey, a cross-campus study of more than 24,000 American university students, 80 percent is the proportion of college seniors who have ever had sex. Writes Kimmel: “The actual percentage [who have sex] on any given weekend is closer to 5 to 10 percent.” Kathleen Bogle, another American sociologist whose research focuses on young people and casual sex, has made similar observations: no matter how much sex the students she interviewed were having, most of them assumed that other young people were having even more.

Even when I felt most isolated and insecure, I knew that many people had sexual histories that were less perfect—or at least more complex—than they let on in public. Most of the conversations I participated in about sex were at once embellished and notably lacking in detail: designed to convey an impression of experience and sophistication while giving away as little information as possible. But the wall wasn’t always up. I would drop my guard around my closest friends, and they would drop theirs around me. The issues they were dealing with were often different from my own, but they were enough to suggest that others too may have covered up any cracks in their sexual facade with a metaphorical layer of paint.

It wasn’t until shortly before my twenty-fifth birthday, however, that I began to realize how thinly that coat of paint might be applied. This book is dedicated to my good friend Monica, a vivacious ball of energy I met through a youth arts organization we both worked at in our early twenties, and with whom I fell in swift platonic love when I read her witty, self-reflective blogs and zines, in which she chronicled everything from the guys she was crushing on to her work as a bartender.

Monica represented everything I thought a young woman should be, and everything I aspired to be myself. She was confident and friendly and adventurous, and one of the smartest, most insightful people I knew. She was fun—the kind of person who always stayed out late, because you never knew how the night would end if you went out, but you always knew what would happen if you stayed home. This was a woman who, only a couple of years before, had crafted badges reading “five-dollar kiss” and worn them out to clubs. In other words, she was about as far from the stereotype of the uptight wallflower as you could get.

Then one summer evening, when we were walking to our respective public transport hubs after a party, she turned to me and declared, in the same careless-yet-dramatic manner in which she might have told me about a new band she had discovered, “You know, next month it will be two years since I’ve had sex. And I haven’t kissed anyone in a year.”

I tried not to show it at the time, but I was floored. That my own sexual history fell short of the benchmarks

that had been set out for me, I knew very well. But to realize that one of my most brilliant, gregarious friends might be in the same boat was a revelation. If someone as outgoing and seemingly sexually confident as Monica was not sexually active, then maybe sex wasn't so ubiquitous—or its absence such a mark of failure—after all.

My curiosity piqued, I decided to find out what my peers were really experiencing, with a view to writing an article about my observations. I set up an online survey and distributed the call-out to my friends and acquaintances—all strictly anonymous, of course—asking them how many people they'd had sex with and what kinds of relationships they'd had. One guy, in his late twenties, confessed that after losing his virginity a decade earlier, he didn't have sex again for two years. "I wasn't particularly interested in it," he wrote. "I would pick up girls in bars but didn't want to take things any further than second or third base." He told me that he had laughed when he saw *40 Days and 40 Nights*, the early-00s comedy depicting teen heartthrob Josh Hartnett's struggle to stay celibate for a month. One thirtysomething colleague revealed that she hadn't had sex in more than ten years, since her last relationship had ended.

The responses weren't all about not getting laid. One man, in his early thirties, divulged that he'd had over one hundred sexual partners. Another friend, a gay man then in his early twenties, told me over dinner that he'd had more than three hundred partners (two years later, when we revisited the conversation, he was up to almost five hundred). But they were even greater exceptions than I was. At the same time that I was starting to ask myself these questions, academics like Kimmel, Bogle, and New York University's Paula England were beginning to conduct broad-scale quantitative surveys of young adults' sexual behavior. Like my own informal surveys, their results suggested that my generation's sex and social lives weren't the booze-soaked, wet-T-shirt-clad perma-party they were increasingly being portrayed as in the media.

Even more interesting than the survey results were the conversations my investigation sparked with the people I encountered in my day-to-day life. As soon as people knew I was writing about sex, they wanted to talk to me about it—and not just in the usual exchange of repartee or relationship troubleshooting that I was accustomed to. They wanted to talk about their insecurities and uncertainties, about those aspects of their sexual histories they had never quite been able to make sense of or were too embarrassed to tell other people about. Everyone, it seemed, had a story to tell, and most of them felt like they were falling short of the ideal in some way.

The more of these conversations I had, the more I realized that we needed a new way of speaking about sex: one that not only encompassed a broader array of experiences but that treated sex as a social act as much as a biological one. It was time to go beyond the usual conversations about the battle of the sexes, hookup culture, and the effects of Internet pornography to look more deeply at the assumptions we hold about sexuality and why we believe them to be true. In other words, it was time to formalize my investigation.

So I went to the library and picked up every book I could find on the subject, along with hundreds of academic journal articles across the fields of sociology, psychology, and medical science. I wanted to educate myself on everything from campus casual sex cultures to how norms are created and upheld to the way that our perceptions of sexual dysfunction have evolved over time. I continued to read the same magazines and watch the same TV shows that had fueled my insecurities about my own sexual history, but instead of looking to them for guidance on the ways of the world, I studied their content with a critical eye, interrogating the assumptions they made about their readers and the surprisingly subtle ways in which they communicated what kind of behavior was acceptable and expected.

Along the way, I traveled across the United States, Canada, Australia, and the UK to speak with more than two hundred people about their sex lives, and was contacted by hundreds more. Most of them, like me, were

members of the generation popularly known as Millennials—those born between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s. They were men and women, gay and straight, white, black, Asian, and Latino. But for all their differences, they were united by a sense that there was something wrong with the stories we tell about sex, and most of all, with the way that our culture alternately elevates and demonizes sexuality.

I began to realize that we were in the grip of a Sex Myth, which regulated our sexual behavior even as on the surface we appeared to be more free than we had ever been before. The first layer of the Sex Myth was the most obvious: the media myth of a hypersexual society, visible in everything from moral panics over wayward youth to the saturation of sexual content in popular culture to the idea that to be sexually liberated—to be confident, free, and, above all, true to ourselves—meant being sexual in one very particular way.

The second, less obvious, dimension of the Sex Myth was the cultural and emotional value invested in sex: the belief that sex was more special, more significant, a source of greater thrills and more perfect pleasure than any other activity humans engage in. I didn't feel unattractive and inadequate just because I wasn't having sex. I felt that way because I lived in a culture that told me that my sex life was one of the most defining qualities of who I was. It wasn't sex that was the problem, but the importance that I, and so many others, had attached to it.

In this book, I will make visible some of the building blocks upon which our assumptions about sex are grounded: our beliefs about what is normal and desirable, how it is appropriate for a man or a woman to behave, and what makes a person good in bed. I will chart how we have moved from a culture that told us we were dirty if we did have sex to one that tells us we are defective if we do not do it enough—and how these seemingly conflicting ideas have more in common than we tend to think. Most crucially, I will show how the Sex Myth has made sex the bedrock of our morals and identity, and how this link between sex and self is used to shape our behavior and even our desires.

Finally, I will consider what life might look like beyond the Sex Myth. What would it take to live in a society that respects difference in all its forms? How can we create a culture that privileges more than just a facade of sexual freedom? Is it possible to drain sex of its grand significance, and is that something we should even aspire to do?

This book probably won't demolish our existing beliefs about sex completely, and it probably won't usher us into a new sexual utopia. But I believe that the first step to solving a problem is to name it, and I hope that in naming the Sex Myth, we can begin to move toward a way of thinking about sex that is less fraught, more honest, and ultimately more free for everyone.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Errol Sawyer:

Information is provisions for people to get better life, information currently can get by anyone in everywhere. The information can be a understanding or any news even a huge concern. What people must be consider while those information which is within the former life are challenging be find than now's taking seriously which one works to believe or which one the particular resource are convinced. If you get the unstable resource then you buy it as your main information there will be huge disadvantage for you. All those possibilities will not happen within you if you take The Sex Myth: The Gap Between Our Fantasies and Reality as the daily resource information.

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Jennifer Chambers:

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