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Book Review: The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women by Jessica Valenti

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The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women

Jessica Valenti

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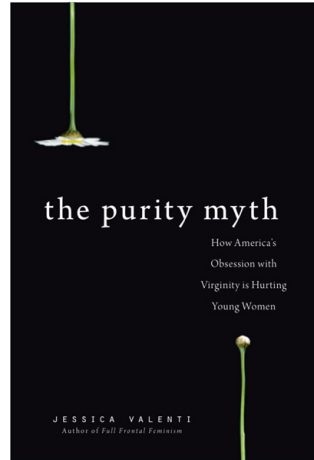
Reviewed by: BROOKE WAGNER

America is obsessed with virginity or so asserts Jessica Valenti in her new book, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women*. From pop stars reaching superstardom after proclaiming their virginity to young women promising their fathers they will remain chaste until marriage to adult women electing surgeries that promise to rejuvenate their vaginas and recreate hymens, virginity is in; and, Valenti believes that this obsession with virginity is pushing feminism out. In *The Purity Myth*, Valenti examines the current virgin/whore dichotomy that plagues the United States, and scrutinizes how it affects women of all ages.

A sex-positive feminist, Valenti is a nationally known activist whose work is intended for women, feminists, and those interested in gendered constructions of sexuality. Valenti is the founder of Feministing.com and author of *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters, He's a Stud, and She's a Slut...and 49 Other Standards all Women Should Know*, and co-editor of *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*. Though virginity obsession appears as a theme in all of Valenti's books, *The Purity Myth* takes this idea farther by deconstructing what purity is, who can be 'pure,' and why society cares.

Throughout this book the reader is invited into Valenti's personal experiences with feminism, sexuality, and lack of 'purity.' She begins by recounting her first sexual experience, remembering the day she lost her virginity as an important marker in her youth but retrospectively insignificant. It did not make her a woman, and counter to some abstinence viewpoints, she was not morally sullied because of it. Losing her virginity did not change her personally (as she once thought it would); it only changed how she was viewed by society.

Valenti argues that young women today are given a label of either pure or whore based on their virginity status and that this labeling can have a dangerous effect. For example, celebrities who choose the purity path become role-models



for millions of girls across the country regardless of their intelligence, kindness, courage, or compassion. For many women, morality's only synonym is virginity. Those who choose to be sexually active, as Valenti did, become 'at risk statistics' and their morality is stripped away. Adults view them as 'bad' girls, classmates view them as 'sluts,' and these sexually active women are constantly told they are used up and worthless by abstinence-only education programs. This is the purity myth -- the fictionalized story that women's self-worth is determined by their sexual status. Calling for a reexamination of female morality, Valenti advocates for a "morality based on ethics" and not on bodies (14).

In remarkable detail, Valenti describes the purity myth's consequences. She links this myth to the hypersexualization of young women, arguing that the moral panic surrounding purity transformed girlhood innocence into sexy. She suggests that "by fetishizing youth and virginity, we're supporting a disturbing message: that really sexy women aren't women at all—they're girls" (13). Valenti notes that this damages all women by sending confusing messages about how they should act (innocent sex kitten?) and where their value as a human being lies (between their legs); As a result, many women internalize the sexual double standard and some go so far as to get plastic surgery to make their vaginas appear more virginal.

The most compelling effect of the purity myth is how it affects the rights women hold over their bodies. Valenti contends that women labeled impure based on social location are ignored in legislation and receive less support when sexually assaulted than women deemed pure. For example, she recounts a Philadelphia case where a woman was gang raped at gun point and the judge ruled the act be termed "theft of service" (not rape) because the woman was a sex worker (156-157). Sex workers, though, are not the only victims of the purity myth. She notes that sexual violence against women of color is increasing, while violence is decreasing among white women. Valenti suggests that this is ignored by media and legislation because women of color are viewed as transgressing purity by simply not being white. Low-income women are also at risk, not for transgressing purity, but because they are "automatically misjudged as irresponsible" (200).

Valenti continues by naming the perpetrators responsible for propelling the purity myth. Shockingly, those Valenti points to are not the abstinence only leaders and teachers, the conservative right, or the pro-life camp, though she gives much detail on how each of these groups keeps the purity myth alive. She does not accuse American masculinity, which promotes heterosexuality, aggression and male dominance over women, though she briefly discusses how this ideology can be used to rationalize sexual assault. Instead, Valenti blames American paternalism for 1) assuming men know what is best for women, and 2) believing women cannot be trusted to make good decisions. She cites numerous examples of women being treated as 'victims' or 'out-of-control and dangerous,' each case 'requiring' a man to step in and play the savior. Valenti insists that reestablishing purity to protect women is only the beginning; the ultimate goal of these measures

is to remove women's rights and to put women back in the home.

Valenti calls for women of all ages to deconstruct the paternal expectations ruling their behavior and take control of their own sexuality. She stresses that America needs to move away from abstinence programs and virginity pledges and instead 'teach sex as a moral, responsible act' (194). In the conclusion, she revisits her thesis that sex should be treated as an act and not as a reflection of a woman's character. The final chapters outline multiple ways to help end the virginal double standard and offers an extensive list of organizations, blogs, magazines, and books that are sharing the fight.

Valenti's informal style is laced with personal experiences and is successful in keeping the reader engaged. The footnotes used throughout the book are humorous but often anecdotal, and the narrative relies on subjective rhetoric instead of balanced perspectives (e.g., her stance that all pro-abstinence feminism is laid in false consciousness and governed by patriarchy).

Black Feminist theorists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins are briefly mentioned; however, most of the book examines abstinence only authors, news reports, and individual case studies, failing to fully address theoretical viewpoints or to systematically use empirical findings. Though present, her discussion on the affects of race and class on purity is diminutive and lacks the lens of intersectionality; meanwhile, the relationship between sexual orientation and purity is never addressed. Furthermore, this book does not make new theoretical claims, which limits its academic use, but instead offers many eye-opening examples on how the purity myth is used against all women.

Overall, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* is an intriguing and valuable book meant for readers less versed in studies of sex and gender. Valenti's argument is rooted in sex-positive feminism and her book offers a unique look at the consequences of the virgin/whore dichotomy. I recommend *The Purity Myth* to anyone wanting a different perspective on female sexuality than the mass media affords.