

men-as-predator/sexual aggressor assumption no longer dominates our thinking. It's difficult to imagine getting there from here, but we're going to have to try.

If you want to read more about **HERE AND QUEER**, try:

- Queering Black Female Heterosexuality by **KIMBERLY SPRINGER**
- Shame Is the First Betrayer by **TONI AMATO**

If you want to read more about **MANLINESS**, try:

- Toward a Performance Model of Sex by **THOMAS MACAULAY MILLAR**
- Hooking Up with Healthy Sexuality: The Lessons Boys Learn (and Don't Learn) About Sexuality, and Why a Sex-Positive Rape Prevention Paradigm Can Benefit Everyone Involved by **BRAD PERRY**

If you want to read more about **MUCH TABOO ABOUT NOTHING**, try:

- How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman? by **KATE HARDING**
- The Process-Oriented Virgin by **HANNE BLANK**

## 20 Sex Worth Fighting For

BY **ANASTASIA HIGGINBOTHAM**

ONE OF THE WOMEN who trained me as an instructor of full-impact self-defense urges students to answer the question What are you willing to fight for? This is a course where people train to fight through realistic rape and attack scenarios as a way to prepare for and protect against violence. Within the first hour of class, students land full-force blows against well-padded instructors portraying their assailants. Few things feel as satisfying.

When asked to consider what's worth such a fight in real life, students name loved ones, usually their children and parents. Some wonder whether they would fight for property that has special significance. Others cut right to "My life," and leave it at that. As a woman and feminist, I put sex on the list—very near the top.

Sex that's chosen and wanted is as vital to my survival as love, respect, and money to pay the bills. Long before I ever approached the stage when I might have initiated sexual exploration, I had the right to experience my pleasure free of inhibition and free of harm.

I've been robbed of that right repeatedly since childhood. But I always get it back, and only with a fight.

It's not the act of sex I care about so much as the whole universe of sex—from my anatomy to my attractions, from the liveliness of

my fantasies to the strength of my libido. And yeah, the act itself ought to feel pretty good, too. But as anyone who's experienced the nasty array of alternatives to consensual sex knows, good sex is not to be taken for granted.

I remember my mom joking, "Even when it's bad, it's good." I was a teenager by then and having sex with a boyfriend I adored, so I sort of got it. But her words echoed in my head years later, in college, when I got into the most sexually dysfunctional relationship of my life. By the end, my boyfriend was bringing me a cold, wet washcloth after sex so I could hold it between my legs to dull the ache. When I told him I wanted to lay off sex for a while so I could figure out why it always hurt, he said sadly, "I feel like I'm being punished." He further commented that having sex with me was like walking through a minefield. How I wish now that, at the trigger of his next touch, I'd have been capable of blowing his arms off.

I abandoned that relationship, eager to remember in my body and not just my mind the time when I agreed with my mother that even bad sex could feel good. I wanted to say yes to the sex I was having and mean it, but it would be ten years before I did so with the lightness and joy that should precede such a moment.

Though I have so far never been raped and never been physically attacked by a stranger, I have been lured, grabbed, tricked, stalked, harassed, coerced, and humiliated, and treated cruelly during sex. As all the studies on violence against women would predict, the majority of these experiences happened with people I knew, some of whom I loved. And though I've seen a bit more menace than some of the women in my life, we've all been in similar boats, up very similar creeks.

Physical force was never necessary to get me to engage in sex or intimacy I didn't want. My will vanished in the presence of great passion and authority, so it's impossible for me to claim I did anything against them. This guaranteed major regrets later on and left

me with a fear, well justified, that my survival instincts were for shit. I was incapable of protecting myself in the world. Panhandlers, employers, lovers, suitors, and even friends all seemed to have more power over me than I did. Eventually every approach, whether kind or insidious, felt like an unholy demand and could send me into a rage. The accumulation of stress, anger, and regret became a poison that ruined my sleep and screwed up my health, hijacked my artistic pursuits, and threatened my ability to earn a living. Sex revolted me, yet it consumed my thoughts.

"If you viewed my cells under a microscope," I told the therapist who helped me through my twenties without my attempting suicide, "you would see teeny, tiny images of pornography. Snuff films, incest, sexual violence of every kind. It lives in me; it fucking defines me."

We spent years homing in on events that had mucked my thinking and monkey-wrenched many of my bodily functions. She, of course, validated my rage and followed me into obvious dreams, where large creatures swam under dark water that I tried to avoid falling in; where I discovered a gorilla asleep in my attic wearing a pink flowered housedress; where I bashed a room full of blood-filled snakes to death with a baseball bat, splattering blood all over the living room of the house where I grew up. But it was all happening inside me, with no real release.

I remained preoccupied by fears that something "truly" bad would happen, and often imagined the gang rape and murder that would finish me off for good. It would probably be committed by boys who didn't plan to go that far but felt like trying out their power on somebody who seemed like an easy target. This scenario felt so possible to me as to be the likely next step in my life. I went looking for it. Drinking and smoking with my girlfriend at a bar called Downtown Beirut, I went into full-on butch mode, ready to pick a fight with any man who stared too long at her or us. I

observed a boy with a blond shaved head, dressed in the leather jacket and boots that convey Nazi youth. I caught and held his eye contact in precisely the way a drunk person should not with a Nazi-looking boy who's also been drinking. I was asking for it—but not rape. I have never wanted that. What I wanted was an eruption of all that I felt and confirmation of my worst imaginings; I wanted contact. He didn't take the bait.

As an instructor of full-impact self-defense, my job is to create the types of situations that allow a person to experience what I was looking for that night, without getting into real trouble. The curriculum is not my invention; it's called IMPACT and is offered in a number of cities around the country. IMPACT's brilliance is to capitalize on factors that would normally guarantee women's victimization: our size and social conditioning, and the likelihood that we will face a sneak attack. Students learn to use these factors to their advantage, reverse the power dynamic of an attack, and defeat or dissuade an assailant with words, silence, and/or the weapons of our own bodies. This is adrenaline-state training, so fear is key. Real fear makes our hearts thump, pulses race, knees jump. Our hands tremble, our vision blurs, our thinking brains shut down. We freeze, can't breathe. IMPACT training provokes this adrenaline response so that students can learn to breathe, think, talk, and fight through it. Lessons get burned into a student's muscle memory for life, same as swimming and riding a bike. Our brains don't have to remember, because our bodies won't forget.

This is no-frills fighting, and you don't have to be an athlete, a martial artist, or even a feminist to pull it off. Beyond teaching the techniques and safely absorbing knockout blows, instructor teams care for the fighter as she battles her own demons, set loose by the realism, and coach her to fight through her adrenaline-related disorientation. This is as tough as it sounds, for both instructor and student, though the techniques are deceptively simple: hurt the

testicles, hurt the head, repeat as necessary. Not everyone emerges from the class transformed and ready for anything, but all leave with a few strategies up their sleeves and plenty of practice dealing with confrontations even when they're scared.

I signed up for the class already galled that I had to make myself more vulnerable in order to get stronger. Plus, I was convinced it was going to make me feel incredibly stupid for having failed to assert myself in the past. Even the letter confirming my registration intimidated me. I should wear comfortable clothing, bring an additional pair of shoes with rubber soles to avoid tracking street dirt onto the blue mats, arrive by 6:15 PM so that class could begin promptly at six thirty, and bring a snack, since we wouldn't finish until ten thirty that night. The class would total twenty hours of training and last five weeks, and if I decided I hated it after it began, I would get no refund—no exceptions.

I arrived the first night at six forty-five, very jittery, with only the street-dirty shoes I was wearing, and no snack. A smiling assistant greeted me at the elevator, handed me a bottle of Windex and a paper towel for the bottoms of my shoes, and urged me to join the circle, where the others had begun to introduce themselves and offer one-minute explanations for why they were there ("Hi, I'm Anastasia. I'm miserable and filled with hate and fear, but I want to be lovely and loving. I swear. Please let me hit you"). After the intro and a short warm-up, we formed a single line along the edge of the mats. They covered almost the entire hardwood floor, creating a giant blue square where our battles would soon be fought.

The female instructor stood before us to introduce the word "NO" as a tool for fighting: 1) It forces you to breathe; 2) it alerts anyone within hearing distance that there's trouble; and 3) it adds power to every strike. After demonstrating this famous and often made-fun-of "NO!"—which, when said properly, as the instructor said it, should send chills down your spine and bring water to your

eyes—our instructor had us all do it together. Then she said she'd be going down the line to hear each of us yell by ourselves.

I thought I would burst into tears, but the woman next to me beat me to it. She was younger than me, built small. She wore sexy black workout gear. When her turn came, she covered her face with both hands, found the nearest corner of the room, crouched into a ball, and wept. My eyes went with her, not realizing that the instructor was now standing in front of me waiting for my "NO!" as though that girl hadn't just melted down in front of us all. I belted out a sufficient "NO!" and listened to the three more left in line. When the instructor heard the last student, she walked over to the crouching girl, tapped her on the shoulder, and said gently but firmly, "Come on back to the line." One of the class assistants had handed the woman a tissue in the interim, but that was all she got: one lousy tissue and a few moments of privacy for her freakout.

*Yeah, it dawned on me, too bad for us and all our sad stories. Are we gonna learn to fight or ball up in the goddamn corner for the rest of our lives?*

By the end of class five, I was determined to take every class offered in this model and to one day teach it. Until I experienced the joy and release of fighting pretend rapists, my life showed no signs of improving. Even with an excellent and committed therapist. Even with devoted friends who I felt understood me, and a loving family that was trying to understand. Even with five seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* available on DVD. I could not get my shit together.

Until I learned how to physically fight for my right to sex that didn't hurt me and intimacy that didn't steal warmth from me, I was determined to prove the world's hatefulness toward women through my own wrecked life, my own destroyed body. Fighting broke this cycle almost immediately. It let me make my point again and again: loud, clear, concise, unapologetic, and with

the tremendous violence I have always felt roaring through me. Fighting and teaching let me connect my rage with meaningful, relevant targets, for my own sake and for that of the other women who want this training. It's the best protest I've ever known and the only activism I have ever enjoyed.

Nothing makes me madder than the reality of rape in women's lives all over the world, and nothing turns me on like fighting it. We have options for resisting attempted rape and other vile behavior, though it's not only fear and socialization that have kept many of us from doing so in the past. Adrenaline is no joke. We all need some education in what our own style of resistance might look and feel like, and everyone needs practice breaking the freeze response that's bound to trigger during traumatic events. With this education and practice, we reap immeasurable benefits.

I've seen a solid self-defense education get into a woman's system and begin to right things that have been going wrong in her life for a long, long time. Mainly, women find their minds freer from thoughts about rape—whether they are getting over some violation or hoping to avoid one in the future. I can actually see it lift off their shoulders and hear the difference in their voices at the end of classes four and five, when everyone has fought their hearts out on the blue mats. Whether they've become great fighters or just okay fighters, they trust their body's own protective instincts more. They can get on with their lives and begin to reclaim the part of their brain once devoted to rape fears, half-assed what-if plans, and regret.

Until we demand this education for ourselves and for girls, we're all still floating in the same boats together, up the same creeks, generation after generation. Our minds are not free and our bodies are not safe. I, for one, don't look forward to having my granddaughter come over and break down about a friend who got really drunk at a party and forced his hand down her pants, all the way down, but it was sort of a joke, so she laughed, until she realized it was really

happening, and then she was, like, frozen, and by the time she removed his hand, he'd already gotten away with it and now she feels slimed and disgusting and has to see him every day at school, where he acts like it never happened, and she's worried about what will happen at the next party. *Oh, honey*, I might say to her, *did I ever tell you about the time my boyfriend tied me to the bed while I was crying and saying I didn't want him to? Yes, we women are built of some strong stuff. Think of all we have endured!*

To hell with that. A drunk friend at a party looking to get away with something crude? A boyfriend with a jumprope and a bad idea? That shit can be stopped. But only by us and only if we're ready for a fight.

Yes, fighting is dangerous, and getting into one is risky. But we're already getting hurt, and even the United States Department of Justice has reported that a woman is not more likely to be injured if she resists an attempted assault. This makes sense when you also consider that more than two-thirds of sexual assaults are being committed by men we know. These are not the rapists of our nightmares; they are the poorly behaved men of our lives, workplaces, and neighborhoods who *always* gave us a bad feeling. A stranger with a knife jumping out of the bushes to rape and possibly kill us does happen, though less frequently than movie posters and the nightly news suggest. But it doesn't take a rape at knifepoint to ruin a woman's life and deny her her right to be a sexual being. Though that may surely do it, we all know there are easier ways to murder a woman's experience of sex, love, and pleasure, and it's happening all the time.

We can learn to fight for sex on our terms. Literally. With strong words, conviction, and certainty, with hands, elbows, knees, feet, and a "NO" so mean it chills the blood. I'm talking about a self-defense strategy that is imprinted on our cells and that affects every seemingly insignificant aspect of how we live, whom we love, and

what we cherish. I'm talking about tucking our studied knowledge of the violence we are capable of into our muscle memory and being ready to unleash it if the situation demands it. I'm talking about each of us refusing on the most basic level to be especially vulnerable to the one violation that has so far defined being female.

When I was fourteen years old, I took a hammer from my mom and dad's toolbox and put it under my pillow. I also swiped a screwdriver, which I hid in my underwear drawer. Until recently, I had always looked back on that choice and thought, *Geez, that's fucked up*. But I've changed my mind. That's a girl who doesn't want to be harmed in her bed, a girl who wants to sleep soundly but knows she needs more than a cheery outlook on life in order to do it. That's a girl who not only will fight for her right to be sexual without being forced into sex, but may kill for it. At the time, I lacked the skills to support such an intention, and a good night's rest was still a long way off for me.

That's no longer the case. And though there's no such thing as safety from an attempted rape in this world, I'm all the weapon I need, and I sleep well.

If you want to read more about MUCH TABOO ABOUT NOTHING, try:

- A Love Letter from an Anti-Rape Activist to Her Feminist Sex-Toy Store by **LEE JACOBS RIGGS**
- The Process-Oriented Virgin by **HANNE BLANK**

If you want to read more about SEXUAL HEALING, try:

- Reclaiming Touch: Rape Culture, Explicit Verbal Consent, and Body Sovereignty by **HAZEL/CEDAR TROOST**
- In Defense of Going Wild or: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Pleasure (and How You Can, Too) by **JACLYN FRIEDMAN**