Book Review: The Purity Myth

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Jessica Valenti, founder and editor of Feministing.com, argues in The Purity Myth that America’s obsession with virginity is harming young women. To her, virginity is nothing more than an idea that varies from person to person. The only true value it holds is the one society and individuals assign to it. The problem, in Valenti’s opinion, is that people frequently talk about virginity as though it is a physical thing to package up and save until that special day, whatever that day may be. Typically the idea of saving one’s virginity for marriage is promoted. But this approach links the value of women to what they have between their legs; if they “give away” that virginity before society says they should, Valenti contends they are often seen as nothing more than used goods.

One of the key players in helping to promote this myth of virginity is the abstinence movement. While this movement is not necessarily a large one, it does hold a considerable amount of power partly because organizations that teach abstinence-only education receive federal funding. Also, many of the organizations that make up this movement are religious in nature as well as anti-feminist in the sense that they want to keep traditional gender roles and not have women and men treated equally. This movement also often uses fear tactics, such as inaccurate information about the rate of failure of contraceptives, to convince young women and men to comply with abstinence. It should be noted that Valenti is not against anyone choosing abstinence, but rather she is against false information being taught to teenagers; especially since such information leaves them improperly prepared for any sexual
activities they may have in the future. Valenti also considers the disturbing trend of purity balls and the pseudo-incestuous vibe they give off; fathers take their daughters to these balls and promise to protect their daughters’ virginity until they are married. That is not the strangest part; frequently these outings are treated like “dates” because the daughter is all dolled up and the father is essentially taking his little girl out to a night around the town. Certainly daughters should love their fathers, but this seems to be taking it a step too far. A girls’ first date should not be with her father, despite Freud’s beliefs about these matters.

After outlining this purity myth, Valenti takes her book in another direction entirely by tying it in with women’s rights issues. The mantra of women’s rights being human rights may be very familiar to some, but this idea cannot be stressed enough. Women’s rights are really nothing more than human rights geared specifically toward women, and women are being denied basic human rights on the basis of their gender. Regardless of whether one is a woman or not, it should not be difficult to understand why this is a problem. Some men will argue that none of this affects them because they are not women, but Valenti writes that this is not true because of interconnected social relationships. That is, everyone will eventually be affected if woman’s rights are slowly stripped away; it will mean that one’s mother, daughter, or wife will no longer be able to make decisions about her own body because the government found them mentally unable to do so. This puts a burden on all genders, Valenti contends, because it means women will be forced to either get permission from a male relative to do something or will be subjected to a man telling them what to do because, somehow, he knows better. This makes women dependent on men even in instances where the man they are relying on is someone they do not know.

Valenti also touches on topics such as women’s health, abortion, rape, porn, and society’s perception of masculinity. Many interesting points are brought up in these chapters and it is a shame Valenti could not expand on some of these ideas. Still, the parallel she makes between the purity
movement and the sex industry is a fascinating one because she argues that both are promoting misogyny and patriarchy, though both do so in vastly different ways. Porn, in many ways, reflects how men see women and so that is potentially why women are consistently degraded in it. The purity movement, on the other hand, is against porn simply because it degrades the patriarchy. Sadly, Valenti only delves into this concept in one chapter before moving on. While this is not a bad way to introduce the idea of feminism to someone unfamiliar with it, it alienates those who already understand the issues women face.

Valenti’s style of writing is also very similar to that of a blog, meaning that some readers may find her too informal and sarcastic. Her footnotes, for example, are full of little quips arguing with those she quotes. The title of her book is also a bit misleading in that she does not focus the entirety of the book on this idea of the purity myth and how it is harming young women in America. Certainly, she ties this idea into other issues, but talking more in length about the idea of virginity and what it means to society would have been useful. In fact, one weakness of this book is that Valenti fails to come up with a more definite definition for virginity. Still, she does manage to tie all these ideas together, however loosely, and perhaps stimulate the reader’s interest enough to learn more about these issues. If nothing else, Valenti does an excellent job at encouraging readers – newfound feminists or not – to consider the ways in which society views women.
Book Information
The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women
By Jessica Valenti (2009)
300 pp., Seal Press, $24.98

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