

JoAnn Wypijewski, *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo: Essays on Sex, Authority and the Mess of Life*
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EROS AND PSYCHE

JoAnn Wypijewski didn't mean to end up writing about crime when she started writing about sex. What first attracted her writerly curiosity was desire, and pleasure—the possibilities for it, the absolute necessity of attention to it as part of any radical politics, the meaning of and conditions for it, the substance of intimate life.' But events intervened: the AIDS epidemic, the Culture Wars, homophobic violence, paedophilia in the Church, the Central Park Five, Harvey Weinstein and #MeToo. And if your beat is sex and culture, as Wypijewski observes in *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About #MeToo*, writing about crime is what happens. Nearly thirty years of essays and reporting are on offer here, many from the *Nation*, where she was a longtime editor and writer (she's also on NLR's editorial committee).

A proponent of old-fashioned values like intellectual scepticism and inner toughness, animated by visions of freedom more than censoriousness, Wypijewski doesn't 'believe all women', that contemporary litmus test, and questions whether thirty-year-old memories should be legally dispositive. When feminism as such comes up in discussion, the qualifier 'white' will often be attached; though sexual politics is the field of inquiry, as per the book's title, class and race continually turn out to be more determinative categories than gender as such. In Wypijewski's astringent assessment, the feminist reformers operating under the #MeToo hashtag not only overlook important ideas about freedom and justice; they also forget to figure capitalism into their political calculations. The campaign displays too palpable an enthusiasm for punishment—and, foregrounding black women's experience ('one in two black women loves someone who's in jail') there's no liberation to be had in ratcheting up criminalization. Too many diverse

behaviours have been herded under the umbrella of ‘sexual abuse’, with summary judgements rather than due process for the accused. Worse, moral panics, including the protracted one we’ve been living through, don’t even require their accused to be guilty.

‘Young activists raising the banner of #MeToo are not to blame for this world of punishment and fear. They did not make it. But every human alive is responsible to history’, Wypijewski writes. ‘We inherit it, and will bequeath whatever it is we do with it.’ She is equally critical of the carceral proclivities of supposed progressives who once distrusted zero-tolerance policies and law-and-order platforms. As she says pointedly of all citizens a little too eager to lock men up—usually poor and black men—and then joke knowingly about what happens in the showers: ‘rape is a heinous crime, except when wished upon those accused of it’. She is dubious, too, about victims’ rights movements, where in her view ‘the sympathetic aspect of the victim’ often obscures the real function of the campaigns: ‘to assert vengeance as a social good’.

Given the accusatory zeal of the moment, left feminism this unapologetic is an increasingly endangered species. Wypijewski remains a proponent of the liberationist energies of the twentieth-century counterculture, even as the twenty-first century frogmarches us towards what the anthropologist Roger Lancaster has called ‘poisoned solidarities’. The term names that ‘communal feeling forged from the negative energies of fear, suspicion, vigilance’, deploying ‘shunning and punishment as empowering, unifying goals.’ Wypijewski’s view of human nature can be no less sharp and bleak, as when she analyses the reflexes that drive ‘the crowd’: ‘Anticipating retribution enlivens people regardless of ideology, and has accelerated into ordinary, terrible fun.’

In prose that pirouettes between the journalistic, the polemical and the lyrical, Wypijewski aims to disrupt today’s habitual scripts about sex, to insist upon the moral conundrums that lurk within our presumptions of guilt and culpability. ‘The terrain gets slipperier’, she argues, ‘when you think for a moment about the real way people have sex—the way risk arouses and arousal subordinates thoughts of risk, the way shame influences almost any discussion of desire, the way denial is always, always at work.’ Wypijewski has been on the scene for nearly every iconic scandal of the last three decades: sometimes as a cultural critic—there are chapters here on Madonna and on the artist David Wojnarowicz—but more frequently in the courtrooms as a reporter, interviewing claimants and key figures, digging up the facts, going through the documents, relitigating the cases. The more demonized the accused, the more they interest her, and a long procession of such loathed figures marches through these pages. Against the mainstream press’s condescension, Wypijewski insists that they are human, too.

Even Harvey Weinstein gets the benefit of the doubt, contrasted to a parody of liberation that has resorted to ‘making monsters, and caging them’. Citing the prosecutors’ depiction of Weinstein (‘deformed’, ‘abnormal’, ‘intersex’, ‘disgusting’, ‘fat’, ‘hairy’) she comments: ‘Never has body shaming and the “normal” trap been so wielded as a weapon of presumed progressive justice.’ Wypijewski’s suspicions are aroused by uniformity of opinion; where there’s social agreement, she presents the counter-intuitive take: ‘It is now accepted as fact that Weinstein is a violent criminal. He may be, but in actual fact we don’t know.’ He ‘basked in the bully role, but his descent would be more satisfying if did not rely simultaneously on conviction by say-so.’ Actual guilt or innocence is irrelevant in these processes, because panic follows its own logic. The concept is a central one for Wypijewski. She defines it as a social eruption, fanned by the media, characterized by alarm over innocence imperilled (the archetype: white women and children). The predator, a mutable presence, figures as a menace against which the populace must be mobilized. In a sex panic, Wypijewski writes, definitions collapse: ‘abuse’ can mean a comment, a caress, a violent act; rape, ‘a terrible and serious crime’, is conflated with behaviour that may not be criminal at all.

Lynndie England represents the obverse case: a low-ranking white woman charged with bringing the system into disrepute. One of the defendants in the Abu Ghraib prison-torture scandal, she was indicted for her role in sexually humiliating naked Iraqi prisoners for the sake of pornographic photo ops. For Wypijewski, the story ‘is, as in every tragedy in which human weakness collides with historical force, a more tangled thing’. She cites the evolution of US torture policy from Afghanistan to Guantánamo to Iraq, the ‘cruelty exemptions’ won by the CIA and others. England, apparently under the sway of a charismatic boyfriend, the actual torture-porn mastermind, was a private, the lowest ranked soldier involved (only twenty-one at the time), yet charged with the most crimes. Why? Because America is a torture state, and England made a conveniently culpable stand-in for military corruption. It’s not that America doesn’t torture, it just won’t countenance getting caught torturing for fun.

The ways social morality gets leveraged for other purposes are threaded through the book. When someone crosses a moral line, Wypijewski’s move is to put the question of individual agency on trial. It’s the central problem these chapters seem to keep banging up against, with Wypijewski devising complicated end runs around—yet not entirely subduing—the qualm (perhaps one shared by even a few anti-carceral leftists) that people who do heinous things aren’t solely social victims. One tactic in her arsenal is the emphasis shift, elegantly performed, as when she turns to the case of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student from Laramie, Wyoming, who in

1998 was ‘strung up like a scarecrow on a buck fence, bludgeoned beyond recognition and left to die without his shoes, his ring, his wallet or the \$20 inside it.’ The focus, however, is less on Shepard than Laramie itself, and the two ‘redneck’ meth heads who did the stringing up, treated by Wypijewski with almost discomfiting empathy: ‘young men of common prejudices, far more devastatingly human than is comfortable to consider’. She investigates what they were up to during the five-day meth binge that culminated in the murder, suggesting it might tell us more about the crime—‘more about the everyday life of hate and hurt and heterosexual culture’—than ‘all the quasi-religious characterization of Matthew’s passion, death and resurrection as a patron saint of hate-crime legislation.’ The report on a homophobic murder turns into an exploration of masculinity.

‘Did Shepard die because he was gay, or because his murderers were straight?’ Wypijewski asks. Not just straight, but probably in danger of being called wusses themselves, and at the bottom of every social totem pole. Where some might consider the national outrage generated by Shepard’s death an achievement, Wypijewski is critical of the ‘tolerance peddlers’ who don’t see heterosexual masculinity as part of the problem. She’s suspicious of victim-impact statements, as when Shepard’s mother extolled her son’s accomplishments in court—languages spoken, books read—‘almost as if Matthew’s death counted for more than it might have if he’d just been a wuss, a fag’. Shepard too had smoked pot and tried meth; there were even rumours of love triangles. She wishes Shepard’s death could have provoked more consideration about questions of sex and freedom, ‘instead of only tolerance and hate’.

Here and elsewhere Wypijewski excels at deep-dive reporting about *place*, especially the depressed and dreary lower-middle-class American enclaves that are the settings for many of our scandals and tragedies. She journeys to locales like Laramie and immerses herself, talking to people, giving us histories and stats about infrastructure, seeing what’s manufactured (or, mostly, what no longer is). The economies of place are, for her, intrinsic to the human-scale dramas of love and need, secrets and betrayal, that percolate up from these run-down landscapes. She’s attentive to the isolation, insecurities, bluster and the attempted salves: ‘Marx was wrong. Sex, not religion is the heart in a heartless world’; attuned to the ways people without much else use sex and drugs for a bit of low-cost transcendence. And she knows about the trouble it gets them into.

Another such depressed and depressing place is Jamestown, in upstate New York, where Nushawn Williams, an HIV-positive African-American man had unprotected sex with a number of white female partners in the late 1990s (one of them underage), infecting at least thirteen people. After the authorities broadcast his picture and medical details around the country,

Williams was tried and served ten years; he remains indefinitely confined in a psychiatric prison. He's still a 'one-man plague', or at least it consoles the community to think that keeping him and others caged solves their problems. As Wypijewski frequently reminds us, these convenient villains are so often poor and black. How then to balance individual agency against structural causality? There's always 'the logic of the culture' to blame. But what to do with—and how are anti-carceral leftists to think about—all the guilty perpetrators with bad childhoods, drunken mothers, meth habits and hopeless futures, who were and are victims themselves, including of the violence endemic to capitalism? Are they any less accountable when they victimize, violate or exploit other people? How to allocate blame and punishment; to what degree should it be balanced with forgiveness?

Along the way, Wypijewski invites us to celebrate the power of sex to destabilize—because 'sometimes sex does change everything'. 'Remember the captured glimpse of the lover stripped and weak with need?' she exhorts us. She reminds us that for his lovers, 'there was a time when Williams delighted them and they delighted him.' When she writes, about Nushawn in bed with Andrea, one of his girlfriends, that 'the knives are drawn for him not for beating her but for holding her in his arms, kissing her softly, fucking her often and well—for the only things in a world of pain and binds from which she exacted a little pleasure and commanded a little power'—this is immersive journalism at its most immersed (or perhaps projective). As a dialectician of sex, Wypijewski's appraisals are cooler—'Can we know pleasure without pain?'—or when explaining that we're all hopelessly weak and 'life's little joke is that in that weakness lies the potential for our ecstasy and our despair'.

Less interested in allocating guilt than in sharing it, Wypijewski forgives the bad behaviour percolating out of 'love's madness' even when it afflicts Republicans (Mark Sanford) or entails a relationship with your ex's daughter (Woody Allen). Wypijewski tends to probe motives when it suits her arguments; this can include at times some rather vigorous probing of the motives of those levelling sexual accusations, especially those levelling them against priests. Catholicism is another of the book's motifs. I found myself at one point scrawling in the margin, 'Does she think she's a saint?' about Wypijewski's proclivities for radical forgiveness, only to come upon her remarking shortly later that she had indeed dreamed of being a saint as a girl. Two chapters concern the priest-abuse scandals, and toward these accused figures Wypijewski is curiously munificent, given that her own Catholic girlhood was not without 'a bit of groping in the priest's chamber'. Her description of this culprit is especially memorable: a piggy-eyed cleric with 'thick fingers that he'd run along the inside of the chalice after

Communion, smacking his lips on the last drops of the blood of Christ'. He later dropped dead of a heart attack.

Still, for someone with first-hand experience of sexually invasive priests, she proves surprisingly sceptical about other journalists' claims that such abuses have been endemic. She blames the Church and the press equally for this ongoing scandal, along with self-dealing personal-injury lawyers. The Church may have paid out up to \$1 billion in settlements; the problem was that these settlements themselves were taken as evidence of the truth of priest abuses: 'Perhaps most claims were legitimate, but not all.' One accused priest in particular attracts her investigative curiosity: Father Paul Shanley, a radical 'street priest' in Boston in the 1970s and, rather astonishingly, a gay activist, a friend of the group around *Gay Community News*. For Wypijewski, he's been made a convenient sacrifice, a substitute for all the priests who got away with worse. She set about reinvestigating the case, interviewing his accusers and lovers, exposing lies and prejudices galore, even while acknowledging that Shanley had numerous sexual relationships with adolescents and young men. For Wypijewski, Shanley was 'life's contradictions incarnate'. He 'certainly lied to himself' and apparently to others, yet his is a hard case to judge, she insists—'not because he did nothing wrong', but because he also had adult relationships with partners who were willing.

Were they all? Well, not entirely. In one episode, midway through sex with an inexperienced twenty-one-year-old named John Harris (it was his first time with a man; Shanley was then forty-eight), Harris said he thought they should stop. Shanley replied, 'I'm almost finished.' Wypijewski admits, drily, 'This is not what Jesus would have done.' Still, people getting carried away in the moment is 'human fallibility', to her way of thinking; not acknowledging that means erasing a priest's humanness. For her it's a story about 'the power sex exerts over men'. Elsewhere in the book when people exploit other people, society is figured as a partner in crime; somehow not here—when a priest has sex, sex is a force of nature. The way that society empowers men—and even closeted priests are men—is regarded rather mistily.

In post #MeToo consciousness, a sex partner saying 'stop' and the other person not stopping—even if almost finished—is defined as rape. If we don't get to say 'stop'—maybe we don't like what's happening, or it hurts, or whatever—one person's sexual satisfaction comes at another person's expense. Or pain. If #MeToo has been energetic in its attempts to redraw the lines on sexual instrumentality, that doesn't seem like such a bad thing. Since elsewhere Wypijewski is a determined sceptic, it's puzzling that this becomes more muted when it comes to sexual mistreatment. To be clear,

I'm not trying to hold Shanley to current sexual regimes—but there is no benefit to be had in minimizing how exploitative the previous regimes often were. Wypijewski acknowledges that some of Shanley's relationships were 'bound to be exploitative', given the power imbalances. Nevertheless, wanting to penetrate 'the dense subject of human vulnerability', she pretty persistently questions the credibility of his accusers—many came from violent homes and maybe that increased their vulnerability?

I'm not sure why Shanley inspires this allegiance. In a letter Wypijewski quotes that Shanley wrote to friends, he strikes me as rather shifty, notably inconsistent about how many episodes of 'misconduct' had occurred, wavering between the singular—'a highly sexualized adolescent'—and the plural—'so non-traumatic then that some of the victims returned. And it was never repeated.' The vacillation between the singular and the plural (Wypijewski doesn't mention it) seems in keeping with the depersonalization of 'I'm almost finished.' Did it matter if there were one or many if the point was simply . . . finishing?

I admire Wypijewski's lyricism about the insistence of desire. I understand wanting to hold onto this conception of sex as something that sweeps us away, has us in its thrall. We came of age around the same time, when the power of sex seemed proto-political and liberatory. I'm thrilled whenever anyone pushes back at the carceral instincts on both left and right because barely anyone does. But there are things to learn from #MeToo, especially about how much mundane sexual exploitation gets normalized in what we label 'desire'. You can agree with Wypijewski, and I do, that there aren't one-size-fits-all monsters, and also regard this minimizing of maltreatment as a blind spot. But yes—condemnation comes cheap; and yes, we're all monsters.

In a lovely concluding essay on James Baldwin, Wypijewski's spirit guide and ego ideal, the example he sets for her is about breaking with the conventional habits of thought that sustain existing relations of power—the only way to be ultimately and fully human. By demanding of her readers that we, in turn, break out of our comfortable conventionality and jailor mentalities, Wypijewski lives up to this demand fully herself, and the writers who do are scarce on the ground.