



## Sex Object

*Jessica Valenti*

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Author and *Guardian* US columnist Jessica Valenti has been leading the national conversation on gender and politics for over a decade. Now, in a darkly funny and bracing memoir, Valenti explores the toll that sexism takes from the every day to the existential.

*Sex Object* explores the painful, funny, embarrassing, and sometimes illegal moments that shaped Valenti's adolescence and young adulthood in New York City, revealing a much shakier inner life than the confident persona she has cultivated as one of the most recognizable feminists of her generation.

In the tradition of writers like Joan Didion and Mary Karr, this literary memoir is sure to shock those already familiar with Valenti's work and enthrall those who are just finding it.

## Sex Object Details

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## From Reader Review Sex Object for online ebook

### Book Riot Community says

This collection of essays about womanhood and the impact of living in a body that is constantly sexualized rocked my world. It is a heartbreakingly accurate portrayal of the daily experience many of us face while living in a female body, and felt especially relevant to read right about now. I listened to it on audio, and Jessica Valenti does a great job as a reader. I highly recommend this book to anyone and everyone, because I think it sheds a lot of light on what are unfortunately not terribly uncommon experience.

—Amanda Kay Oaks

from The Best Books We Read In January 2017: <http://bookriot.com/2017/02/01/riot-r...>

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### Terry says

Yeesh. I had a really difficult time with this book. I can blame some of my reaction to extremely high expectations...but only some. Other reviewers have been pretty articulate about the flaws of the book. I agree that it feels extremely haphazard and at the same time oddly flat. She presents her experiences without any kind of "big picture" element. Unfortunately, in seemingly letting her experiences speak for themselves, they end up feeling instead like an unrelenting litany of misery--of unhappy experiences and unhappy choices that, in the end, left me feeling a bit exhausted and even annoyed.

Part II especially is simply a retelling of her sexual experiences, most of them poor, and exhaustion with what she experiences as an obsession of others with her body (including what she says is literal daily street harrassment from the age of, roughly, eleven) that drains her of all autonomy (resulting in said bad sexual experiences). Again, I felt a little bit like I do when I read addicts' memoirs: after a while, all the "bad behavior" can feel a little bit like bragging: LOOK HOW OUTRAGEOUS I AM. LOOK HOW OBSESSED WITH MY BODY SO MANY OTHER PEOPLE ARE. LOOK HOW DANGEROUS I AM. LOOK HOW BADLY I WAS TREATED. LOOK HOW BADLY I BEHAVED WHICH ONLY INDICATES HOW WOUNDED I AM; I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY OF MY BEHAVIOR.

I think an interesting discussion \*could\* be had about the need, by a reader, for a redemptive arc in books like Valenti's--an expectation that in the end, that a lesson was learned, or a new perspective was gleaned, through all these negative experiences. One \*could\* ask: why? Is looking for a "all these terrible experiences were worth it in the end" a horrible expectation to have of someone who experienced abuse? Perhaps. Perhaps that's something Valenti is trying to get her audience to think about. If so...it's done in a very muddy way.

One of the difficulties I had with the reading experience of the book is Valenti herself still has many unresolved--and clearly hostile--feelings about...everything. For example, she states toward the end of the book that she suffers from PTSD, but it's unclear, despite the 150 pages prior to that statement, what the trauma is (her childbirth experience?\* Her childhood? Her sexual experiences?). I do feel like she feels very acted upon throughout her life, yet, at what point does snorting Adderall become something you do, not something that was forced upon you, for example? As another example, she states in this book that she was

forcefully pushed out of Feministing, which is counter to other public statements she's made about leaving Feministing, which now throws all her earlier statements into question--and then makes ME question, why bother lying about it at the time? She's even hostile about her fans, which, again, if you feel you have zero autonomy over your body and feel violated by being on a stage and having an audience, then maybe don't do book tours? I feel that, after a certain point, you don't get to agree to do things that you KNOW make you suffer and then write about how much you suffer doing them, especially if the things are "speaking engagements" and "autograph sessions." These are elite problems that can be avoided. They aren't requirements for sustaining life.

Again, one could argue that her thesis is that having been treated as merely a body upon which others act has left her, even at her age, married and with a child, still feeling utterly without any control over her body or her life. In the end, my reading experience of the book is that Valenti flails around, feeling extremely injured\*\*, without having *anything else* at all to say, which, as a reading experience, is...challenging. I feel like I had to turn myself inside out to create some kind of thesis to her book--out of guilt from not liking it as much as I wanted to--and I don't think that's a good thing.

\*Her story about pregnancy and childbirth reminded me of Meaghan O'Connell's Longreads piece, and while I acknowledge there are significant differences (O'Connell's was not a premature birth), the comparison still struck me, and Valenti's book suffered by the comparison.

\*\*Once again, as I felt with We Should All Be Feminists, discussions of feminism that boil down to "I want to wear dresses and high heels but I feel bad if I do but feminism should mean I can wear dresses and high heels and not be criticized for it" really bum me out.

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### **Emily says**

I've had a hard time parsing what I think about this book, because Valenti says so many important things that need to be said; I've wanted to support its project, and I've wanted to make sure my ultimate ambivalence to it isn't some kind of backwards blaming of her or it for her reporting of the revolting things done and said to her. Large parts of the book made me feel like I needed a shower, or like I'd walked out my front door: it's not so much that she's revealing uncommon experiences as that one of the points of the book is how these experiences accumulate for women and on women's bodies, and are NOT uncommon. In fact, about half way through, I got frustrated and asked a friend why I was reading the book when the experience of reading it in many ways mirrors walking down a city street. (Closing with the litany of horrifying comments she's gotten, so you leave the book having just read them, was especially immersive and familiar.)

Eventually, I realized that was my problem with the book: I don't think it's very good as a book. It reads like an ongoing series of articles that aren't coherent, and aren't driving toward a point; there's not a through-line or thesis. It's episodic, and all the episodes are the same thing. That makes for powerful reading if you're looking for a catalog of the things women experience daily, but it's not revelatory and I'm not sure of the point if the intended audience is already an educated and aware one. Maybe Valenti was excising; maybe the idea is to shock people who DON'T know the world is like this; maybe I'm being too unappreciative or too judgey. I certainly think writing the book was courageous. I hope people who need to read it do.

But ultimately, I'm not sure of the point of the book as a book, and I'm not sure that its location in the movement means I should forgive it for not being good as a book.

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### **Rachel says**

This book made me angry. Or, rather, it reminded me the multitude of reasons why I SHOULD feel angry. Why I should feel frustrated and hurt by society's treatment of women. Jessica Valenti refuses to sugarcoat what women deal with in a patriarchal society, and her feminism is a bitter pill to swallow. Here are concrete examples and anecdotes of one woman's daily experiences with sexism, misogyny and microaggressions. This book was a difficult read, but a necessary one. Everybody (especially men!) should read Valenti's account of how society fails women, and how crucial feminism is in a world that still hasn't accepted its movement's legitimacy.

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### **Ashton Kessler says**

I hate when people rate books before they have even come out, but to the guy who rated it one star: fuck you.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

As a voice, Jessica Valenti is honest, unflinching, and insightful. As a memoir, this suffers a bit from a lack of cohesion and overall story arc. I almost wish it had been revised into a book of essays, because I think it would have worked better that way.

The first section has some candid remarks on everyday sexism, the long-ranging effects of sexual assault, and the conflict between trauma and empowerment.

"Despite the preponderance of evidence showing the mental and emotional distress people demonstrate in violent and harassing environments - we still have no name for what happens to women living in a culture that hates them."

This is the passage I posted to Litsy, read out loud to my husband, etc.:

"No one wants to listen to our sad stories unless they are smoothed over with a joke or a nice melody...No one wants to hear a woman talking or writing about pain in a way that suggests that it doesn't end. Without a pat solution, silver lining, or happy ending we're just complainers - downers who don't realize how good we actually have it.

Men's pain and existential angst are the stuff of myth and legends and narratives that shape everything we do, but women's pain is a backdrop - a plot development to push the story along for the real protagonists. Disrupting that story means we're needy or selfish, or worst of all - man-haters - as if after all men have done to women over the ages the mere act of *not liking them for it* is most offensive.

See what I mean? Good stuff. I'd recommend reading the book just for the first section. But then Valenti goes off to talk about all the relationships she had and all the drugs she did. I think the point she was trying to make was that there was a connection between feeling devalued in society and acting like she herself was

worthless, not caring for herself sexually or physically. I struggled with this section because it just felt like a litany of things she did or things that happened, lacking the commentary that I think would have made it stronger.

The third section is about abortion and having a preemie and post-partum depression, which I failed to connect much to the concept of the book except for that of course getting pregnant involves sex and these things happened to her. She doesn't talk a lot about the pressures of having babies, which would have fit in nicely here, had they been her experiences (and maybe they weren't!)

One chapter in this last section, called D, about a married friend's sexual advances. She looks at how despite her feminist beliefs, she still finds herself communicating with men first in flirtation, and that she still accepts this expectation from men that "his desires trump my comfort." I think many of us can identify with these issues, harder to tackle if they are people we know and who are in our circles.

At the end of the book, Valenti has an appendix of sorts with a selection of comments men have made to her on her blog, to YouTube videos, and to Facebook. Anyone who thinks women exaggerate should at least read these two pages.

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### **Kate says**

Reading this book is like getting a chicken bone caught in your throat. It's very uncomfortable, but points to a reality that needs to be understood and dealt with fast.

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### **Rachel Smalter Hall says**

I've really enjoyed Jessica Valenti's work over the years and was excited to check out her memoir. I was surprised by how uncomfortable and raw it is, but it's also fascinating!

If there's an underlying thread, I think it would be that Valenti, like most women, has been objectified her entire life, with a staggering number of disgusting anecdotes to drive home the point. The pervy stories in the book started to feel excessive, until I stopped to consider how every woman could come up with just as many stories, except that we tend to brush them off instead of talking about each one.

The other common thread is Valenti's lifelong struggle with anxiety, addiction, and imposter syndrome. These anecdotes — and there are plenty — felt a bit off-putting because they came off a little as "ooh, look how crazy I am!"; but at the same time I think the case can be made that it's also radically feminist — Valenti's showing up and saying: "here I am, with all my flaws and mistakes."

One last thing that I didn't love about this book is that the stories have a kind of weird flow and the memoir feels a little incomplete and rough around the edges. But, for someone who has enjoyed a lot of Valenti's other work, I found this book to be interesting, candid, and bold.

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### **Lisa says**

[3.4 stars] This is an engaging, somewhat uneven memoir about growing up female and becoming a mother. I really appreciated Valenti's unflinching honesty about herself. I think she is incredibly brave - especially given the hostile emails and social media comments she shared at the end of the book. Valenti is proof that you don't have to live up to some impossible, superwoman ideal to be a feminist and make a difference.

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### **Bianca says**

*Sex Object* is a powerful memoir, worth reading/listening to.

Early on, Valenti lets us know that this is not an inspirational, motivational, "here's the silver lining" kind of book, that, apparently, women, feminists, in particular, are expected to bestow, otherwise, they're just "whiny" and/or "victims" and we can't possibly have that, can we? Valenti dared to be different, and just tell her story, in the form of essays. I liked that.

I personally related to some aspects discussed in the book, and even those far away from my own experiences still gave me an insight into her life. I applaud her candour about her sexual relationships, bad relationships, abortions, drug taking, and motherhood.

One of the most powerful chapters/essays is the last one, where she reads messages she received via email, blog comments, twitter, facebook and other social media outlets. The amount of vitriol and threats she's received is astounding. It's somewhat incomprehensible that most of us womenfolk are still heterosexual (stupid mother nature and all that reproduction bs...). That there is a lot of internet bullying is a well known. The one directed towards women though goes to a whole new level. It made me sick; I know I couldn't put up with it and keep going. So, I take my virtual hat off to you, Jessica Valenti, for being able to stick out.

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### **Brandice says**

Unfortunately I didn't care for this book. I don't know what exactly I was expecting but as a whole, I was left disappointed. There were 2-3 select statements in the book that I read and thought "yes!" but other than that... not sure what to say. I had a hard time seeing where it was going - it felt like the book should be building up to something, but that just didn't happen.

While I realize the author's interactions with men shaped her way of thinking and sometimes impacted her actions, a large portion of the book came across as disjointed: quick recollections and some even just seemed like they were "bragging" moments (not saying they are (or aren't) just seemed to read that way to me). I also felt that the book ended kind of abruptly. I kept reading, even as I began to feel unsure near the middle, because I was waiting for the big build up moment but disappointingly, it never came.

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## **Ang says**

So. Hmm.

I read Lindy West's *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman* breathlessly and ravenously. It feels unfair to compare these two books, because what is similar about these women? That they wrote a memoir and they happen to be awesome feminist women?

But the truth is, I couldn't separate the two books. And I relate to West in a way I just can't relate to Valenti. And those two facts made me like this book less than I liked *Shrill*.

It's possible that at any other time, I would have really loved this book, and in fact, some of the essays are simply lovely. The material that deals with her daughter Layla's birth is just...it's heart-wrenching and beautiful and really, really amazing.

But if I tell you to read one feminist memoir this summer (BUT WHY WOULD I? READ BOTH YOU CRETIN.), it would be *Shrill*. That's why this has the rating from me that it does.

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## **Whitney Atkinson says**

This is my first book by Jessica Valenti, but hopefully the first of many! I've been interested in her writing since I found *Full Frontal Feminism*, but I was excited to read this book by her in particular because memoir is more familiar to me, and the first chapter of this is stunning.

I ended up reading this entire book in a few hours. I love Valenti's observations of sexual objectification and not only how it perpetuates misogyny, but it also causes women to devalue themselves and normalize abuse and harassment. I liked the first and third parts of this book because they felt relevant to the subject matter of the book, but the middle section just seemed like an unneeded tangent about all of her relationships in college, and it was difficult to keep all of her partners, universities, and chronology straight. And in the end, those descriptions really didn't build anything onto the message of the book for me.

I underlined several stunning, thought-provoking quotes in this book, and I enjoyed Valenti's approach to this subject matter. Her explanation of her life and actions is so refreshingly honest and she doesn't waste time pretending that her life is flawless and we are getting more and more progressive, because she still is swamped with hate online and sometimes prefers crawling under a rock to being famous, which takes a lot of guts to admit but I really admired.

After I read more of Valenti's works then maybe I'll be able to better assess whether it was a good idea to start with this book, but regardless of my intent to read her other works, hearing about her experiences and her perspective on how to make sure those experiences don't extend to her daughter had me captivated.

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## **Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says**

SEX OBJECT is an interesting book, partially because of what it contains but also partially because of how I think people are going to react to it. If you skimmed through it, you might say, "Oh, it's just another one of those self-effacing memoirs of a woman relating all of her sexual encounters." But that makes it too easy to dismiss this book - and it *shouldn't* be dismissed.

I know "microaggressions" is a loaded word with some people, but there really isn't a word out there that's quite as good at describing those little tiny "tells" of subconscious prejudice. SEX OBJECT shows many of the microaggressions women have to deal with on a day to day basis, from whether it's how women get the short end of the stick in most sexual encounters, to date rape, to sexual harassment, to pregnancies from hell.

SEX OBJECT is a collection of essays and as with most essays, they are uneven in quality. I think the most powerful essays are the ones where Valenti writes about her coming of age, and how young women are often the favorite targets of predatory men. I also liked the essays about abusive relationships, and how abusive doesn't always necessitate hitting - many of her ex-boyfriends found creative other ways of being abusive.

The most relatable chapter for me, however, was the last chapter, in which Valenti provides a collection of emails, tweets, and Facebook messages she's received from men who either insult her looks, threaten her with rape, or otherwise objectify or dehumanize her in an attempt to invalidate both her points and her as a person. It made me think of Buzzfeed's video, *What it's like to be a woman online* . It's a video I often trot out when reading books like these because it underscores what women have to deal with every day if they have an active, feminist presence online.

There are a lot of topics in SEX OBJECT that make for difficult reading: rape, rape threats, gore, sexual harassment, sexual harassment of minors, and all kinds of other infuriating things. But if you can stomach the content, you should read this book: it puts an interesting spin on what the sexual life of a woman can sometimes be reduced to, and why we should all be angry about it.

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3 to 3.5 stars!

### **El says**

I had been looking forward to reading this for a while, since it came out and made its way onto my radar, though with reservations. I like Jessica Valenti. I think she does a lot of good and has great things to say about contemporary feminism for the most part. I was excited to read a book on her thoughts about being a

sex object, which, as she points out, is a role every woman falls into at some point in their lives, whether they choose to be or not. It's a role that is chosen for us. The fact that she wanted to write about this in the form of a memoir intrigued me.

It starts out with a punch. Her childhood was difficult to read about and I'll be honest that it stirred up a lot of my own pre-adolescence, and then adolescence. Those are hard ages for anyone, but I am confident (since I lived through it and that's the only experience I have) that those ages are more difficult on girls than it is on boys, though of course it's damaging for everyone in some way.

But soon the chapters of Valenti's life became more like announcements about her experiences rather than some sort of personal essay. She is (and I think she admits this somewhere in the book) removed from her experiences which is troubling to see. What she *doesn't* come right out and say (causing it to seem even more removed) is that is the basis for her entire memoir. That in a way we become desensitized to behaviors and statements made towards us about our bodies, about expectations of us as women. It's so prevalent - in Valenti's case she rode the subway at a young age and first experienced a man jizzing on the back of her jeans. We all have experiences of some sort, for sure. And it makes an impression on all of us, regardless of how we choose to deal with those experiences as we grow up.

Eventually I didn't even quite understand the purpose of some of Valenti's chapters. They became a litany of stories of people she had sexual relations with, drugs she did, lies that she made. The worst part is that some of these chapters didn't even have a thread connecting it to the title or the purpose of this memoir. They felt disconnected from one another, and it was the strangest thing ever, coming from a memoir.

The flap of this book says "In the tradition of writers like Joan Didion and Mary Karr..." I adore Joan Didion, but this lacks a lot of the eloquence with which Didion writes, and I cannot comment on the Karr reference since I have yet to read her. But as I read this, the author who came to mind most frequently was Elizabeth Wurtzel, another writer who has on occasion had really good things to say, and at other times has been a complete mess which has come across in her writing. I read Wurtzel in my twenties, like a lot of other young women, and considering I believe Valenti and I are the same age, or roughly so, I would expect she spent a lot of her twenties reading Wurtzel as well. If she did not, I would be surprised because their writing styles (at least with this book) are very similar.

It's not Valenti's fault that I expected more out of her memoir than I actually got. Her story is not unfamiliar to me, whether we have a few shared experiences, or I recognize in her stories the stories of people I have known. It makes me sad that women of any age find things happening to them that are beyond their control, and it angers me that men feel that they can say and do anything to women they want. The strongest part of this book was the few pages Valenti talked about street harassment, though I admit that's also a part of our world that I find to be incredibly troublesome and it's a topic I think about quite a bit.

Additionally, the fact that men (and even women) feel it's okay to say horrible things, usually only to women, through social media is another huge problem that society isn't ready to combat yet. If you read any part of Valenti's book, I recommend it be the Endnotes (2008-2015) in which Valenti shares bits and pieces from emails and internet comments left for her. It's troubling and disgusting; unfortunately it's a reminder that no matter how intelligent a woman is, no matter what experiences she has lived, she will always be reduced to this sex object, an object of any sort, sexual or otherwise, this *thing* that anyone can comment on based on their looks or level of attraction.

This book will appeal to younger readers who are likely going through a lot of Valenti's earlier experiences. I'm glad she spoke so candidly about her experiences because it's that candid discussion that needs to happen

so others grow up not feeling as alone as so many do. However, due to the emotional disconnect, much like Elizabeth Wurtzel, a lot of the experiences shared comes across as glorified and that's not what I thought Valenti's point was before I picked up the book.

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