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THE MEANING OF NO
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This creative writing thesis is a compilation of short stories centered around the theme of modern-day sexism in America. I wanted to explore the ways in which people my age and younger, generally college and high school students, experience sexism. The world has made a lot of progress towards gender equity in the past several decades, but we still have a long way to go. I feel that sexism in the modern world is particularly nefarious, largely due to the Internet. Some people believe that we've already achieved gender equality, while online trolls rage against "social justice warriors" and call "feminism" a dirty word. We've experienced global movements such as #MeToo demanding that sexual discrimination and violence no longer be tolerated; however at the same time, we've seen the rise of Incels and increasingly easy access to violent and degrading porn, to the point that even elementary school students know how to find and watch it.

In this thesis, the proliferation of technology, and especially the Internet, have a big impact on the experiences with sexism that my characters face. Despite living in a society that generally claims to support gender equity, the Internet is still a dark place to be a female. In some

ways experiences with sexism online can be more disturbing than in real life because when people have a screen to hide behind, they may feel entitled to be as violent and degrading as they want.

The biggest tie to the Internet and its relationship to sexism in my stories is the proliferation of online porn. There are millions of videos online that depict men sexually and physically abusing women, and it's having an impact on real men. I recently read an article that found that nearly one-third of women in the UK have experienced unwanted violence during consensual sex, such as slapping, choking, and spitting, largely because porn presents these acts as a normal part of sex (1). With the vast majority of children in developed countries like the U.S. having ready access to the Internet, and knowing how to use it, there is nothing to stop even prepubescent children from finding and viewing these videos. Online porn is one form of modern sexism that I think is particularly harmful because it is so easy to access without adult supervision to put it into context, and it can and does have an impact on younger generations.

At the time that I'm writing this, the first 8 Google search results for "Domestic Violence Pornhub" are advertising Pornhub's vast selection of domestic violence videos. The search results include titles such as "Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women," "Domestic Violence Sexual Abuse Porn Videos," "Brutal Alzena back with more Domestic Violence," and even "Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse Porn Videos." You have to scroll to the bottom of

the page, to the ninth result, to see “Pornhub cares about ending domestic violence.” The search result advertises a campaign Pornhub did selling merchandise to supposedly combat domestic violence. It seems that if Pornhub actually cared about domestic violence, they wouldn’t have an entire page of Google search results advertising rape and abuse against women as an attractive medium to masturbate to.

A man on the Internet once argued with me that it doesn’t matter how messed up porn is, because it’s not real. It’s just acting. But it is real, and it does matter. By normalizing the violence and degradation in those videos, what message are we sending to men, women, and the next generation? If a man needs to see a woman being abused to get aroused, the problem lies with him, but the porn industry doesn’t seem to see it that way. Abusing and/or oppressing a woman for the sake of a man is the history of patriarchy, and if we truly want to reach a gender equal society someday, we can’t tell men and women that the degradation in porn is normal. It’s not just a fantasy, because those degrading acts can easily be acted out in real life. In a society that often says being opposed to porn makes you a prude, pressure is put on women to act like a porn star and indulge their partner’s fantasies. We still live in a world that expects sexual submission from women, for all that #MeToo and other movements have tried to address it. The existence of Incels shows that the misogynist idea of women owing sex to men is still very much alive. It’s thriving in porn, and it perpetuates an extremely toxic, harmful message that is increasingly

accessible to young audiences. With sex education still severely lacking in the U.S., a lot of children's first exposure to sex is porn. Children generally don't separate video from reality the way adults do, so what is a nine-year-old boy watching rape porn going to think? What is that going to teach him about sex? That knowledge heavily influenced my writing in this thesis.

Other issues I chose to address were rape culture, toxic masculinity, and gender roles.

While I didn't originally intend to have a majority of male narrators, two of my five stories are narrated by men, and one by a transgender woman. "Hero of War" is the only story in which readers see from the perspective of a heterosexual man, and he's not exactly a "good" character. However, my goal in this thesis was not to demonize men or suggest that all straight men are monsters. While I don't excuse the actions of my narrator in "Hero of War," I did want to demonstrate the ways in which gender expectations and toxic masculinity push him into violent behavior. Sexism and toxic masculinity hurt everyone, and I wanted to show that as part of the lessons behind my stories. Both the narrators of "Hero of War" and "Playing Pretend" find themselves performing actions that horrify them as a result of either male peer pressure, or the gender-based expectations of male behavior that they've absorbed growing up in our culture.

"Won't Happen Again" explores both the idea of male entitlement, and the way women are trained to submit to said entitlement. Despite knowing that her boyfriend has done something wrong, and despite being afraid of him, my narrator still tries to excuse his behavior. She feels a

sense of obligation to give him what he wants, an idea I pulled from my own life and personal experience.

When I was in high school, I had my first kiss with a boy I didn't want to kiss. We were alone, and he was pressuring me. It wasn't so much that I *couldn't* have said no—I don't believe he would've assaulted or forced me, and if I'd said no forcefully I think he would've accepted it. But for some reason, even though I'd been raised in a feminist household, even though I was known for speaking up against sexist comments at school, I couldn't tell him no. It wasn't fear that I felt, not exactly, but I did feel nervous; and more than that, I felt obligated. I didn't even know why, but I did. I'd agreed to hang out with him alone, and that alone seemed to be a social cue, in my mind at least, that I'd agreed to kiss him if he wanted it.

The kiss was very brief, at least, and we didn't do anything more. When I left that evening I didn't want to come back; but even then, I couldn't just tell him no. The next time he asked to hang out I made up an excuse, and I kept on doing that until he gave up. Eventually he seemed to get annoyed with me, and that made me feel guilty. I felt like I needed to apologize to him for not wanting to date him, even though I know now that that was never something I owed him. Somehow, even though no one had told me directly that I owed a boy pleasure and company, I still felt like I did.

My problem with saying no didn't go away in college. One night during freshman year, I found myself alone with a boy in his dorm room. We were watching anime, just hanging out, but I could tell he was interested. I wasn't—or at least, I wasn't sure if I was—and I was nervous that he would want to do something physical. I grew up in a small town and had never been interested in dating anyone there, so my experience with physical intimacy was basically nothing. I know that if he'd gone in for a kiss, I would've given it to him, even though I didn't want it then any more than I had in high school.

Luckily, this particular boy was very considerate, and before leaning in asked me, verbally, if he could kiss me. Even with the question in the air and full room to say no, I couldn't completely turn him down. Instead of “No,” I said, “Maybe next time.” The boy then went on to assure me that I didn't owe him anything, and that if I didn't want to kiss him next time that was fine. I'd known that already, but I couldn't seem to feel it until he said it too. I needed a man's validation that I didn't owe him anything to believe that I didn't owe him anything. It still surprises me sometimes. I grew up being taught to be independent, strong, feminist, and somehow I'd still fallen into my society's expectations for me as a woman.

I didn't end up dating that boy, but I believe he went on to be an advocate for sexual assault prevention on campus. He's great; I wish I would've asked him what had taught him to be

so considerate, and so aware of the entitlement society had given him. I don't think enough young men are sufficiently taught about consent and gender issues.

“Funeral” is my only story without any instances of sexual and gender-based violence, but I think it may be the one that explores gender roles the most. I wrote “Funeral” a couple years ago for a creative writing class, which is partly why it feels different from the rest of the collection. However, I still felt that it had a place in this thesis because of the issues it explores. My narrator is a transgender woman attending the funeral of her late mother, who never accepted her transition. My narrator reflects on the way her father and brother's treatment of her has changed since they began to see her as a woman; not all of it is positive. With “Funeral,” and somewhat with “Playing Pretend,” I wanted to explore the ways in which modern society offers avenues to escape gender roles and expectations, and the ways in which those avenues still fall short.

The narrator in “Funeral” completely shirks the gender she was born with, giving up all visible trace of being male. She wants to escape the confines of what it means socially to be a man. However, in doing so she is still defining herself based on gender. My intention is not to come across as transphobic, but I have seen some feminists speculate on whether or not identifying based on gender is compatible with a goal to eliminate gender roles and sexism (2). Despite completely rejecting the gender she was assigned at birth, my narrator still finds herself

bound by gendered expectations. She wants to be identified as a woman, but once she is, her father begins to treat her differently. He's more affectionate with her, but also seems to see her as more delicate. My narrator cries when her father says "I love you," because she realizes that her true, internal self is not what he loves; he loves the image of her, what he perceives her to be based on her gender, because he never said "I love you" when he saw her as a boy. Her brother also treats her differently, resenting her for gaining their father's affection when he will never be able to. Despite transitioning to the gender she feels is right for her, the narrator finds that she and her family are still constricted by gender roles.

Along that same line, my narrator in "Playing Pretend" finds that even though he is a gay man and sympathetic to women's issues, he can still slip into a mindset of male entitlement and see his best friend, a girl, as something to dominate. Despite the fact that he defies traditional gender expectations of men, he is still subject to them, at least a little.

I don't give an exact answer as to how to escape the trap of gender expectations and sexism in my stories, because I don't know a perfect answer. I think education and empathy are the best weapons, but to progress to a truly equal future, we need more of both. Children and teens need to be taught about consent, boys need to be taught empathy, girls must be taught to be strong, and the glorification of violence, especially sexual violence, needs to stop. I know it'll be

a while before we reach a society that manages to do all that, but I hope that one day we get there.

Several of my stories are fairly didactic, with a clear message beneath them. I know some writers criticize making stories too morally focused, as though fiction should be a place of escape and not tied to real issues. However, I think stories are a vital way of conveying important messages. I chose to address the issue of modern-day sexism in the form of stories for multiple reasons. Creative writing is my passion, so I knew I would enjoy writing stories far more than writing a research paper. I've also been dealing with moderate to severe depression for the last two years or so, and gender issues are what get to me the most. Having to consistently read stats and accounts of violence against women would've broken me down to the point that I don't know if I could've finished this thesis. Though most of my stories are graphic and may be difficult to read, writing creatively about harsh subjects is much easier to handle, as I have full control over what happens and know that it's fiction.

The biggest reason I chose to address my topic in the form of stories is because I think stories are powerful. Research papers are important to addressing any issue, but not everyone is going to sit down and read one. While writing this, I imagined my target audience as people the same age as my characters—namely, teens and young adults. Stories tend to grab a person's attention more than a research paper, and for that reason they're a great way to convey important

information in a palatable way. Stories also have power because, when done right, they make the reader feel. I wanted my readers to be able to sympathize with my characters, to understand them, even the narrator in “Hero of War.” When human rights issues are presented as basic facts, the emotional response that pushes people to get involved isn’t always there. Reading a story that brings light to an issue while giving the reader an opportunity to connect with the character, to feel what they feel and understand why sexism is so painful, can give a person the push they need to stop being a passive bystander and get involved, in one way or another. That’s also why I chose to write my stories in first person. I tend to prefer to write in third person, but for these stories I wanted the reader to feel that the narrator could be anyone—any college girl, any guy in the military, any high school student. Typically in creative writing I would want to make my characters original and unique, but the purposes of this thesis were different. I felt that the first person narration would really allow my readers to step into the heads of my characters and see through their eyes for a while. I think most women my age would be able to relate to at least one my characters, and probably many men too. I want them to read a story and realize, “That could be me,” so they’ll feel more sympathy and compassion for the real people who suffer most as a result of sexism.

I chose to organize my stories in a sequence that I felt built on the issues I wanted to explore, beginning with rape culture, then toxic masculinity, issues of gender itself, and the ways

in which society still promotes misogyny. My two stories involving queer narrators are in the middle. Part of this is because my first two stories involve graphic sexual violence, and I thought it would be nice to give my readers a break, but I also put them there because it seemed fitting that after introducing gender based violence, I should explore the nature of gender itself and how it leads to said violence. I chose to put “It’s Natural” last because the story ends with my female narrator choosing to stand against misogyny and the oppression she’s experienced, and to push for a better future. This compilation is fairly dark, so I wanted to end on a hopeful note. I also wanted to end with a story that showed that I’m not attempting to make my women characters seem weak or unable to save themselves. When they don’t find the confidence to stand up for themselves, it is not an act of weakness or submission so much as a result of being beaten down (metaphorically) too many times. With my final story, I wanted to show a female character who does find the strength to stand up, but who also recognizes that not all women have that opportunity; she wants to stand for them as well as herself.

By exploring sexism in relation to the Internet, pornography, rape culture, toxic masculinity, and gender roles, this compilation seeks to send a message about the issues facing children, teens, and young adults in a world that decries sexism in the public sphere and glorifies it in the private sphere, especially online. The stories provide both an example of the reality of modern-day sexism and a call to action. We’re making progress in the world, but we still have a

lot left to do and more awareness to spread. As a creative writer, I hope to do that with these stories and more in the future.

Sources:

1. <https://www.bustle.com/p/a-third-of-uk-women-have-experienced-unwanted-violence-during-consensual-sex-19411207>

2. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/04/woman-2?verso=true>

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