



Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality

By Deborah L. Tolman

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Be sexy but not sexual. Don't be a prude but don't be a slut. These are the cultural messages that barrage teenage girls. In movies and magazines, in music and advice columns, girls are portrayed as the object or the victim of someone else's desire--but virtually never as someone with acceptable sexual feelings of her own. What teenage girls make of these contradictory messages, and what they make of their awakening sexuality--so distant from and yet so susceptible to cultural stereotypes--emerges for the first time in frank and complex fashion in Deborah Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire*.

A unique look into the world of adolescent sexuality, this book offers an intimate and often disturbing, sometimes inspiring, picture of how teenage girls experience, understand, and respond to their sexual feelings, and of how society mediates, shapes, and distorts this experience. In extensive interviews, we listen as actual adolescent girls--both urban and suburban--speak candidly of their curiosity and confusion, their pleasure and disappointment, their fears, defiance, or capitulation in the face of a seemingly imperishable double standard that smiles upon burgeoning sexuality in boys yet frowns, even panics, at its equivalent in girls.

As a vivid evocation of girls negotiating some of the most vexing issues of adolescence, and as a thoughtful, richly informed examination of the dilemmas these girls face, this readable and revealing book begins the critical work of understanding the sexuality of young women in all its personal, social, and emotional significance.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

For all the panicky ink devoted to teen sex, until now there has been no academic study on what teenage girls actually want. Tolman, an associate director at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, fills that gap by focusing on girls' desires, rather than on the social ills they're usually quizzed on--pregnancy, disease and dropping out of school. The teenage voices she has collected are articulate and refreshing, though many of the stories are depressingly familiar. Nearly all the girls surveyed worry about being branded sluts, and many grapple with the pressure to be sex objects for boys while expressing no desire of their own. Tolman also makes a convincing case for why we should listen: girls in touch with their own desires make safer, healthier choices about sex. She advocates making it easier for girls to talk about their sexual wants--whether with parents, teachers, or other girls--without fear of repercussion. This is an excellent candidate for a gender studies textbook, and will also be of interest to parents, educators, and teenage girls themselves. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From [Booklist](#)

"Girls are the objects of boys' sexual desires and have no desires of their own." In this provocative study, Tolman, a researcher at Wellesley College, turns this notion upside down. Basing her research on extensive interviews with both suburban and urban teens, Tolman investigates how young women's first sexual experiences may be influenced by societal pressure to dissociate from their own bodies and desires; many women said of their "first time" that "it just happened," for example. Tolman shows the chilling dangers--for individuals and society--when girls are afraid to take ownership of their sexuality, citing soaring rates of teen pregnancy, STDs, violence, low self-esteem, and more. And she offers ideas for how change can happen. The language in this volume is both more scholarly and more radical than that in other recent titles on the subject. But parents and teachers alike will find much to contemplate and borrow from in this fascinating account. See the Read-alike column "Girl Talk" in *Booklist's* July 2002 issue for additional titles on the subject. Gillian Engberg

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Review

In the constant din of pseudoscientific claims about sex, arrogant punditry, and moralizing fear-mongering, the voices consistently missing are those of teenagers, and especially teenage girls. By listening carefully to these girls as they navigate their own sexual desires, balancing agency and ambivalence, Deborah Tolman dramatically enlarges and enriches the conversation we should be having about sex and sexuality. (Michael Kimmel, Professor of Sociology, SUNY Stony Brook, and author of *Manhood in America*)

Dilemmas of Desire challenges one of our most fundamental beliefs about adolescent sexual activity--that it causes problems, especially for young women, and ought to be prevented. In this nuanced and insightful book, based on extended interviews, Deborah Tolman argues that it is the failure to recognize the reality of female sexual desire that is at the heart of the "problem." Challenging both some deeply held assumptions and social policies, the book is bound to stimulate debate. (John DeLamater, Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin--Madison)

Girls feel sexual desire. Simply asserting that would be revolutionary. But *Dilemmas of Desire* goes much further, allowing girls to explain their sexuality from their own perspectives: how they deny it, assert it, are cut off from it, embrace it. Tolman's work is essential to a true understanding of female adolescence. (Peggy

Orenstein, author of *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*)

Listening to and appreciating the depth of girls' desire--complex, powerful, sometimes pleasure-seeking, sometimes afraid--is indeed revolutionary. Deborah Tolman has done it, with sensitivity and honesty, and that makes *Dilemmas of Desire* a gift to adolescent girls and adult women as well. By inviting girls to tell us about their experience of aliveness in their bodies and their longing for connection, Tolman invites all of us to reexamine our sexual stories, and better understand our own sexualities. (Judith V. Jordan, Wellesley Centers for Women)

It's rare that there's a national debate in which public opinion and social science are so clearly on the same (and losing) side. Eighty percent of parents want comprehensive sexuality education in the schools; most social science points to the positive impact of full sexuality education on public health and family and community well being. And yet, in this nation, a relatively small band of ideologues prevails over the real wishes of the public. *Dilemmas of Desire* is a powerful tool in the struggle for sexuality education and improved sexual health for young women (and young men too), published at just the right time. (Michelle Fine, author of *The Unknown City: Lives of Poor and Working-Class Young Adults*)

What fascinated me in Deborah Tolman's research was her discovery of how much girls have to say about what they say they can't talk about. Taking the bold step of asking girls about their own experiences of sexual desire, Tolman asks us to consider the quandaries girls face when they feel desire, and act on it, and also when they do not. *Dilemmas of Desire* is a path-breaking book, opening new conversations about girls, boys, and what it means to be human. (Carol Gilligan, author of *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*)

A thought provoking exploration of young women's relationships to sexuality. Deborah Tolman elicits rich stories of bodies, emotions, and desires, and offers an intriguing analysis of these complex and ambivalent narratives. (Carole S. Vance, Columbia University)

For all the panicky ink devoted to teen sex, until now there has been no academic study on what teenage girls actually want. Tolman...fills that gap by focusing on girls' desires, rather than on the social ills they're usually quizzed on...The teenage voices she has collected are articulate and refreshing...[Tolman] makes a convincing case for why we should listen: girls in touch with their own desires make safer, healthier choices about sex. (*Publishers Weekly* 2002-11-01)

"Girls are the objects of boys' sexual desires and have no desires of their own." In this provocative study, Tolman...turns this notion upside down. Basing her research on extensive interviews with both suburban and urban teens, Tolman investigates how young women's first sexual experiences may be influenced by societal pressure to dissociate from their own bodies and desires...Tolman shows the chilling dangers--for individuals and society--when girls are afraid to take ownership of their sexuality...And she offers ideas for how change can happen...Parents and teachers alike will find much to contemplate and borrow from in this fascinating account. (Gillian Engberg *Booklist* 2002-11-15)

Tolman bases this qualitative study of teenage sexuality on what she calls the "listening guide" method of research (a method she helped pioneer), in which she records interviews on various topics and then reads through them several times looking for different themes. She drew her sample of 31 girls from high school juniors in two different settings, one urban and one suburban...Though reluctant to be honest about their sexuality in a group setting, in part because of potential gossip, the girls discussed their feelings with Tolman in a one-on-one setting. The quandaries the girls face--whether they assert, embrace, or dismiss sexual desire--is Tolman's theme. Though the girls told her they felt sexual desire, they at first often denied it. They

fear getting pregnant or being labeled as sexually promiscuous...The book is a powerful tool in the struggle for improved sexuality education, since even the most sophisticated of girls seem to lack basic kinds of information. (V. L. Bullough *Choice* 2003-04-01)

Bombarded by conflicting social messages--sexy but not sexual; open but not slutty--it's no wonder teenage girls are often confused by sexuality. Tolman, an expert on sex and gender, offers an analysis of that confusion, the dangers involved, and what sorts of changes might help arrest this trend. (*Globe and Mail* 2006-01-07)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carissa Ware:

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William Pak:

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Michael Clark:

This *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* is great publication for you because the

content that is certainly full of information for you who also always deal with world and still have to make decision every minute. This particular book reveal it facts accurately using great arrange word or we can state no rambling sentences inside. So if you are read this hurriedly you can have whole details in it. Doesn't mean it only offers you straight forward sentences but tough core information with lovely delivering sentences. Having Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality in your hand like keeping the world in your arm, facts in it is not ridiculous one particular. We can say that no guide that offer you world throughout ten or fifteen minute right but this publication already do that. So , this is good reading book. Hello Mr. and Mrs. stressful do you still doubt in which?

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