

Consent versus 'hotness': Letting go of the sexual mystique

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Books

Sarah Henstra on her new novel, #MeToo and changing how we view sex and consent



Consent is the final frontier of sex education. Photograph: Omar Havana/Getty Images

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In 1940, the world watched Rhett Butler haul Scarlett O'Hara up a grand flight of red-carpeted stairs. Straddling a very fine line between healthy sex and rape, the scene has divided audiences of *Gone With the Wind* for decades. At the centre of the debate is our tendency to mystify sex: songs and books seem to get hotter after they've been banned; forbidden love makes for a steamier romance. So an onscreen seduction that carries hints of physical violence and coercion will make our hearts pound all the faster, especially in

response to the swelling musical score and the seducer's pretty face and virile swagger. Watching O'Hara being carried, albeit struggling and whimpering, up the stairs, it's somehow impossible to imagine that she doesn't secretly want to have sex with such a handsome rogue.

Societal Change

The voices that reject this type of interaction on screen, in music, and in popular culture overall are getting louder, and with good reason. Legal reforms enacted in the late 20th century concerning definitions of sexual assault have proven to be only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to transforming rape culture. Last year, for instance, Ireland's Law Reform Commission released a paper discussing the issue of consent in Irish law. The paper calls out the inherent sexism in the precept of "honest belief", which excuses an assaulter who acted on the mistaken presumption of consent. The semantics of such legal loopholes are being discussed everywhere, and the #Metoo movement has helped steer the conversation into a wider cultural arena, where the need for a better vocabulary and a better set of strategies for sexual assault prevention is urgent.



Sarah Henstra: “It’s my hope that *The Red Word* helps to revolutionise our ways of thinking about sexiness and consent.” Photograph: Paola Scattolon

I’ve recently waded into this public discussion about sexual best practices not as an educator or a feminist critic (though I am both of those things, too), but as a fiction writer. My new novel, *The Red Word*, takes place on an Ivy League campus in the US and tells the story of a war between a group of feminist students and the members of a fraternity house notorious for its bad treatment of women. The action unfolds in the mid-90s, when “No Means No” and “date-rape” awareness campaigns were common on campuses but there wasn’t much language beyond that to talk about sexual conduct. Back then, the line between “bad sex” or a

“mistake” and “sexual assault” was often too blurry to see, especially in the case of the blind drunk or even passout-drunk hookups that took place at frat parties. #Metoo has cleared up a lot of this confusion. For the first time, rather than isolated groups of women attempting to define sexual violence or consent, we’re all able to participate in the same conversation.

But even if we all agree in the abstract that enthusiastic consent is required for sex, people remain very worried (if social media chatter on the issue is any indication) about how to get and give consent in a “sexy” manner. How do we enact the new rules without killing the mood? These doubts about the practical implementation of consent are rooted in a set of pervasive and regressive cultural assumptions about sex – a sexual mystique to which, in spite of all the explicit content of our media, we remain very much in thrall.

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The sexual mystique

The sexual mystique is complicated but can be broken down into three basic misunderstandings of what sex is and what makes it good. First, and most discussed in our #Metoo climate, is the gendered dichotomy in expected sexual attitudes. In *The Red Word*, one extreme plays out in the all-male fraternity culture with its ritualised hazing and hijinks and the other in the moral high ground claimed by the feminist students for whom the end (getting the fraternity banned) justifies any means. In pop music, hits like Robin Thicke’s *Blurred Lines* and Jamie Foxx’s *Blame It on the Alcohol* construct a world in which men must coerce and persuade women into something that is mostly (if not only) enjoyable for men. We must collectively outgrow the belief that men only want one thing from women, that boys are sex-crazed and without the need for intimacy or vulnerability, if we are to grow into a safe and inclusive relationship with sex. Not only do these Rhett/Scarlett stereotypes foster corrosive systems of peer pressure and shame, but they continue to divide us along an assumed binary of gendered feelings that does not exist.

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The second false belief behind the blowback on consent is our fantasy of sex as something we just fall into rather than something deliberate that we choose to do. We’re reluctant to own up to our real sexual desires – the empty bravado of locker room talk notwithstanding – so we like to imagine sexual passion as something that seizes us, overcomes us, sweeps us off our feet, strikes us mute, blows our minds. But this is much closer to Hollywood- and porn-fuelled fantasy than reality, where sexual encounters are fairly down-to-earth affairs, involving ongoing negotiations with clothing, furniture, privacy, placement of limbs, bodily fluids, voluntary and involuntary noises, and one’s own distracting thoughts. If all these negotiations don’t kill the mood – and mostly, they don’t, do they? – then why would seeking and granting consent?

A third component to our sexual mystique is the notion that talking about sex is inherently unsexy. We’re steered out of communicating our own needs and toward the warped idea that we’re supposed to magically intuit the needs of our lovers. At the same time, we know from every sex manual out there that “dirty talk” is a

huge turn-on. It's a weird double standard that does nothing to help us when it comes to consent. Somehow, we've all going to have to learn to loosen our tongues.

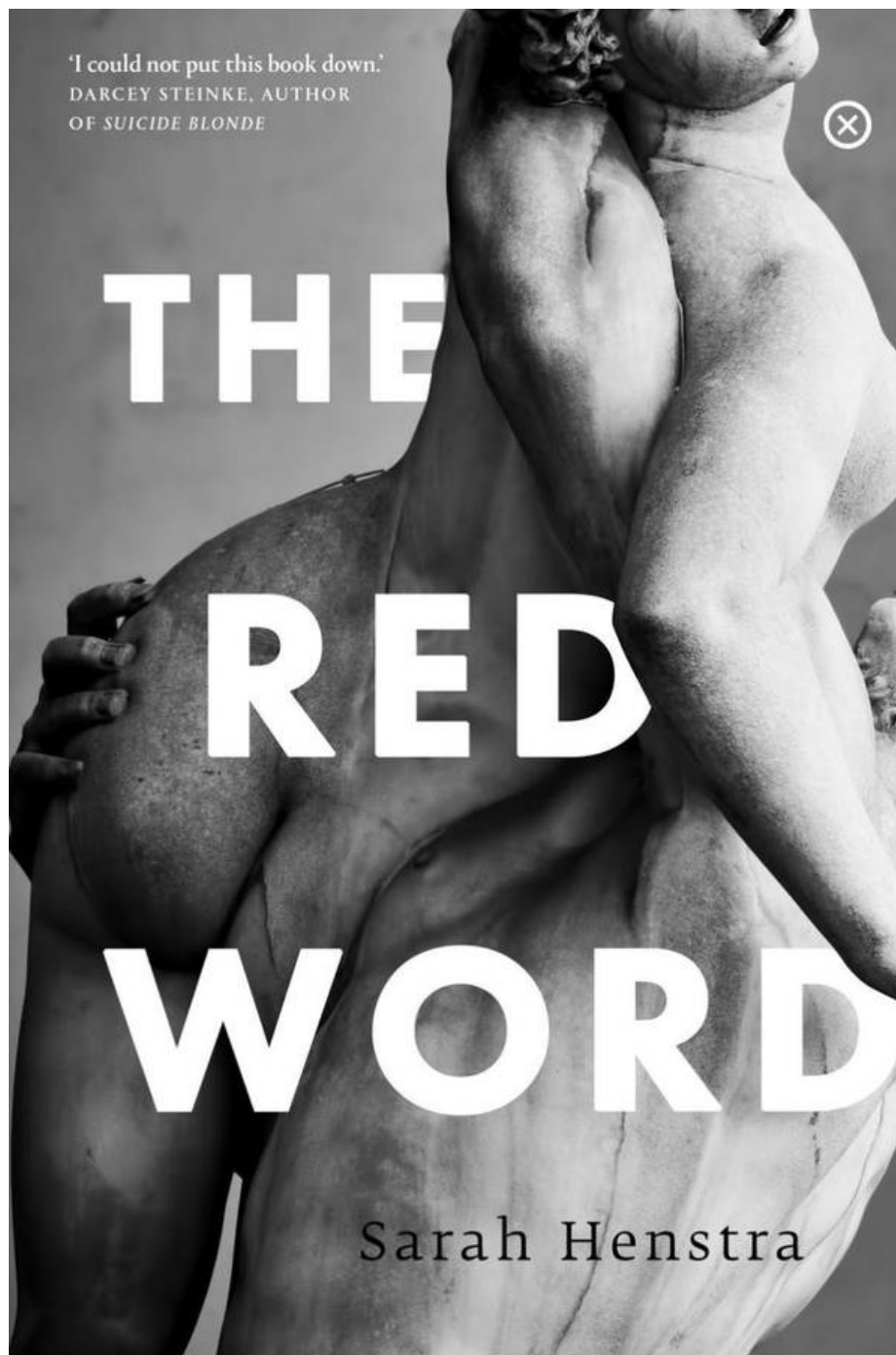


University campuses, too, are seeking positive messaging. Youtuber Laci Green (R) calls on students to ask for consent.
Photograph: Kimberly White/Getty Images for Trojan

Consent is the final frontier of sex education, as Ireland's Minister for Education, Joe McHugh, confirmed last year when he called for an overhaul of the country's primary and secondary sex-ed curriculum. The most forward-thinking consent-ed initiatives have moved beyond negative messaging – teaching kids that “No means no” – toward spelling out how sex can be both pleasureable and respectful, and teaching kids of all genders how to ask for what they want.

In a speech for the 2019 Makers Conference, Jameela Jamil read a poem explaining the shift in sexual education that must take place in order for consent to be truly understood. The poem, entitled Tell Him, read: “Tell him about sex, not just reproduction, but sex [...]The joy of equal pleasure and enthusiastic consent.”

University campuses, too, are seeking positive messaging such as the “This is How We Take Care of Each Other” campaign at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada, where I teach. Posters around campuses offer real examples of the type of consent-based support students can offer one another at off-campus parties and bars, like “He gently asked if I wanted him to get help,” “We used a signal when things got weird at a party,” and “They ran to get my friends to get me out of there.” These campaigns model not only a safer campus but a culture of collective support and responsibility.



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It's my hope that The Red Word, along with the many other new fiction titles coming out of the #Metoo movement, help to revolutionise our ways of thinking about "sexiness" and consent. Recently, I was thrilled to learn that a nightclub in Brooklyn, NY called House of Yes has invented a new kind of "party educator" called the Consenticorn. Consenticorns wear light-up unicorn horns and stand at the ready to deliver information about consent. By setting an example of a party atmosphere that is enjoyable for everyone,

where the rules are clear and no one feels at unsafe or uncomfortable, House of Yes and other frontline organisations are spreading the word: it is possible to have hot sex without without victims and perpetrators, and the way to do it is through open conversation and education.