

Selected praise for
What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape

“The right to our own bodies is the first step in any democracy, and, by that measure, women in general—especially those of us also de-valued by race, caste or class—are still subject to an intimate dictatorship. Read the personal stories in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape*, and see how far we have come—and have yet to go.”
—Gloria Steinem

“Unflinching and nuanced... Her structure is disruptive and powerful for it—never letting us forget that there is a person who suffers, a body that gets broken. And, when a body is violated, all of society is at risk. This book could not be more timely, nor could there be a better thinker—herself a survivor—to write it. If the #MeToo campaign is to have any lasting impact for change in women’s circumstances across the world, it will be because of books such as this.”

—Preti Taneja, author of *We That Are Young*,
winner of the 2018 Desmond Elliott Prize

“This is a vital, eye-opening exploration of a crime which affects too many of us, in often unspoken but always life-changing ways. Sohaila Abdulali’s book is an honest, wry, engaging and very human testament to the survivor’s voice as a necessary tool for change. It is filled with truths that will resonate with millions of us—and educate millions more.”

—Winnie M. Li, author of *Dark Chapter*

“An essential contribution to the current conversation about rape, rape culture, and the personal toll of sexual violence in the world today... Abdulali captures the complexity of this disturbing topic with clarity, compassion, and insight. Her prose is, at turns, comforting and enraging, confrontational and engaging, timely and timeless, humane and horrific. Yet, throughout, she focuses on our capacity and responsibility to contribute to a safer, healthier, and more fulfilling world for all. Abdulali teaches us that surviving sexual violence is essentially a creative act, and in her brave book she shares her, and many other, inspiring stories of surviving, thriving, and regaining wholeness.”

—Richard O. Prum, Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary
Biology, Yale University, and author of *The Evolution of Beauty*

“Brilliant, frank, empowering, and urgently necessary. A powerful tool for examining rape culture and language on the individual, societal and global level that everyone can benefit from reading.”
—Jill Soloway

“Both hard to read and an amazing, vital read, this is the exact book we all need right now—to do better, we must know more. Empathy is a key character in this book. Sohaila is a brilliant and beautiful writer, and a star and thought leader for our generation.”

—Alyssa Mastromonaco, author of *Who Thought This Was a Good Idea?: And Other Questions You Should Have Answers to When You Work in the White House*, and former White House Deputy Chief of Staff

“This book is a public square for those who know a lot about rape, and for those who know little. It is a safe space for survivors, and a broad-minded attempt to open the conversation to everyone. It’s a global book, relevant in refugee camps and American suburbs.”

—Sarah McNally, McNally Jackson Books, New York

“Know this: the shock is not that Abdulali speaks frankly about rape. The shock is not that she interrogates the content, and limits, of our public discourses about rape culture with candour and warmth, with cool precision and justified rage, with wisdom and, yes, humour. The shock is that there are not more books like this. This is a powerful indictment of the way our socialised silences breed only injustice, fear and disconnection. Abdulali speaks into those voids and misperceptions, using the full register of her humanity in the hope for change. Read it, and do not stop talking.”

—Dr Sarah Krasnostein, author of *The Trauma Cleaner*

“*What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape* places the American #MeToo movement in a global context. Drawing on her experiences as a rape survivor and as scholar and advocate, Sohaila Abdulali takes us from the US, to India, South Africa, Mexico, Kuwait, and other countries, providing examples that illustrate both the intense particularity and infuriating similarities of sexual violence around the globe. Courageous, angry, compassionate, informative, hopeful, and wise, this book approaches this hard topic from a variety of angles. She addresses shame and the silencing of survivors, retaliation, victim blaming, the complexities of consent, recovery, and other issues.”

—Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan

“Such a lot of insight in this book. I wish I had written it. An international take on the contemporary movement towards learning to talk about rape. The more we talk, the more we learn. The more we learn, the more we can change. Read this book and be part of the change.”

—Una, author of *Becoming Unbecoming*

What We
Talk About
When We
Talk About
RAPE

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Abdulali

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*For Samara, Aidan, and Rafe
Teatime forever*

Contents

1	Introduction	... 1
2	Who am I to talk?	... 5
3	Shut up or die, crazy bitch	... 14
4	Totally different, exactly the same	... 27
5	Yes, no, maybe	... 40
6	What did you expect?	... 50
7	Oh, please	... 59
8	How to save a life	... 63
9	The Abdulali guidelines for saving a rape survivor's life	... 75
10	The official version	... 77
11	Your love is killing me	... 83
12	A brief pause for horror	... 94
13	A bagful of dentures	... 98
14	Teflon Man	... 107
15	Keys to the kingdom	... 118
16	A brief pause for fury	... 124
17	Rx—polite conversation	... 127
18	All in the family	... 142
19	A brief pause for confusion	... 148

20	Stealing freedom, stealing joy	... 150
21	Lead weights for drowning	... 162
22	A brief pause for ennui	... 166
23	The quality of mercy	... 167
24	Your rape is worse than mine	... 174
25	Good girls don't	... 180
26	Rape prevention for beginners	... 193
27	Boys will 195
28	A brief pause for terror	... 202
29	The full catastrophe	... 205
	<i>Endnotes</i>	... 211
	<i>Index</i>	... 219
	<i>Original sources and permissions</i>	... 225
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	... 227

Disclaimer

I've used anecdotes from many people's lives, including my own. I haven't made up anything, but I have taken some liberties with names, places, etcetera, to respect people's privacy. In some cases I have used pseudonyms. Every quote in this book is real, but, if I say A's uncle said it, it might actually be B's father. It's all true, but it's not all necessarily true in exactly the order I tell you it is.

1

Introduction

The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from.

— Raymond Carver, “Beginners” (originally “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”)

RAPE DRAINS the light. Like J.K. Rowling’s fantastically terrifying Dementors, it sucks joy. And, along with draining the light from victims’ lives, it tends to drain the light from sensible conversation. Discussions about rape are so often irrational, and sometimes outright bizarre. It’s the only crime to which people respond by wanting to lock up the victims. It’s the only crime that is so bad that victims are supposed to be destroyed beyond repair by it, but simultaneously not so bad that the men who do it should be treated like other criminals.

I want to let some light back in.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape

Rape. The word is so harsh. In Hindi, *balatkaar*. In Finnish, *raiskata*. In Indonesian, *memperkos*. In Arabic, *aightsab*. In Slovenian, *posilstvo*. In Zulu, *ukudlwengula*. The English word “rape” probably comes from the Latin *rapere*—to snatch, to carry off. For the last seven hundred years, it’s meant “to take by force.” In Roman law, abducting a woman, whether or not you forced sex on her, was called “raptus.” Which sounds horribly, misleadingly, like “rapture.” Then again, the Oxford English Dictionary drily informs me that it comes from the word *rapa*, which means turnip. Even the definition is confusing.

I think about random examples from my own life—a male friend on a Nicaraguan beach with a woman friend, enjoying the night until someone beat him unconscious and raped her; a woman friend on another beach, in Greece, enjoying the day until a group of “cops” raped her; another woman really excited about a romantic evening with her new boyfriend until he grabbed her and forced himself on her. How have we managed to evolve as a species that is riddled with rape? When did we give ourselves permission to become this way? Sometimes I wonder if we consider bad table manners a worse breach of protocol than forcing a random object up a personal orifice.

I will be interested to see which shelves this book ends up on in bookstores. Essays? Not really. Sociology? Not learned or academic enough. Psychology? No, too opinionated. Research? Not comprehensive enough. Memoir? I hope not. It’s easy to say what this book isn’t, because it doesn’t neatly fit into any genre. This is just what I want, because in this space lies my freedom. I can do whatever I want, and I have. I can roam around the world and the internet, stopping where I want, chatting with whoever takes my fancy, and

Introduction

drawing my own conclusions—or not. I am very willing to take shameless advantage of my street cred as a rape survivor to generalize and opine, but I speak only for myself, not for anybody else.

So what is this book? It's about what we talk about, but also what we *don't* talk about. We don't talk enough about aggravating phobias. We don't talk enough about rebuilding trust. We don't talk enough about joy and rage and how to fit both into our lives.

I began college weeks after being raped. I showed up at my freshman dorm still healing from physical injuries—a bump on my head and a bandage on my ankle. The ankle bandage wasn't because of anything the rapists did. A few days after the rape, I was at the beach, so happy to be alive that I took a running leap off the front steps of the house and twisted my ankle. In college, I threw myself into the feminist movement like a drunken sailor on shore leave—these were my people, this was my place! And it still is. When you're seventeen, with a bump on your head from almost dying and a bandaged foot from the rapture of living, clichés come easily. I joined marches and yelled, “Yes means yes! No means no!” Later, running in-service training sessions for police officers and doctors, I held forth on how rape has nothing to do with sex.

Now I realize that, well, sometimes yes doesn't mean yes; and sometimes rape *does* have to do with sex.

Much has changed in how we talk about rape. In the last few years, people in India have come a long way in talking about it in everyday conversation. In my household, rape is just another topic. If we can expose our children to talk of genocide, racism, bikini waxing, and the inevitable melting of the planet, why should we leave out sexual abuse?

What We Talk About When We Talk About Rape

Happily, the global conversation on this issue is deepening too: the #MeToo campaign has shone a startling spotlight on sexual harassment. This is all happening while the US has a robust champion of sexual abuse for its president.¹ It's particularly unsettling in contrast to the last occupant of the White House, a dignified, feminist man who believed in evolution—of the species, of ideas and attitudes. It's all very interesting, and confusing.

We must notice who is part of the conversation, and who is not. The #MeToo campaign is global, yes, but what is “global”? Let's not forget that the man who brings buffalo milk to my family home in rural Maharashtra, or the King of Swaziland's latest virgin wife, may not be on social media. Let's not forget that, if you're a trans person, your chances of being sexually assaulted are fifty-fifty²—but your chances of finding understanding and support, or justice, are far lower.

In this book, I will contradict myself. Rape is always a catastrophe. Rape is not always a catastrophe. Rape is like any other crime. Rape is not like any other crime. It's all true. Except for the foundational belief that rape is a *crime*, with a *criminal* and a *victim*, I will not take anything else for granted.

Rape drains the light. I want to let some light back in. I don't have answers, but I hope to at least illuminate some of the questions and assumptions we all carry around with us. We must talk about rape, and we must talk about *how* we talk about rape.