BELIEVER

Jeannie Vanasco in Conversation with Amy Berkowitz

by Amy Berkowitz and Jeannie Vanasco
illustrations by Jeannie Vanasco

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interview

Jeannie Vanasco in conversation with Amy Berkowitz, 2023. Illustration by Jeannie Vanasco.

Jeannie Vanasco is the author of two formally experimental memoirs that reflect on her years-long quest to find the secret sexuality, Bisexuality, Mormonism, and Mormon Bisexuality (2018) and the forthcoming Dear Sweetness (2024). Her essays explore Rachel's sexual assault of the handful of a dozen and the narrative complications of describing such an act of violence. In doing so, the challenges the expectations that accounts of sexual assault adhere to a straightforward linear structure. In 2016, she co-organized Not Like a Girl and another show at Oakland California, featuring performances and readings by cis and disabled artists. Her writing on sex, gender, and disability has appeared in Bitch, Bust, Hyperallergic, The Rumpus, and Tin House. She is currently at work on a second short-form book on the sexual assault of a friend.

Amy and Jeannie met at a 2019 writing conference in Mendocino California, where Jeannie was an instructor and Amy was a student through our Jeannie's. In fact, they didn't meet until the last session, when Jeannie had left the room. Amy had left a note for Jeannie, which Jeannie found in the release of Things We Talked About Taking Off Our Clothes, a CD, after learning Jeannie would from the night before. During their third conversation while Jeannie signed The Glass Eye, they discovered that they both sought to explore the non-violence discussion of sexual violence in their work.

During the pre-months after the writing conference, Tender Points was released by Highbrow Books. Jeannie and Amy met in Berkeley, CA, and Jeannie was published by The Glass Eye, Jeannie and Amy read each other's books and started a recharge long emails. In February 2020, they met up in Washington, DC, where they shared a Jeannie phone at a bar and then discussed their writing at an event hosted by Sister City Bookshop. This conversation began over email in September 2019 and concluded in a Google Doc in March 2020.

— Jeannie Vanasco and Amy Berkowitz

1. NICE GUYS

AMY BERKOWITZ: I was recently referencing in an episode of the podcast Dear Sweetness that I read the Nickel about the #MeToo movement, and I couldn't remember the details of your book. In the episode, Jeannie Brown says, "One of the things that … was an interesting inside of the moment is that if you were a man in the movement, you were likely consumed in that you were behaved in an unsafe way or sexual harassment." Her name and others, activists, women, lesbians, agency, observing that men are social and sexual. Jeannie Brown's point, "The Nickel Boys emphasized that this moment, sexual harassment and sexual violence is a result of a larger thing."

This exchange struck me as really relevant to our conversation, because that's one of the things that makes your book unique and important: you're covering the lives across their same. Sheet nothing to do with sexual violence, but it's all part of the same thing. I'm wondering if you could talk about the ways that both of the something in your narrative intertwinedness gave the Nickel, gave what Nickel gave you, gave you may well be friends with. And gave who, as Jeannie and Alexandra's Virginia Dangerous jumps out, was not thinkt of what Nickel gave us "Nice conditions, nice guys and nice people." Nice is always something else?

There are a lot of discussions we could go from here, but what this calls to mind at the moment is a conversation since the end of the book where Mark brings up the topic of rituals. He says he doesn't understand them at all. He doesn't understand the conceptual theory here for women. But he's a guy. Guys prepare for acknowledgment that he left anger about being a target and he "connected this[anger into sexual assault]." And then in the same conversation he gives the example of a friend who was sexualized—Mateo, taking hold instructor—and Jeannie is so into engaged an example that's also a kind of sexual violence. Mark's point, you, which was full of all the Platitudes. Mark acknowledges that you felt that way, but he still wrote, should in about what to do in those other ways. Now, do you feel almost like he's off somewhere?

It also makes me wonder about the self-awareness of men who end up recalling the book. Will they see themselves in the protagonist of Nickel, or will they need to assert themselves as not-Mark, or not-Mateo, or not-Jeannie's friend?

JEANNIE VANASCO: That stuff Mark said about rituals really frustrated me—not because I wanted him to pity men, not because I believed he secretly identified with men, but because he excluded himself from the conversation. He's a man, he's a heterosexual man, he's a cis man, he's a man who can be male-centric. I never actually asked him if I'm opening that one open, don't ever. I ask, "Do I think you're what I'm saying?" He and Brooke ch Himself as a nice guy, and I said, "OK." I didn't know him, but since it had been my friend for years and years, that doesn't mean I automatically like him. Mark's equal statement, it reminds me of this passage from your book: "We don't want to believe our friends are rapists. But the popular desire to hold on to the comforting 1972 Dorian Gray-Old-Fashioned that a rapist is a stranger or a shadowy alleyway—and only a stranger is a shadowy alleyway—is starting to crack a little?"

I don't know why this surprises me—it shouldn't—but so many women tell me they know guys on the Nickel, and so many men point out how terrible Mark is. These men are the Nice Guys. Nice guys. Nice on one they know Rachel? Nice guys? Nice on they those men Rachel, the bad guys, Rachel, always your friends? Nice guys? Nice guys? Nice guys

We Didn't Talk About. In addition to Mark, there's the abusive ex, both aforementioned teachers, the physics teacher, the magazine editor, the guy on the street, the Italian restaurant guy, the motel guy. It's like adrienne maree brown says: It's no wonder this kind of behavior is everywhere. Men are socialized to do this from the start. But we don't always talk about it, so I appreciate you situating Mark's assaulting you among these other events and not as an isolated incident; I appreciate you not worrying that doing so would make you an unreliable narrator. Tell me more about your concerns about being an unreliable narrator. Were you concerned that writing about bipolar disorder would make you an unreliable narrator? And/or that other factors would make you an unreliable narrator? At one point you write, "This all seems too distracting to include," but what made you decide to include it anyway?

JV: I'd already published *The Glass Eye*, and so my experiences with mania and psychosis were out there. Plus, I wrote a Modern Love essay for *The New York Times* about having bipolar disorder. So there was no avoiding it. The diagnosis was a big reason why I felt pressured to include Mark's voice. That, and the fact that I was drunk on the night of the rape. If I could get Mark on record, I doubted any reader would dispute my memory of that night. Plus, by making Mark explain himself, it'd focus the reader's attention on his actions. I needed him to say—and I'm glad he did say—that he knew what he was doing was wrong while he was doing it, but he did it anyway.

This is really annoying to acknowledge, but Mark's voice gave me, as a narrator, more authority. It gave me the confidence to include my bad experiences with other men. I didn't want Mark to be the only man in the book who committed a terrible act. Because he wasn't the only man to hurt me, and to isolate him would have misrepresented the problem. Some readers have asked me why I didn't interview the friend who raped me in my twenties. Or why I didn't interview my high school boyfriend. I usually answer, "Look, my mood stabilizer works great, but I don't know if it works that great." But really, unlike the rape in my twenties, Mark's rape of me was, at its core, a question of language. I didn't think of it as rape, because I was so focused on his body, which part he used, that I wasn't thinking of my body, which part he violated. The FBI's definition of rape—between 1927 and 2012—was "the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will." Then, in 2013, the FBI revised the definition to "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim." What Mark did in 2003 would not have been considered rape, according to the FBI, because he used his fingers. But now it would be rape. And I thought about how the new definition helped me process what had happened. That's why the other men weren't prioritized. They were in the book simply as context for how pervasive this problem is. And its pervasiveness is largely why I excused, or tried to forget, a lot of their behavior. Unfortunately, the online review of *100 Times* doesn't surprise me. I wish it did. People judge women who've been sexually assaulted more than once, instead of looking at the larger cultural messages we're sending boys and men. An interviewer—this was before the book came out—asked me, "Why do you think you've been sexually assaulted as much as you have?" I thought, Oh no. Am I going to get more of this? Maybe other readers have the same question, but so far no one else has asked me that. And you know, I don't always mind the rude questions. It probably sounds like I do, but I'd rather have the conversation than no conversation. And I'm hopeful that things are getting better—despite Rhymes with Dump. What do you think? What makes you hopeful?

AB: I just finished reading Jenny Offill's new novel, *Weather*, and there's a character who talks about struggling to add the "obligatory note of hope" to her articles about climate change. So I feel a bit like her now. But I am hopeful! People will always doubt and judge survivors, but more and more of us are writing our truths. Your book makes me hopeful. Chanel Miller's book *Know My Name* makes me hopeful. Alexandra Naughton's *a place a feeling something he said to you* (a second-person portrait of an abusive relationship) makes me feel hopeful. So does Catalina Ouyang's collaborative project *Conclusion and Findings*, which invited poetic translations of the Title IX report that found her ex-partner "not responsible" for raping her. And Heather Clark's *Scorched Cunt* and all the other zines I've read make me hopeful too. It's inspiring to see people finding new ways to write about rape and writing about aspects of rape that haven't been explored enough. Reading zines and books like yours is what gives me hope.

AB

CONTRIBUTOR

Amy Berkowitz is the author of *Tender Points*, rereleased by Nightboat Books in 2019. Other writing has appeared in publications including *Bitch*, *McSweeney's*, *Jewish Currents*, and *Wolfman New Life Quarterly*. She lives in a rent-controlled apartment in San Francisco, where she's writing a novel. More at amyberko.com.

Jeannie Vanasco is the author of two memoirs, *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* and *The Glass Eye*. *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl*—a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, a *Kirkus* Best Book of the Year, and a *TIME* magazine Must-Read Book of the Year—was published by Tin House Books in 2019 and comes out in paperback this fall. *The Glass Eye*—honored as an Indie Next selection and an Indies Introduce selection by the American Booksellers Association—was published by Tin House Books in 2017. She lives in Baltimore and is an assistant professor of English at Towson University.

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