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Eye on Culture



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A Book for Cultural Warriors *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America too!)*

By Colleen Raezler

The Centers for Disease Control has issued a report stating that more than three million American teen girls – a staggering one in four – have a sexually transmitted disease. What's going wrong?

Political commentator Carol Platt Liebau argues in her book *Prude: How the Sex-Obsessed Culture Damages Girls (and America too!)* (Center Publishing) that the media constantly bombard our society with sexual messages. In consequence we are tolerating, even normalizing, sexual behavior among teens, to the detriment of girls above all.

In the past month, NBC, *New York* magazine and *Sports Illustrated* have all illustrated Liebau's point about the incessant sexual messaging coming from all points on the media compass.

In the first nine minutes of NBC's *Knight Rider* premiere, audiences saw a man and a woman joined in bed by another woman. The show moved on to show gratuitous images of yet another woman's body as she showered. Before she left the house, she told her female conquest to "lock up."

New York magazine's current spring fashion issue, which hit newsstands last month, features Lindsay Lohan in a recreation of Marilyn Monroe's last nude photo shoot. Twenty-one-year-old Lohan appears topless in some photos and completely nude and veiled only by wisps of sheer material in others.

Sports Illustrated's annual swimsuit edition features a topless – except for strategically placed beads – Marisa Miller on its cover. Other models sport painted-on bathing suits.

Sexual immorality is often in the news, too. New York Governor Eliot Spitzer's involvement with a prostitute is only the latest in a long line of sexual scandals that dominated the networks and the major newspapers.

The examples above are, unfortunately, more the rule than the exception. In *Prude*, Liebau exposes the sexual messages aimed squarely at teenage girls by Web sites, books, magazines, television shows (especially the role MTV plays), movies, music and clothing stores. Liebau provides numerous examples throughout the book that are absolutely shocking in their overt promotion of sexual activity, which we will spare you from reading.

Normalization of sexual activity among teens leads inevitably to moral problems. Much of the information available to girls about sex fails to discuss any moral considerations at all. Liebau also finds that when consequences of sex are mentioned, which happens only sporadically, physical risks such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are highlighted, but emotional and psychological consequences are ignored.

According to Liebau, the only behavior that the culture now considers deviant is to hold fast to higher moral standards than are currently fashionable. As Liebau puts it, "Apparently scarlet letters still exist in American life. But ironically, it's now the chaste who must wear them."

Liebau blames four cultural shifts for creating the sexualized atmosphere in which America is now steeped. They are: "the elevation of sexual expression over sexual restraint," the privatization of religion and sexual morality, the rise of moral relativism, and the advent of the 'cool mom.'" She states, "all four of them share one common trait: They undermine private, informal, nongovernmental controls on human sexual behavior – whether the controls are internal (springing from one's personal convictions) or external (resulting from a desire to avoid censure by society as a whole, or one's parents in particular)."

Examples of these cultural shifts cited in *Prude* include:

- Alfred Kinsey's 1948 report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Liebau states "Kinsey's supposedly scientific approach and studiously nonjudgmental reporting suggested that morality itself was irrelevant to sex." She argues that this led to Americans "equating sexual

promiscuity with self-expression, and identifying both as the distinguishing features of a truly joyful, meaningful existence.”

- Liebau observes, “When it comes to sex, ‘values’ are equated with morality, and morality with religion.” In the spring of 2005, more than 100 “progressive” organizations pressured the Department of Health and Human Services to remove the factually correct line “abstinence is the healthiest choice for teens” from a Web site advising parents how to talk to their children about sex. Groups including the ACLU, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), the Human Rights Campaign, Planned Parenthood and the National Education Association charged the government with “dictating values” by mentioning abstinence. The site now reads: “Waiting until marriage to have sex is a very healthy decision for teens.”
- The term “cool mom” refers to parents who “behave a lot like their children’s peer and unquestioning advocate, offer generous and constant approval whether or not it’s merited, toss discipline largely out the window, and pretend to be little older than their children.” An extreme example is Silvia Johnson, a Denver mother who provided drugs and alcohol to her teenage son and his friends, and engaged in sexual behavior with the teens.

Liebau says she believes that America can regain higher standards of sexual morality. She holds up the campaigns against drunk driving and smoking as examples of cultural change in a healthy direction. She also encourages setting higher standards for boys and girls and re-associating relationships and intimacy with sex.

Pruude is a frightening glimpse into what it means to be a teenage girl today. At the same time, it’s a must-read for any adult who wants to combat messages about sex that the media are sending to kids. Culture warriors have to understand those messages before they can effectively expose them, challenge them, protect their children, and change the public discourse.

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