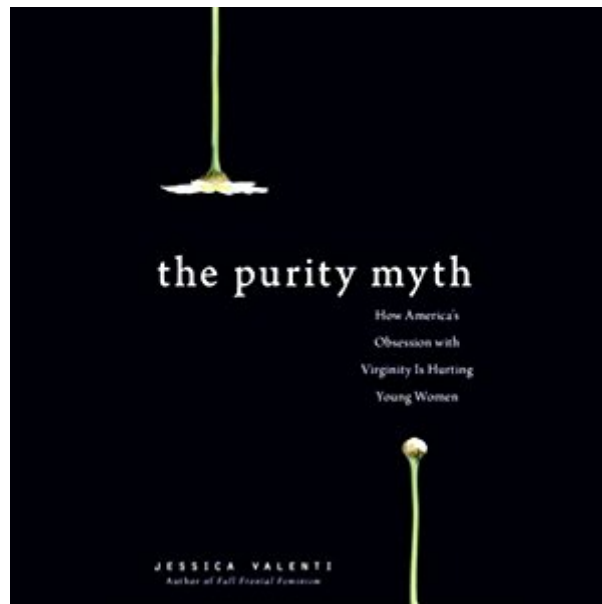


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# The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession With Virginity Is Hurting Young Women



## Synopsis

The United States is obsessed with virginity from the media to schools to government agencies. In *The Purity Myth* Jessica Valenti argues that the country's intense focus on chastity is damaging to young women. Through in-depth cultural and social analysis, Valenti reveals that powerful messaging on both extremes ranging from abstinence curriculum to *Girls Gone Wild* infomercials place a young woman's worth entirely on her sexuality. Morals are therefore linked purely to sexual behavior, rather than values like honesty, kindness, and altruism. Valenti sheds light on the value and hypocrisy around the notion that girls remain virgin until they're married by putting into context the historical question of purity, modern abstinence-only education, pornography, and public punishments for those who dare to have sex. *The Purity Myth* presents a revolutionary argument that girls and women are overly valued for their sexuality, as well as solutions for a future without a damaging emphasis on virginity.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As the daughter of an Evangelical Christian minister (I often tell people that I cut my teeth on a Scofield Reference Bible) I should be on the defensive about this book. But actually, I found it worthwhile to read. I grew up believing that virginity was a good thing, but I noticed that most of the burden of being a "virgin" was put on the girl and not on the guy. While many preachers and Bible teachers gave some lip-service to young men to abstain until marriage, I got the impression that pre-marital sex didn't seem to "damage" them as much as it supposedly "damaged" a woman. And

the older I got, the more I thought, "If I am not to be 'damaged goods,' then I certainly don't want to marry a 'goods damager.'" You don't even have to be a feminist to know that a woman is not a man's possession. and these chastity and purity rituals that some young women are going through (BTW -- these were not happening when I was a teenager) make my jaw drop. It seems to me that young women are faulted both for having sex and not having it. If we are having it, we are trashy, and if we aren't having it we are treated like ignorant little girls who knew nothing. Or we get called gay. (Yes, people try to throw that at women and girls, too!) I also agreed greatly with the author when she decried the difficulty women have in getting a rape conviction if the woman in question was not a virgin when she was raped. To me, that's the same mentality as not prosecuting someone for stealing merchandise that was already stolen! Perhaps my biggest problem with the book is that I am still uncomfortable with the abortion issue. It's not a cut/dried matter, and I think that both sides of the issue oversimplify things. However, this does not mean that the writer doesn't make some extremely good points about the double standard, and her points are well-taken. Thankfully, there are a lot of good, rational men out there who reject the double standard. One of them, happily, is my husband, who approves this message!

I suppose the fact that this book left me wanting more can be both a positive and negative thing. Overall, this book offers a fresh perspective on why the virginity/chastity/purity movement is harmful to young women. Jessica drives home the point that young women are more than whether or not they've had premarital sex and society/media has done a poor job of acknowledging that, as the stories we hear about women and sexuality often reinforce the virgin/whore dichotomy. Too often young women are depicted as tainted, unlovable and dirty unless they adhere to a strict model of what the Christian Right deems acceptable sexuality. The book discusses at great length abstinence only sex education classes where girls are being taught that they are like a "used lollipop" if they have sex before marriage, and worse for young women (and men) the book offers evidence that some educators are flat out lying to students. (e.g. exaggerating the failure rates of condoms and discounting or even denying their effectiveness in preventing STDs) One thing Jessica points out that I never really thought about before is that "...young women who are sexually exploited are often young women of color from low-income communities who are perceived as inherently loose, unredeemable and hopeless." If you think about it this is true, because you have to be a "certain" type of girl to be thought of as a victim of sexual crime in the media (young, pretty, usually white - definitely a virgin). Otherwise, the woman is thought to be complicit in her attack. (she's on the streets anyways, she likes it, she's a slut already...etc). Many many good things about

this book, but what I would've liked to see more of is discussion on how the purity movement affects friendships between young women and the way we treat each other as women. As someone who grew up religious and was guilty of "slut shaming" others for something as innocuous as "making out", I was part of this movement and indoctrinated with thinking that sex before marriage = slut and was thus very concerned with my perceived purity/lack of "sluttiness." I'm sure there will be many people on the right who will accuse the author (and pretty much all feminists) of promoting promiscuity but that's not what this is about at all. This book is about presenting a radical idea that sex and sexuality is more complex and nuanced than "pure" vs. impure", "virgin" vs. "whore." It's about being honest and breaking the cycle of judgment and ridiculous standards that most people don't adhere to here. I'm actually surprised I haven't seen more reviews on this book, but I hope I do because as someone who has been on both sides of this movement I'm interested in hearing more discussion from both sides. But like Jessica, I'm tired of hearing the "feminists want girls to be slutty" argument. Overall, this is a really good book. So good that I just changed my review from 4 to 5 stars (I didn't want to seem like a gushing fangirl... but whatev, maybe I am. Sue me). But hey, at least I read the whole book before posting a review on it... :)

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