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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Men Explain Things to Me by Rebecca Solnit

Summary

Men Explain Things to Me is Rebecca Solnit's 19th book. First published in 2014, it is comprised of a collection of essays primarily concerned with gender politics. The first essay explores men silencing women. It begins with Solnit recounting a conversation with "Mr. Very Important" in which he asks her about her writing, only to talk over her and lecture her about a book that, it turns out, she actually wrote. She uses this to explore the way traditional gender roles inculcate men to believe that they are automatically better informed than women and have a right to speak over them. Examining how this works to silence women and drown out their voices, Solnit links this to wider patterns of repression, violence, and abuse.

The second essay explores violence against women, providing a variety of statistics that demonstrate the scale of rape, domestic violence, and other abuse in the U.S. and throughout the world. She observes that the vast majority of this violence is committed by men but that this pattern of gendered abuse is rarely recognized or discussed. From this she concludes that tackling violence against women will require us to properly recognize the way gender roles and masculinity help perpetuate abuse.

The third essay continues to explore violence against women, focusing on the alleged sexual assault of Nafissatou Diallo, an African immigrant working as a hotel maid, by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). She uses this encounter to explore the roles of gender, power, and privilege in enabling men to commit violence against women. She also draws symbolic parallels between Strauss-Kahn's alleged actions and neo-colonial violence enacted by Western institutions like the IMF.

The fourth essay examines marriage equality suggesting that those who oppose same-sex marriage are motivated by a desire to maintain traditional gender roles. She asserts that same-sex marriage, which can be seen as a marriage between equal parties, should be celebrated for the way it challenges the patriarchal organization of traditional marriage in which women have effectively been the property of men.

The fifth essay explores how women are, on a symbolic and literal level, "obliterated" (70) by many cultural practices. She examines practices such as only recording men on family trees or women taking their husbands' names when they get married, asserting that this removes women from history, silencing their voices and lived experiences. She connects this to wider patterns of silencing and repression experienced by women throughout the world.

The sixth essay is a celebration of Virginia Woolf and an examination of approaches to criticism and analysis that do not seek to make the unknown known but rather subtly explore the intangible and obscure. Solnit suggests that, far from being something that we should attempt to pin down and definitively understand, the unknown or the “darkness” (86) should simply be explored without striving for fixed interpretation. With this understanding, she suggests that the darkness is a place of hope, filled with potential for remarkable progress and positive change.

In the final essay, Solnit looks at progress made by the feminist movement. She suggests that the most accurate measure of this is the way the movement has made irrevocable changes to cultural understandings of gender and women’s rights. Accordingly, while conservative forces may attempt to change legislation and restrict women’s rights, they cannot change the fact that the majority of people now believe that women should have these rights. Like the forces released from Pandora’s box, these ideas and a general belief in gender equality will not go back in the box, despite the backlash of repressive forces exerted against the feminist movement and women more broadly.

Discussion Questions

1. What does “mansplaining” have to do with domestic violence?

One of Solnit’s main themes in this book is the connection between silencing women and violence. In her essay “#YesAllWomen,” she argues that our acceptance of casual sexism, rape culture, and sexual entitlement have created an environment that is at the very least hostile to women and is a “slippery slope” towards violence. She writes:

“A man acts on the belief that you have no right to speak and that you don’t get to define what’s going on. That could just mean cutting you off at the dinner table or the conference. It could also mean telling you to shut up, or threatening you if you open your mouth, or beating you for speaking, or killing you to silence you forever.” (p. 134)

Do you agree? Why or why not?

2. Men Explain Things to Me

“Yes, people of both genders pop up at events to hold forth on irrelevant things and conspiracy theories, but the out-and-out confrontational confidence of the totally ignorant is, in my experience, gendered. Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they’re talking about. Some men.

Every woman knows what I’m talking about. It’s the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men’s unsupported overconfidence.” (Men Explain Things to Me, p.3)

If you identify as a woman, do you know what Solnit is talking about? Have you ever experienced “mansplaining?” If so, what effect did it have on you? Have you ever seen “mansplaining” or men silencing women in pop culture, the news, politics, or elsewhere? How was the situation handled?

3. Violence in ALL its forms

Solnit makes a strong case against gender-based violence throughout this book. In “The Longest War,” she writes the following:

“There is, however, a pattern of violence against women that’s broad and deep and horrific and incessantly overlooked.” (p. 20)

And then she goes on to say:

“We have an abundance of rape and violence against women in this country and on this Earth, though it’s almost never treated as a civil rights or human rights issue, or a crisis, or even a pattern. Violence doesn’t have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender.” (The Longest War, p. 21)

While we agree that domestic violence can affect anyone, regardless of race, class, ability, gender identity, or any other identifier, we also know that violence disproportionately affects these groups, as well. Do you think Solnit’s quote diminishes the reality of all oppressions? How have you seen these intersections impact gender-based violence? What additional barriers do they create? How do you think we all can better support survivors living at these intersections?

4. Power and control on-and offline

Throughout the book, Solnit makes a strong case that links silencing women with more extreme forms of violence. In one essay, “The Longest War,” she compares the extreme harassment and threats made by proponents of Gamergate with the violence of the Taliban. She writes:

“Both are trying to silence and punish women for claiming voice, power, and the right to participate.” (p.30)

Do you agree? Why or why not?

5. Building credibility

Solnit argues that centuries of patriarchy have bestowed an engrained implicit bias in our culture, one that devalues women’s voices and experiences and inherently makes a man’s story credible and a woman’s story doubtful. In “Cassandra Among the Creeps,” she explains:

“Hysteria derives from the Greek word for ‘uterus,’ and the extreme emotional state it denotes was once thought to be due to a wandering womb; men were by definition exempt from this diagnosis that now just means being incoherent, overwrought, and maybe confused.” (p. 105)

When a man is accused of sexual assault, sexual harassment, or domestic violence, the victim is often the one who is put on trial. Solnit argues that this is the result of centuries of misogyny that paints women, as a category, as unreliable. How can we as a culture shift this narrative? Believing survivors is a powerful way to interrupt this system of oppression. What are some ways that the average person can support survivors?

6. Mental health & violence

Solnit cites several examples of the ways that the media dismisses violence as a “mental health issue.” In “#YesAllWomen” she writes:

“Mental illness is, however, more often a matter of degree, not kind, and a great many people who suffer it are gentle and compassionate. And by many measures, including injustice, insatiable greed, and ecological destruction, madness, like meanness, is central to our society, not simply at its edges.” (p.122)

Have you seen examples in the media like this? What effect did this portrayal have on the coverage of the case and your reaction to it?

7. Coalitions to prevent and end domestic & sexual violence and technology safety. In the essay “#YesAllWomen,” Solnit finds herself at the website for the Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence where she learns, from the coalition’s safety warning on the homepage, that abusers sometimes monitor a victim’s browser history as a tactic of power and control. She writes:

“The site is informing women that their abusers may punish them for seeking information or naming their situation. It’s like that out there.” (p. 128)

She’s absolutely right. We know how prevalent technology-facilitated abuse is (“A Glimpse From the Field: How Abusers Are Misusing Technology:

”<https://www.techsafety.org/blog/2015/2/17/a-glimpse-from-the-field-how-abusers-are-misusing-technology>) and it’s why we prioritize addressing technology safety with survivors, local programs, state coalitions, and others (#TechSafetyMeans:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7DmsuDHLm0&t=48s>). How does technology impact survivors of violence? How can it be used by a survivor to increase their privacy or stay connected to loved ones? We were also thrilled to see the Indiana Coalition highlighted in Solnit’s book! Did you know that there are 56 state and territory coalitions in the United States? State and territory coalitions are critical to ending domestic violence. Learn more:

https://nnev.org/latest_update/why-coalitions-are-critical-to-ending-domestic-violence/ or find your state/territory coalition here: <https://nnev.org/content/state-u-s-territory-coalitions/>

8. Prevention. Whose job is it anyway?

“There’s no good reason (and many bad reasons) colleges spend more time telling women how to survive predators than telling the other half of their students not to be predators.” (The Longest War, p. 29)

In response to campus rape: "...but men were shocked at being asked to disappear, to lose their freedom to move and participate, all because of the violence of one man." (Grandmother Spider, p. 70)

Solnit consistently argues that perpetrators, not victims, need to be held accountable for their actions. What are some ways that you think we can effectively shift the conversation toward placing responsibility on the perpetrator rather than the victim? Have you seen any effective prevention campaigns that address violence in this way? How did these campaigns frame the issue?

9. What's next?

We seem to be in the midst of another watershed moment in the United States, with the emergence of viral campaigns like #MeToo and #TimesUp. How do you think these movements build off of the work described in *Men Explain Things to Me*? What else needs to be addressed in order to comprehensively prevent and end gender-based violence? What's next?

Summary from Super Summary
Discussion Questions from National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)