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On Rebecca Solnit's Men Explain Things to Me

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, June 11th, 2014

Writer, historian and activist, Rebecca Solnit's new book, *Men Explain Things to Me*, is currently one of the most talked about books in America. Solnit's book of seven essays began with an article she wrote in 2008 of the same name. The book not only highlights what goes wrong in conversations between the sexes, it also examines marriage equality, the silencing of women and the frightening landscape of contemporary violence against women.

In the now famous essay from 2008 and the book's opening chapter, Solnit begins the narrative while in conversation with a very wealthy and patronizing man that attempts to tell her about her own recent book without realizing he is talking to her, the actual author directly in front of him. She uses this anecdote to illustrate a much wider trend: "Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they're talking about. Some men." She acknowledges "that some women have explained things in patronizing ways to men among others. But that's not indicative of the massive power differential that takes far more sinister forms as well or of the broad pattern of how gender work in our society." This explaining, she writes, "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."

She offers several examples of this that are equally comic and scathing. The original piece the book grew out of has been so influential, Solnit writes that, "The term 'mansplaining' was coined soon after the piece appeared, and I was sometimes credited for it. In fact, I had nothing to do with its actual creation, though my essay, along with all the men that embodied the idea, apparently inspired it." *Mansplaining* as a term has been embraced in popular culture in the last few years, the *New York Times* named it one of the words of the year in 2010. The context remains self-evident enough that millions instantly understood it, especially the women that live with it daily.

The other essays in the volume corroborate with the opening piece tackling marriage equality, domestic-violence and an examination of the pioneering scribe Virginia Woolf and the implications of Woolf's love of mystery. Solnit's agenda is always aimed at promoting understanding and healing. She notes, "There are other things I'd rather write about, but this affects everything else. The lives of half of humanity are still dogged by, drained by, and sometimes ended by this pervasive variety of violence." After citing statistics from domestic-violence homicides from the last decade, she writes: "If we talked about crimes like these and why they are so common, we'd have to talk about what kinds of profound change this society, or this nation, or nearly every nation needs." Solnit leaves no stone unturned. She points out "what we don't talk

about when we don't talk about gender." She also reminds us, "Clearly the ready availability of guns is a huge problem for the United States, but despite this availability to everyone, murder is still a crime committed by men 90 percent of the time." Solnit demonstrates how this is a global problem.

In Chapter 3, "Worlds Collide in a Luxury Suite," she discusses the encounter between Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the head of the International Monetary Fund and his alleged assault of a hotel maid, an immigrant from Africa in his executive suite. Solnit examines how the media framed the story, Strauss-Kahn's pattern of predatory behavior and his eventual downfall. She highlights the long term effects of this case:

> What matters, in the end, is that a poor immigrant woman upended the career of one of the most powerful men in the world, or rather exposed behavior that should have ended it earlier. As a result, French women reassessed the misogyny of their society.

This outcome was a landmark case and a new precedent, still Solnit notes that though the woman won her case in civil court and received a significant financial settlement, one part of the terms for this was her silence.

Solnit's take on same-sex marriage and the battles around it highlight several factors not often discussed in the media. Chapter 4, titled "In Praise of the Threat," is where Solnit explicates "what marriage equality really means." In describing the recent changes in regards to same-sex marriage, she explains why the term marriage equality is being used now: "The phrase is ordinarily employed to mean that same-sex couples will have the rights different-sexed couples do. But it could also mean that marriage is between equals. That's not what traditional marriage was. Throughout much of history in the West, the laws defining marriage made the husband an owner and the wife a possession." Her advocacy is for egalitarianism, whether with same-sex couples or heterosexual. Solnit is a visionary looking towards the future. She wants "to slam the door shut on that era. And to open another door, through which we can welcome equality: between genders, among marital partners, for everyone in every circumstance. Marriage equality is a threat: to inequality. It's a boon to everyone who values and benefit from equality."

In the book's seventh and final essay, "Pandora's Box and the Volunteer Police Force," Solnit addresses rape culture, sexual entitlement and the epidemic of sexual assault in the military. Her survey looks back at the history of feminism and connects the dots to the topography of 2014. The book came to me a few days after the UCSB shootings and the misogynistic diatribes left by the shooter epitomizing sexual entitlement—the idea that a man has the right to have sex with a woman, regardless of her consent. This type of thinking, she says, "Embodies the worst of machismo while it destroys what's best on Earth." Solnit rails against this and the widespread contemporary culture of blaming the victim that is often repeated by the media and law enforcement. She shines a light on this practice by using the example of a Toronto policeman's remarks to illustrate it: "That policeman's 'slut' comment was part of the emphasis colleges have put on telling female student how to box themselves in safely—don't go here, don't do that—rather than telling male students not to rape: this is part of rape culture." Raising societal awareness to rape culture and the long standing skewed and violent hierarchy between the genders is an important step towards reforming it. For the men that get it, this awareness is common sense but there are not enough of these men yet, the paradigm is still shifting. Solnit notes that thirty-two of

the original one hundred signatories at the Seneca Falls women's rights convention in 1848 were men. Moreover, she writes, "The men who get it also understand that feminism is not a scheme to deprive men but a campaign to liberate us all."

Solnit is the author of 14 books on a variety of topics including, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and *Infinite Cities,* as well as the winner of numerous book awards and fellowships. This volume is a joint publication between the Chicago-based Haymarket Books and Dispatch Books. Dispatch Books is an imprint of the popular website, Tomsdispatch, where the original article was published in 2008. The necessity of the original essay explains the instant success and why it still circulates six years after it was written. She notes that, "It's circulated like nothing else I've done."

Entering summer 2014 both the silencing of and violence against women remains pervasive across America and the world. Events like the UCSB tragedy show the urgency of Solnit's discussion. Her book is timely for a plethora of reasons. She writes, "Things have gotten better, but this war won't end in my lifetime. I'm still fighting it, for myself certainly, but also for all those younger women who have something to say, in the hope that they will get to say it." Her extensive body of work and brave perspective alone is enough to inspire any young writer, woman or man. Solnit's latest offers a roadmap of the contemporary issues facing women and the role that men who explain things play to make matters worse. In the same way, Solnit's thorough study is also a sourcebook for strategies to subvert the traditional patriarchal structure and ameliorate the difference. *Men Explain Things to Me* is a landmark work.

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