Sex Object: A Memoir

by Jessica Valenti



About the Book

Author and *Guardian* US columnist Jessica Valenti has been leading the national conversation on gender and politics for over a decade. Now, in a darkly funny and bracing memoir, Valenti explores the toll that sexism takes from the every day to the existential.

SEX OBJECT explores the painful, funny, embarrassing, and sometimes illegal moments that shaped Valenti?s adolescence and young adulthood in New York City, revealing a much shakier inner life than the confident persona she has cultivated as one of the most recognizable feminists of her generation.

In the tradition of writers like Joan Didion and Mary Karr, this literary memoir is sure to shock those already familiar with Valenti?s work and enthrall those who are just finding it.

?Deeply moving, honest, and unflinching, SEX OBJECT secures Jessica Valenti?s place as one of the foremost writers and thinkers of her generation. Her personal story highlights universal truths about being a woman, and makes the case for why feminism today is an unstoppable force.? ? Cecile Richards, President, Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Discussion Guide

1. In the context of the book, what does the phrase ?sex object? come to mean?

2. For Valenti, why is her use of the phrase ?sex object? more one of resignation than reclamation?

3. Throughout the memoir, Valenti references many things which she leaves unsaid or consciously chooses to not say --- in relationships with men, with her parents, in how she talks about pregnancy, i.e. What are some of these silences that

we, as readers, learn about? What is the significance of revealing these moments of silence?

4. What is the overall tone of Sex Object? Valenti says that if most girls who admire her ?really knew me they would never say that? (143). Does the amount of honesty and frankness in the memoir surprise you?

5. Valenti?s focus on vulnerability is in contrast with contemporary feminism?s use of humor as a means of diffusing and moving past male misogyny. What are the benefits to pausing and observing vulnerability?

6. How would you position Valenti in relation to contemporary feminist discourse?

7. Is there a continual renegotiation for Valenti between her roles as a ?professional feminist? and the personal choices she makes? How does she balance those scales for herself?

8. Valenti begins each section with a quote from a historical female figure. What are your thoughts on her selections and how do they shape your reading?

9. How are female relationships (friendships, matrilineal familial relationships) depicted in SEX OBJECT?

10. What are the different kinds of matrilineal anxieties that exist between Valenti?s mother, grandmother, and Valenti herself as a mother? What are the ways in which they are significant for how these women see themselves as women but also mothers?

11. SEX OBJECT is told in a nonlinear narrative structure. How does blurring the chronology of events effect the personal stories Valenti tells? What does that structure allow for that chronological ordering cannot?

12. On page 3, Valenti presents a definition of identity that combines ?half what we tell ourselves and half what we tell other people about ourselves? and ?the stories that *other people tell us about ourselves*.? How are these three definitional parts constructed throughout SEX OBJECT? What kind of identity do they produce?

13. People like Sheryl Sandberg have written extensively about ?impostor syndrome? and the tendency some women have to feel like they are frauds despite hard earned success. Have you ever felt a disconnect between the way you view yourself and the way others view you?

14. What are the ways in which Valenti struggles with acceptance throughout her memoir?

15. The necessity and importance of voice and Valenti speaking for herself, telling her story is a theme emphasized throughout SEX OBJECT. It becomes twinned with and is contrasted by her daughter Layla?s selective mutism. Valenti describes it as, ??a thing that you passed on to her --- not the silence perhaps, but the fear behind it? (190). What are ways in which you can compare and contrast the anxieties voicing yourself brings to Valenti and her daughter?

16. At several points, Valenti addresses the inevitability of harm against women. What can be done to change the cultural predominance of a narrative that Valenti describes as, ??the creeping understanding of what it meant to be female --- that it?s not a matter of if something bad happens, but when and how bad??

17. Have you ever been objectified? If so, did you speak up in the moment?

18. As a memoir, the genre of SEX OBJECT tells the specific story of Valenti?s experiences. How can parallels be drawn and connections made to experiences of other women with regard to the systemic effects of misogyny?

19. The final section, Endnotes 2008-2015, is a collection of comments, emails, and social media interactions that Valenti has received. In terms of narrative structure, they are presented without comment. How does including them effect your reading of SEX OBJECT?

Author Bio

Jessica Valenti is a columnist for *The Guardian* US where she writes about gender and politics. In 2004 she founded the award-winning Feministing.com, which *Columbia Journalism Review* called ?head and shoulders above almost any writing on women?s issues in mainstream media.? Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Nation* and *Ms*. She is the author of several books, including the national bestseller FULL FRONTAL FEMINISM. Jessica lives in Brooklyn with her husband and daughter.

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