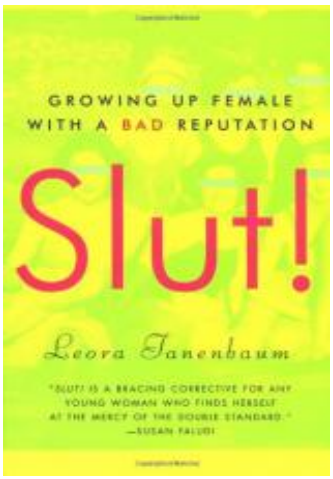
Slut!: Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation

by Leora Tanenbaum



About the Book

Girls may be called "sluts" for any number of reasons, including being outsiders, early developers, victims of rape, targets of others' revenge. Often the labels has nothing to do with sex -- the girls simply do not fit in. An important account of the lives of these young women, *Slut!* weaves together powerful oral histories of girls and women who finally overcame their sexual labels with a cogent analysis of the underlying problem of sexual stereotyping.

Author Leora Tanenbaum herself was labeled a slut in high school. The confessional article she wrote for *Seventeen* about the experience caused a sensation and led her to write this book.

Discussion Guide

The word "slut" is uniquely suited to describing girls and women of all ages who are trampy, cheap, trashy, sleazy, sexually promiscuous, and sexually aggressive -- and outcast by their peers for seeming so. In this fascinating work of feminist critique, Leora Tanenbaum uncovers the phenomenon she calls "slut-bashing." By interviewing girls and women who have been labeled "sluts," she puts to the page their experiences to reveal that it is not always -- and, in fact, rarely is -- a woman's "deviant" sexual appetite that causes sexual labeling. Rather, it is the sexual mores, attitudes, and insecurities of the labelers (often friends and peers) that are the root cause of this damaging and utterly unjust form of sexism.

1. Describe a "slut." Has she had many sexual partners? How many is too many? Does she dress in provocatively? What criteria do a woman or teen need to meet to be labeled a "slut?" Is it ever acceptable or accurate to label a woman in this way? What are our general responses to women we meet who might be considered "sluts?"

2. What are the limits of "normal" adolescent sexual expression? Is this tied in to a teen's sense of autonomy and individuality? How are autonomy and individuality affected by name-calling, labeling, and "slut-bashing" -- on both the

receiving and giving ends?

3. Who is responsible for the culture of "slut-bashing" that runs rampant in American schools? What are the roles of students, administrators, teachers, and parents and are they complicit? To what extent do the media have an effect on each of these groups? Have the messages perpetuated by the media taken precedence over those expressed by loved ones, peers, and friends?

4. Which is the classic and damaging double-standard: that men are permitted sexual freedom while women are held to strict behavioral codes that make them the voices of abstinence in the heat of the moment, or is it that women and "good girls" do not experience or act upon sexual feelings for someone they do not love or to whom they are not committed to in a long-term relationship?

5. Educational institutions have been subject to lawsuits in recent years, accused of being irresponsible and unresponsive to reports of verbal sexual harassment, including "slut-bashing" and name-calling. How seriously should schools take simple name-calling? Should students who call others derogatory names suffer disciplinary action? Who should mete that out -- parents and guardians or school administrators? Or, is categorizing and labeling a normal part of growing up?

6. Should schools and various other community groups incorporate awareness of sexual harassment, sexual aggression, and assault into their curricula? Does opening discussion of these topics ultimately equip teens to recognize and possibly avoid damaging behavior or does it open a Pandora's box for perpetuating negative behavior?

7. Is our culture too open about sex? To what degree do various forms of mainstream media -- movies, television, magazines, music -- contribute to long-standing sexual stereotypes? Can you name specific or current trends and examples of this? Is there any truth in these stereotypes? Why do they persist?

8. Do women and girls seem to be more harshly critical of other females than do men and boys? Is most "slut-bashing" rooted in female aggression or generated by the opposite sex? If so, why? What to women have to gain by publicly demeaning other women? Can a woman successfully improve her own image and set of beliefs (as in the chaste "good girl") by labeling others as slutty or loose or promiscuous?

9. Is it true that girls and women are praised more for their appearance than for their accomplishments? How does body image play a role in burgeoning awareness of sexuality for both young men and women? How is the act of labeling related to teens who are simultaneously trying to assert their individuality as well as conform to their peer group?

10. What can "sluts" do to overcome this labeling? What can their peers do to help downplay the stigma? Can it ever be completely erased within a community or forgotten altogether?

Author Bio

Leora Tanenbaum is the author of **Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation** and a rising young talent of journalism today. She has written for *Newsday*, *Seventeen*, *Ms.*, and *The Nation*, among others, and appears regularly on a variety of national television programs. She lives in New York City with her husband and two children.

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