

BOOK REVIEW

“Mansplaining” Explained: *Men Explain Things to Me* by Rebecca Solnit

Rebecca Solnit is the author of seventeen books. She writes with passion and great intelligence, dealing with subjects like community, art, politics, hope, and feminism. She is a frequent contributor to the political site Tomdispatch.com, and is a contributing editor to Harper’s. Let’s face it – she’s kind of a big deal. But in *Men Explain Things to Me*, she explores how men talk down to her and explain things, just like they do to me, and every other woman I know.

The anecdote in her title essay “Men Explain Things to Me” is perfect because it is so easily pictured. A snooty man – “Mr. Very Important” – asking her if she has read the “very important Muybridge book” that came out that year. She had, in fact. She wrote it. Solnit uses anecdotes excellently throughout this collection, and it drives home the fact that no woman is immune from sexism in daily life. She then uses an amazing line that sums up talking about feminism: “Some men explained why men explaining things to women wasn’t really a gendered phenomenon.” This case of “mansplaining” – a term Solnit is often credited with inspiring – sparks a discussion of the “slippery slope of silencing”. This everyday act of sexism relates directly to acts of male violence against women.

Throughout this collection of essays, all written between 2008-2014, Solnit makes great use of vivid and colourful metaphors. The incident with “Mr. Very Important” is described as one where “forces that are usually so sneaky and hard to point out slither out of the grass and are as obvious as, say, an anaconda that’s eaten a cow or an elephant turd

on the carpet.” The metaphors she uses help create her conversational and comedic tone, and often make powerful statements towards her argument. The metaphor of Cassandra in relation to female credibility was so interesting, as it took a mythical story and proved it’s relevance to real women today. I also appreciated the soccer metaphor to begin her essay “#YesAllWomen”: using two opposing goalposts of “Widespread Social Problems” and “Isolated Event” really hit home for me about the way we talk about acts of violence against women. Another favourite metaphor was a quote Solnit included from British columnist Laurie Penny: “An opinion, as it seems, is the short skirt of the Internet.” I like the fact that she included other voices throughout the essays, as it made it read a lot less like a personal tirade and more of a collected argument based on a universally shared female experience.

Each essay was extremely well researched and provided so many real-life examples to back up her arguments about inequality between men and women and gendered violence. One striking perception was the idea of gendered violence linking directly to control, as she says, “violence is first of all authoritarian. It begins with the premise: I have the right to control you” and “murder is the extreme version of that authoritarianism.” She drops in huge statistics, such as “in the U.S. there is a reported rape every 6.2 minutes, and one in five women will be raped in her lifetime,” and “a woman is beaten every nine seconds in this country.” Statistics like these made me stop in my tracks and made the argument much more powerful in terms of the numbers and frequency of such disturbing actions.

While she clearly uses great research, many points in her essay are conveyed by listing example after example of disturbing crimes males have committed against

females, particularly in the second essay “The Longest War.” While these devastating events are necessary to show just how severe the issue of gendered violence is, the extent of examples in a row of such disturbing content makes the essay hard to read. For me, the problem was not only about what she was saying, but how her writing style constantly included long, confusing sentences. Many were so long that by the end of the sentence I had forgotten the thought she had initially started. This sentence is one example: “As a result, it imprisons a lot of women, and though you could say that the Tenderloin attacker on January 7, or a brutal would-be-rapist near my own neighbourhood on January 5, or another rapist here on January 12, or the San Franciscan who set his girlfriend on fire for refusing to do his laundry, or the guy who was just sentenced to 370 years for some particularly violent rapes in San Francisco in late 2011, were marginal characters, rich, famous, and privileged guys do it too.” Her writing style, not her opinions or research, is what would have stopped me from finishing the essays if I didn’t have to.

Despite my issues with her writing, *Men Explain Things to Me* made me think, nod along, and take pride in being a feminist – particularly by the final essays “#YesAllWomen” and “Pandora’s Box and the Volunteer Police Force”. However, to me the problem is who this collection did not sway. When I read this book over reading week, my dad picked it up off the counter and scoffed, “What is this?” I explained the problem of mansplaining, the anecdote inspiring the first essay, and Solnit’s arguments about gendered violence and inequality. Later, my dad read the first couple essays and said, “Sorry Zo, but this is just too much” and then a classic quip, “I guess we should just get rid of all the men, huh?” My dad is a good guy – he would never hurt a woman and he that women are just as capable as men – but his first reflex when reading feminist writing

that attacks male action is to rebuff it as man-hating. And he is who I want this type of collection to affect and positively impact. But due to the constant, extremely intense lists of male crimes, he stopped reading before he could really *get* it. When I read this, I already agreed with so many of her points, and was excited for the chance to learn more about the feminist cause I already support. By writing in a tone that attacks men so consistently, it can alienate half its possible readership.

But at least if my dad couldn't make it to the end of the collection, I did. And now I am more educated on feminist issues than I was before. I am more than happy to take my place as the radical feminist of the family. Men may explain things to me, but if I can continue the feminist conversation after reading this collection – even if only to my dad – then I think I am part of Solnit's solution.