

Chapter 1

From Outside-In to Inside-Out

Creating a New Definition of Sexy

Today our sexuality is an open-ended personal project;
it is part of who we are, an identity, and no longer merely something we do.

—Esther Perel, *Mating in Captivity*

I am so freaking glad you're here! This book is the culmination of thousands of hours of conversations and innumerable long days and late nights spent with my laptop. I wrote this book with the unflagging support of a kick-ass team of editors, consultants, and graduate and undergraduate students, and you need to know right off the bat how much we have been thinking about *you*. We have been worrying about you. We have been feeling protective of you. We have been laughing and crying and imagining how you'd respond to these pages. And now you're here.

You are about to do something that is both challenging and exhilarating. You are going to deepen your understanding of who you are sexually. *This process, however, is less discovery and more reclamation—taking back that which is your birthright as a woman and as a person.* This book will help you rewrite the troubling and shame-loaded stories our culture has placed on that tender and essential part of you: your sexuality. The journey of this book is *both personal and universal*. Women walk the path both alone and together. The path that leads *away* from silence, shame, and isolation *toward* pleasure, empowerment, and connection.

This book is written for every woman who has:

- silenced herself because she didn't know how to open up to her intimate partner about her sexual preferences, needs, and desires
- struggled to stay present and engaged in a sexual experience
- had sexual experiences that left her feeling sad or disconnected from her authentic self
- beaten herself up for sexual choices she has made or not made
- felt anxious about the fluidity of her sexuality
- been let down by a system of sex education that left gaps in her understanding and shame for knowing she needed more information
- faked an orgasm because she didn't know what else to do
- felt disconnected from, or ashamed about, the most intimate parts of her body.

This is a book about self-awareness. Self-awareness that guides you toward sexual choices that are enlivening and uplifting. Self-awareness that helps you celebrate your sexuality as essential, imperfect, and *yours*.

I have been working as a professor and a relationship therapist for over twenty years, and what I know for sure is that we are long overdue for some vulnerable, heart-centered, and perhaps difficult conversations about our sexual selves. Our culture treats sex as either titillating or taboo, which makes it so hard to talk about sex in a curious and wholehearted way and which leaves most of us with sexual shame that compromises our individual and relational well-being.

The relationship you have with yourself is the foundation of all of your relationships. *Although sex is something you (usually) experience with another person, your sexuality is yours.* Your sexuality is much more than to whom you are attracted or what you do or don't do in bed.

It is a central part of who you are, and it is about how you navigate the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual need for pleasure, closeness, and connection. This book is a journey toward greater *sexual self-awareness* centered on the relationship between you and your sexuality.

The Old Way: Outside-In Sexuality

There is a world of difference between being *sexualized* and being *sexual*.¹ Sexualization is a position of passivity, and it is the sad reality for girls and women in this culture. Women and feminine-presenting people are flooded with stories from family, friends, religious institutions, school, the media, and pornography about who and how they ought to be sexually. These voices are loud and opinionated, and they crowd out a woman's ability to hear her own voice.

Sexualization obliterates women's agency, reducing them—their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and power—to one-dimensional sexual objects who perform their sexuality the “right” way or the “wrong” way.

When our culture positions men as active/subject/predator and women as passive/object/prey, women's sole access point to their own sexuality is as a reflection in the eyes of another. *This toxic climate robs women of sexual autonomy and self-definition, leaving them with only an outside-in experience of their sexuality.* This toxic climate yields a dating culture in which sexual experiences all too often involve poor or absent communication and insufficient empathy and care. And this toxic climate sets the stage for couples to struggle with sexual desire.

Women are taught to be sexually appealing but not demanding, to be sexually available but not hungry, to bring our partners to orgasm but to fake our own pleasure for their benefit and

protection. Many of us cannot name our sexual anatomy or describe what those parts long for. The sad truth is that although women are more empowered than ever, that agency and authenticity doesn't follow us into the bedroom. *Women's sexual experiences are not as good/positive/rewarding/pleasurable as they could be and should be.* Perhaps a part of us knows that moving from silence into voice will shake the very foundation of patriarchy. And what happens then?

The New Way: Inside-Out Sexuality

It's time to flip the script and shift from sexualized to sexual. It's time for women to construct their sexuality from the inside-out. Instead of awaiting or fearing the label, "you're sexy," it's time to get to know "Your Sexy." Your Sexy is your sexuality—the unfolding story of your relationship to the erotic. Your Sexy is connected in an ancestral way to every woman/witch/goddess/bitch/heroine who came before.

It is time to quiet the noise of the outside world so you can create, from the inside-out, a deeper connection to Your Sexy and reclaim that which has always been yours. Neither earned nor ordained by another, an inside-out experience of Your Sexy is a wholehearted belief that your sexuality connects to and reflects your physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual self. By cultivating an inside-out experience of Your Sexy, you courageously step outside the gender roles and insist on nothing less than self-aware and empowered sexual experiences. Shifting from an outside-in to an inside-out experience of Your Sexy is the shift:

- from performance to enjoyment
- from shame to comfort
- from numb to enlivened

- from restrictive to expansive.

A sexual experience might express “I love you,” it might express “I need comfort,” it might express “I want to make a baby,” it might express “I want to try something I’ve never tried before,” and a thousand more things. Experiencing *Your Sexy* from the inside-out infuses those expressions with integrity, making every yes a heartfelt yes.

I work with so many long-term couples for whom sex is a tremendously fraught topic. While a commitment to sexual self-awareness does not guarantee you a lifetime of happy and carefree sex, it will help you address painful or problematic aspects of your sexual story with courage, curiosity, and compassion. What would happen if we lived in a world that trusted, celebrated, protected, and supported female sexuality—for example, would half of all women in long-term relationships struggle with sexual desire problems? I have no idea. But the fact that women have a body part that exists solely for pleasure (yay clitoris!) suggests that the more we work to heal this toxic sexual culture, the less women will struggle with sexual desire problems!

Reclaiming *Your Sexy* readies you for partnership with someone who can meet you in that self-aware space. Reclaiming *Your Sexy* also prepares you to raise the next generation of girls who can live from day one entitled to their voice, their boundaries, and their pleasure...and boys who are empathic and compassionate and who can be both tough and tender.

What You *Won't* Find in This Book

It's difficult to think of a topic that invites more opinion and judgment than the topic of sex, but here's what we are *not* going to do:<begin unordered list>

Bash men. I have so many men in my life whom I adore, and I hope you do as well. The problems we are unpacking are much bigger than blame. We need to work together, and we are inextricably bound: *Women’s healing calls men forward, and men’s accountability heals women.* In fact, chapter 12 is written for our male (and male-presenting) allies!

Apply rigid rules or use shame to create change. The goal is for you to determine— from the inside out—how, when, where, why, and with whom you have sex.

Focus on “how to.” This book is not explicitly about the pragmatics or the mechanics of sex, but there are great how-to resources listed at the end of the book.

Create any expectation of what your relationship status is (or should be). Whether you are single, dating, engaged, married, or single again, you will find valuable tools and information.

“Should” all over ourselves. What follows has no expectation of whether, how, when, and with whom, you “should” be having sex. This book is about your relationship with your sexual self. Where you go from there is frankly none of my business!<end unordered list>

What You *Will* Find in This Book

Sexualities are incredibly diverse. Readers of this book will have wildly different interests, desires, and relationship goals. This book strives only to support *your* deeper connection with *you* so you feel 100 percent empowered to author your unfolding story! On these pages, we will:<begin unordered list>

Name the problem. Women’s sexual experiences are not as good, positive, rewarding, and pleasurable as they could be and should be.

Explore what gets in the way of healthy and pleasurable sexual experiences. We will look at how healthy sexual expression is constrained by inadequate sex education, sexism, inequitable distribution of power and privilege, dualistic (either-or) thinking, low-accountability, low-vulnerability hookup culture, family patterns, and a culture of sexual violence.

Encounter lots of shades of gray. There may not be fifty, but this book will invite you again and again to beware “the danger of the single story” as writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says. We will resist easy answers, opting instead to trust that resilience grows by holding ever-more degrees of complexity. You will be asked to sit with paradoxes, points at which multiple things are all true: I am *both* courageous *and* afraid; I am *both* intrigued *and* intimidated by sex; I embody energy that is *both* feminine *and* masculine.

Grow your sexual self-awareness. Sexual self-awareness is a process of moving from an outside-in to an inside-out experience of Your Sexy.

Use an inclusive definition of sex. When people use the word “sex,” they tend to mean a penis going into a vagina, but when I use the word “sex” in this book, I am referring to a big umbrella of erotic behaviors that may or may not include a penis going into a vagina. A big broad definition of what counts as sex fosters inclusion, imagination, permission, and pleasure.

Take an intersectional feminist approach. Heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, cisgender, gender queer, transgender, nonmonogamous, monogamous, and/or asexual, you belong on these pages. Your Sexy is you, as you are.

Apply and integrate. Throughout the book, you will find questions and exercises to help you with application and integration into your life. There are no right or wrong ways to

approach these questions and exercises, but you might find it helpful to keep a journal near you as you read.

The Personal Is Political

One promise you must make with yourself as you begin this book is that you will never ever blame yourself for having developed an outside-in experience of Your Sexy. How could you be healthy in a wildly broken system? The vast majority of women have been the victims of some kind of violent harassment in public.ⁱⁱ One-third of all women will be subjected to sexual violence in their lifetime, and the risk of sexual violence is higher for women of color and for those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community.ⁱⁱⁱ Our culture approaches sex in an *incredibly fragmented way*—obsessive and avoidant at the very same time. Hypersexualized images sell everything from cheeseburgers to eye shadow, while at the same time, parents (and teachers, religious leaders, and others in positions of authority) avoid talking about sex altogether or talk about it in fear-loaded and judgmental ways.

I believe we are living through a cultural transformation. Like so many people, I feel heartbroken by the inescapable awareness of the scope of women’s suffering brought to light by the #MeToo movement.^{iv} But as my heart breaks, it also swells because the power of this movement is inspiring. This is a rising. A reckoning. A collective, “No more.” This is women saying “no more” to sexual violence, certainly. But it is more than that. It is a “no more” to the shameful silence that has historically existed in the wake of sexual violence. Shameful silence that has allowed a culture of degradation to roll from generation to generation. What happens when stories move from the shadows of silence into the collective light of day? Transformation

happens! What happens when women (and allies) stand together and say, “No more”? Space is made for “Yes!”

If women cannot say no, then women cannot truly say yes. When it comes to sex, that yes is essential. Sex requires a big, juicy, heartfelt, embodied yes. I believe that old ways are dying so new ways can be birthed. Transformation is destructive, uncomfortable, scary, and messy as hell. #MeToo is a movement of cultural and personal transformation, a movement that demands an end to sex as violence, sex as manipulation, and sex as power over, and it is a movement that holds the potential to create a culture of sex that is consensual, healing, and empowering.

Ending sexual violence requires change in lots of different domains (education, law, religion, public policy) and at multiple levels (individual, couple, family, community). We need to work together to make the world a place in which every sexual experience is one between consenting adults who cocreate the experience from start to finish. We must talk about women’s bodies and struggles with sexual pleasure, not in a vacuum, but in a context. This book exists as one mere stone on a larger path that leads us away from lousy sexual experiences to wonderful ones.^v

Our Declaration of Reclamation

I value the relationship between me and My Sexy. In some chapters of the story of my life, My Sexy will be a prominent, central, and vital feature, and in other chapters, My Sexy will be on hold. My Sexy is a part of me. It always has been and always will be, regardless of when, how, and with whom I express it. My Sexy is defined by me, and when I share My Sexy with others, my intention is that the experience is in the service of my health and well-being. I know that our culture has an incredibly problematic relationship with sex and that within this toxic framework,

celebrating My Sexy is an ongoing and imperfect process, one that requires nothing short of fierce self-compassion. Shame blocks self-love, and the stories I carry about how My Sexy is dirty, sinful, wrong, and dangerous make it hard to live in flow with My Sexy. Naming these stories helps me bring them into the light of my awareness so I can ask, “To what degree does this story make me feel aligned and empowered versus ashamed and voiceless?” From that place of greater awareness, I let go of the stories that I never asked for and that do not serve me.

Coming Home to Ourselves

I want you to practice self-awareness as you read. Check in with yourself again and again. Notice when you find yourself *leaning in* to the material. Maybe you feel goosebumps, maybe tears well in your eyes, maybe you deeply sigh, or maybe you have a feeling of warmth inside of you.

Those are moments in which you are letting go of an old way that wasn't serving you and inviting in something new that feels more nourishing. Notice too when you find yourself *feeling defensive* about the material. Maybe you feel like you want to say, “Yeah, but what about...” or maybe you feel queasy, ill-at-ease, angry. Those moments are invitations to dive a little deeper.

Your resistance has much to teach you. I hope that the pages of this book help you find and listen to yourself, and I hope that this journey leaves you with confidence and inspiration you need to create sexual experiences that serve you, heal you, and connect you—to yourself and to your intimate partners.

Before we dive in, it is important for me to locate myself. I am woman. I am cisgender (meaning that my biological body and my gender identity align as female). I am white. I am an economically privileged Midwesterner. I come from a blended family that endured a variety of relational and emotional challenges that no doubt informed my decision to become a clinical

psychologist. I am in midlife, in a long-term marriage, and the mother of two teens—a son and a daughter. I converted to Judaism and practice my spirituality in a big and wide way. You need to know this because even though I aspire to inclusivity, my writing cannot exist outside of my perspective, which has been forged through my experience (professional and personal) and my identity. I want you to feel empowered to integrate that which feels valuable and resonant and leave behind that which does not.

You also should know that for years, I lived with a kind of internal split. I have always been nerdy... like homework-is-a-joy nerdy. I have also always been fascinated by sex. As kids, my friends and I loved to sneak our parents' copies of *The Joy of Sex* and sit in awe of the images. As a teen, I would look forward to Sunday nights because I would hide under the covers, crank up my Walkman, and listen to the radio show of the pioneering sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer. But, for a long time, I was unsure how to reconcile these competing truths about myself. I felt like these two parts of me needed to remain very separate—the good girl/the bad girl. Through my personal and professional work, I have learned that I am far from alone. A lot of us experience a split between our erotic self and the rest of us. Knowing this has helped me feel entitled to honor and integrate My Sexy. This book is born from my inward journey, my reading and research, and my conversations with friends, clients, teachers, colleagues, and of course my intimate partner, Todd.

I am passionate about reclamation and integration of the sexual self. I am passionate about creating opportunities for people to shed shame and claim authenticity. I am passionate about helping people come home to themselves. Maybe someday this process won't be a reclamation. It will be the default. Maybe someday sex and relationship education will be wholehearted, preparing people to advocate for *both* safety *and* pleasure. Maybe someday all

physical touch will begin with enthusiastic consent. Maybe someday there will be no sexual trauma, or at least, when it occurs, the victim will feel able to immediately speak up, be believed, and receive the care they need to recover, and the perpetrator will be held accountable. Maybe someday there will be no need to take sexy back because the sexual self will begin as, and remain, an integrated part of who we are. I hope each of us will do our part to create this world together.

Chapter 1: From Outside-In to Inside-Out

- ⁱ Peggy Ornstein, *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated Landscape* (New York: Harper, 2017).
- ⁱⁱ Sophie Wilkinson, “Meet the Heroic Campaigners Making Cities Safer for Women,” *Refinery29* (May 19, 2016), <http://www.refinery29.uk/women-safer-cities>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ UN Women, “Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women,” (August 15, 2018), <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>; The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, “NISVS: An Overview of 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation,” https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_victimization_final-a.pdf.
- ^{iv} #MeToo was originally created by activist Tarana Burke in 2007 to reach survivors of sexual violence in underprivileged communities. In the fall of 2017, actress Alyssa Milano reignited the hashtag on Twitter, and within forty-eight hours, there were nearly 1 million tweets. On Facebook, there were more than 12 million posts, comments, and reactions in less than twenty-four hours by 4.7 million users around the world who were sharing, many for the first time, that they too were survivors of unwanted sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and/or sexual assault.
- ^v As I have been working on this book, we have been witnessing a rollback of reproductive healthcare and access to abortions in the United States. I have experienced moments of panic, thinking, “How can I write a book about sexual pleasure in the midst of this war against women’s rights?” Then I remember that now is precisely the time for us to declare without apology that bodily autonomy and self-determination are a human rights. Retreating into fear and silence won’t keep any of us safe.

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