

CONSENTING THE CHANGE

Lottie Hazell

Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*, London, Verso, 2021, 160pp; £10.99

Titled after an essay by Michel Foucault, Katherine Angel's *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* asks why we expect women to know what they want. Over four parts, Consent, Desire, Arousal, and Vulnerability, Angel, who assumes a heterosexual approach, interrogates the cultural expectation that women should be self-aware of their sexual desires, no matter how fluid or unfixed.

This book grapples with the 'double bind' of expressing female desire, which is unfree from risk. Angel begins by examining a porn film made in the early 2010s starring James Deen and a fan called 'Girl X'. The film shows Girl X oscillating between desire to 'do a scene with James Deen' and fear of public retribution. This example encapsulates the torment of managing desire. As Angel puts it, 'saying no may be difficult, but so too is saying yes' (p5).

Part one of the book, Consent, also examines the limitations of 'consent culture', in which 'women's speech about their desire is both demanded and idealised, touted as a marker of progressive politics' (p7). It is clear that Angel believes consent and confidence culture are well-intentioned: their existence is an insistence that truth-telling and self-knowledge can offer sexual emancipation. However, she argues that requiring women to give 'enthusiastic consent' in order to avoid sexual assault is inadequate and sometimes impossible. She concludes that consent alone cannot ensure good sex.

In part two, Desire, Angel's analysis explores desire as unfixed, and therefore unserved by consent rhetoric that demands women 'know [themselves] in order to be safe from violence' (p40). She also emphasises her caution at the cultural tendency to characterise women's desire as 'responsive'. Angel argues that by casting women as responsive, they are at risk of striving for desire even if they do not want to feel it. Furthermore, this puts women in a position to do 'the work' of heterosexual sex, which Angel resists (p61). She concludes this chapter by imagining an ideal of 'pleasure detached from gender' (p68). Although set persuasively within Angel's manifesto for desire, this perhaps might be too utopian a hope, especially when framed by her convincing argument for democratising pleasure for men and women.

Arousal is the most bodily of the chapters, with large parts of Angel's examination concerning the physical signifiers of arousal. The analysis in Arousal underscores Angel's argument that physical arousal does not necessarily equate to desire or even work as a sign of consent. She is rightly

insistent that the physiology of a woman's body should not 'trump her own feelings' (p70). She also interrogates the validity of scientific research that is accepted into social rhetoric as fact, when it is conducted in the strange laboratory settings of sex research.

In the following chapter, the question of why women should know what they want persists. By part four, *Vulnerability*, Angel's narrative voice is exasperated, asking, 'why should we not expect men to proceed, with us, in exploration?' (p111). Her tone is one frustrated by the expectations of emotional labour, which extends its remit to sexuality. Throughout the book, Angel refuses the expectation that women should be responsible for this labour, required to work out what they want when this expectation is not imposed upon their male counterparts. In *Vulnerability*, Angel posits it is the gendered expectations of men and women that stymie good sex. She declares that if we are able to abandon 'ideals of mastery' informed by gender, 'we might *all* find greater pleasure' (p40).

Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again is a thorough and searching investigation of the cultural conditions and behaviours needed for good sex. Although Angel's overarching urge is to embrace sexual ethics that allow 'for obscurity, for opacity, and for not-knowing', the fastidiousness of her research and the precision of her writing offer reassuring clarity (p40).

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