

The Shame Cycle

The new backlash against casual sex.

By Jessica Grose

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Julie Klausner has slept with a lot of losers and perverts, she tells us in her funny, trenchant new collection of essays *I Don't Care About Your Band*. She is not permanently wounded by these encounters and yet she feels bad. And then she feels bad about feeling bad. "When you cry about things not working out, you're crying not only because a guy you slept with now doesn't seem to care you're alive," Klausner writes, "but also because you're ashamed of yourself for crying."

Why would she be ashamed? After all, Klausner is a feminist who doesn't believe there is anything wrong with casual sex. But she's not the only recent memoirist with regrets. Hephzibah Anderson had such deep ones that she decided to abstain from what she calls "penetrative sex" for a whole 12 months. "A tiny bit of me can't help judging myself, nor, presumably, can those women who consistently shave their own tallies in sex surveys," she writes in her memoir *Chastened* (out in the United States in June), which chronicles this self-imposed dry spell. "Liberated women that we are, we'll blame Victorian

morality and its outmoded, repressive mores — we'll blame ourselves for succumbing and we'll deny our feelings."

From whence this confusing, shame-feedback loop? Compelling research shows that hooking up is not psychologically damaging, and only purity-ring-clutching evangelicals believe that it's wrong to have sex before marriage. Feminist Web sites advise that is it our "feminist duty to 1) seek pleasure and feel entitled to it and 2) to make the world a more orgasmic place for other women." And yet there seems to be something else at play in the culture that's making Klausner and Anderson regretful, some new wave of anti-orgasmic sexual conservatism that makes you hate yourself for what you did last night.

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Sex regret seems to come in cycles, and we're definitely experiencing one right now. In the '60s, *Cosmopolitan's* Helen Gurley Brown told us in *Sex and the Single Girl* that "sex is great, and that one should get as much of it as possible," as *The New Yorker* put it. In the '70s, the sexual revolution reached its peak with Erica Jong's "zipless f---." But by the end of the '70s, Gail Collins argues in *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, women were obsessed with the casual-sex cautionary tale *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, "which painted a picture of the new morality that was so dismal it's a wonder the entire generation didn't head for the convent." Then came "spinster panic," involving narratives that focused around the "beautiful, lonely career woman." As Collins notes:

"The Revolution Is Over" announced *Time* in 1984. In fact, what was over was not the dramatic change in women's feelings about the double standard that had been at the heart of the sexual revolution. What ended was the to-the-nth-degree greenness of it—the group sex, the casual encounters at a rock concert or airport ticket line that led almost instantly to sex behind a tree or in a plane restroom. "The difference now is that things are not so casual. The women I speak with seem to want to know their partners," said the director of the health

center at Wheaton College.

The current raft of regret seems to be a response to the *Girls Gone Wild* archetype of the late '90s and early aughts. Ariel Levy described the new era's version of sex positive in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, "a tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular." We were supposed to dance on tables like Paris Hilton and wear ass-baring chaps and hump the floor like 22-year-old Christina Aguilera did in her "Dirrrty" video, or at least find that sort of thing appealing, otherwise we were marmish prudes. We were supposed to go to strip clubs and wear Playboy necklaces around our necks—as *Sex and the City* star Carrie Bradshaw did.

But after a while, we did not really want to do any of those things anymore, as Tina Fey explained in an interview with

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Vogue earlier this year. We have been handed "a sort of Spice Girls' version of feminism. We're supposed to be wearing half-shirts and jumping around. And, you know, maybe that's not panning out." *Girls Gone Wild* founder Joe Francis was put in jail. Christina Aguilera married a nice Jewish boy and had a baby. She's been replaced on the pop charts by 19-year-old virginal chanteuse Taylor Swift, who sings chaste love songs about Romeo and Juliet. Paris Hilton is rarely in the tabloids and we haven't seen her nether regions in years. Finally, the fictional Carrie Bradshaw is wed and living a New York domestic fantasy.

And there's the flip side to the stripper fantasy. Domestic bliss is now the cultural ideal for young women, which is why Lori Gottlieb haranguing women to settle for Mr. Good Enough in her new book *Marry Him* hit such a raw nerve. Cue the "spinster panic" articles, like this one from the *New York Times* in January, which talks about how successful beautiful women are "victims of a role reversal" that will leave them single because men aren't making as much money as they are anymore.

At the start of this decade, we have thoroughly internalized these recent conservative cultural messages about the importance of marriage: "73 percent of women born between 1977 and 1989

place a high priority on marriage," writes Hannah Seligson in the *Wall Street Journal*. If what Gen Y wants is marriage, then it follows that feelings about sex would be more complicated—and in some cases, deeply judgmental. A Princeton freshman wrote an op-ed last week about why her friend should not be allowed to claim rape after a night of highly inebriated sex, the implicit message being that she should not have been having inebriated sex in the first place. A poll taken last month in London showed that women were less likely to forgive a rape victim than men were.

Of course, the Princeton freshman was roundly pilloried, along with Lori Gottlieb. Women are not quite ready to admit that we are ready to be domesticated again. But the *Girls Gone Wild* model doesn't appeal much either. Caught between the false liberation of the last decade and the fervent

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conservatism of the new one, it makes some sense that Hephzibah Anderson called the whole thing off for a year. It's much easier than dealing with the shame cycle.

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*Jessica Grose is an associate editor at **Slate** and the managing editor of **DoubleX**. She is the co-author of *Love, Mom: Poignant, Goofy, Brilliant Messages From Home*.
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