

November 4, 2016 - Amy Rose Spiegel published her first book, *Action: A Book About Sex* earlier this year. Previously, Spiegel was a story editor at *Rookie* and an associate editor at *BuzzFeed*.

As told to Charlotte Zoller, 2170 words.

Tags: Writing, Culture, Sex, Identity, Politics.



Amy Rose Spiegel on sexual inclusivity

When was the first time you wrote about sex?

I want to say I was 19 or 20. I must have been 20 by that point. Maybe 21. I wrote an advice answer for *Rookie's* advice column, which I wrote for very frequently and then I later went on to edit. We got a question about abortion. On this site for teenagers (and mostly female teenagers or female-identifying and queer), we hadn't yet had anything about abortion. I was really nervous because at that point, I'd had an abortion. I think I'd had two. I was terrified about making that public or writing about it in a way that wasn't totally contrite. That's not sex, but it was reproductive health, which was part of what I felt the stigma around. It was really useful for me to write it because the things I'm terrified of—like when I publish something and I think the night before it goes up, "Oh, this is going to ruin my life"—are often the most rewarding.

That opened the floodgates for me to think more critically and write more openly about all topics relating to sex. I didn't write *Action* as a book of instructions. I wrote it as just an idea that maybe you could have permission to think about your own sex life. The Q&As on tour were really wonderful because I had teenagers, elderly people, and people of all years coming up and talking to me about the questions and the ideas they had about their sex lives, which was phenomenal. If that is how people reacted even just a little bit, that feels good.

When I talk to older women about sexual harassment, the overwhelming majority say something to the effect of "For my generation, it's normal. We don't think about it and we don't talk about it, because it happens to everyone."

I have a really good friend who is in her 60s and we talk very openly about gender and issues pertaining to sex. I'm actually having dinner with her tonight. Her idea of talking about it is in line with what you're saying where it's just normal, it's like breathing, why would you talk about it... There are still parts that will catch in her throat when we do talk about it. That's a really interesting thing for me. I think when you come up in such a way that you've lived through second-wave feminism, you've lived through everything that you've lived through *period*, it might not seem as safe to talk about it.

I think for women who are older than we are it was seen as, "Okay, you already endured the setback. Don't keep setting yourself back by making this public. Don't become damaged in the eyes of the rest of the world." Even though we all experience this and we know that we're not, there's still a degree of blame.

Why do you think it's important for our generation to continue that conversation?

I think that medically it's really important. I think that people should be able to have access to real knowledge about what's going on with their bodies, actual sexual and reproductive education. Then I think it's important on a personal level because you deserve to not feel like your experiences in some way are harmful to you, outside of the ways they've already been. Also, I feel like if sex is presented to you as something you're supposed to be enjoying, then it's counter-intuitive to treat it like something that's in some way degenerative.

One of my first thoughts when I began reading *Action* was "How does she come up with so many synonyms for gender-neutral partners?" First of all, do you have exclusive access to the best Thesaurus of all time? Second, why is it important for you to be inclusive in your writing?

[laughs] I feel like the gender neutral terms are just kind of the way I talk! I have friends and people in my life who date people of all genders. It becomes second nature when you talk that way then, of course, you write that way. Inclusivity I think is just non-negotiable. If you live it, of course you write it, especially with something as sensitive as sex and in making people feel safe within that. Language is the first step.

I feel like if you're a cis person writing about sex it's your real responsibility to not perpetuate the same thing you're angling against. You can't be a cis woman and be like, "Cis women have it so tough," and

then ignore trans people or gender nonconforming people. Otherwise you're just taking the lessons that have been shittily applied to you and teaching them to other people who also won't benefit from learning them.

Why do you think there's currently such a backlash to the notion of inclusivity?

There's a real wave of otherizing right now that's coming from people feeling like they're disenfranchised and they deserve more—specifically white people, especially Republican people. They're looking for basically anyone else to blame that they can. Like Hunter Schafer, who is a plaintiff against HB2 in North Carolina. After this issue came to light, we've seen violence against trans people increase. I think that the more people talk about it, the more they feel like there is a real "enemy" to be working against. Who is hurt when someone says the word "they"? Who is hurt when someone uses the restroom that they want to use?

Other than their ego?

Right! I feel like it's a little bit ridiculous even for media outlets that I respect to act like it's so cumbersome to use the word "they." Like, "Oh, grammatically it's so tough." That's ridiculous. Also, you ostensibly went to journalism school or at least know the basics of Strunk and White. You can handle one more thing. It's okay. I promise.

I feel like it's really interesting, too, when we're talking about different generations and how they relate to ideas of gender and sexuality now. I find that a lot of older people are really resistant to ideas that gender can be more than the sex you're assigned at birth. I think people have a hard time with things they might feel ignorant about. They don't want to feel stupid. No one wants to feel stupid and if you don't know about issues of gender, equality, or supporting trans people, you might react in a way that is hideous. No one wants to feel dumb.

I wish the reaction, instead of feeling afraid or like it's in some way oppressive to them, that people take the very little amount of time it takes just to learn a little bit about other people's perspectives. That would be life saving. I encourage people who maybe don't have trans friends or don't know anything about different ideas of gender outside of the cis spectrum just to learn about it.

What would you suggest to someone looking to expand their knowledge?

I think about this a lot, because I don't want to be speaking for other people. The thing I typically do is point to other people's work. I'll point to the work of Tyler Ford or Shon Faye, who is a great writer for *DAZED* and many other places. I'll point to Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, Hari Nef, any number of trans writers and public people. Any other people who've spoken about it.

Even that feels a little bit less than ideal because I don't want to point to those people as paragons for all of what the trans experience is, because there isn't just one. Also, you don't want to tokenize a person based on one part of their life. It's tough. It's something that I'm still working on all the time. I hope to keep getting better at it. It's hard and because it's hard, it's worthwhile. I feel like the first thing to accept when trying to be caring towards other people is that it takes a lot of fucking up. Everyone is going to make mistakes.

That's not a way at all to excuse people being like, "Oops, just used the wrong pronoun," because that sucks. I would want people to think not about how a situation impacts them first, but how the people who are directly involved might be feeling, and how they might want to be supported. A great way to figure that out is to ask.

Sometimes asking can be scary—for both parties.

I wouldn't be offended if anybody asked for my pronouns. I think that it's acceptable. I think it's okay. But again, I'm not really the main person to be talking about it. I think it's good as long as you're asking not out of fear of fucking up, but because you really care. It really just comes down to: are you asking for the other person's benefit?

Amy Rose Spiegel recommends:

My 1980s and Other Essays by Wayne Koestenbaum

"Real Talk With RuPaul" by E. Alex Jung

East of Eden, John Steinbeck, the dedication almost as much so as the antecedent book

Moments of Being by Virginia Woolf

"Queen of the Pack", Patra

Speaking of asking for another person's benefit—that brings us to the issue of consent. It's such a simple concept. You ask, you get permission, you continue. If at any point you no longer want to be doing what you are doing, you communicate it and stop. Why do you think it's so hard for some to understand and honor the idea of consent?

I think it's just another case of people not wanting to relinquish an idea of power that they've wrongly

assumed they have. We've seen, especially in this election cycle, that people, certain male people, especially older rich white ones, really do believe that it's a right. They've earned it because if they have all this money... or maybe because they have a XY set of chromosomes. They have earned it. They worked hard for this. Don't take it away, "How dare you?" I think when people say consent is difficult to wrap their heads around sometimes they're just being willfully obtuse. Yes and no are some of the first words you learn in the fucking world.

I think when people raise a really big fuss about having to adjust their behavior that's really telling. It's not hard. It's hard because you're making it hard. It's hard because you've decided that extending respect to another person is somehow more difficult than whatever it is that you want to do. I feel like I'm disappointed too when I see people talk about consent in ways that, "Oh, it's an interruption". It's not.

Why would you want to go ahead with doing something that could later be perceived as sexual assault? Even in a totally selfish way. I don't understand that. Even if you're not willing at all to respect another person, you're fucking yourself over. I don't know. I hope that people are becoming more aware of the very basic notion of what consent is. I really hope that's the case. It really is as simple as asking, "Is it okay if I do this?" Or, "Do you like that?" That's cool and you can do it with a little bit of a suave tone. Yeah, that's fine. Totally.

What conversations do you hope to start with your writing? What are your hopes and dreams is basically what I'm asking!

I want a Cadillac. [laughs] No, I mean, I really do. I always thought when I was a young person writing that I wanted to make work that would make other people feel less alienated. I had it backward, I think. I guess I write because I want to feel less alienated. I think that the main way of relating to others is just trying to be as forthright in your work as you can. I want to keep making things where I don't always know the answer. I think my hope is just to be curious and to be uncomfortable. I really think that the difficult things are the worthy ones. I know that sounds really highfalutin, but that's why I do it. I really do believe that fucking up is how you go pro.

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Vocation

Writer, Editor

Fact

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