

Amber Keyser: Another book you might call an act of love, I sort of consider this book an act of rage.

Host: Thanks for joining us on The Lerner Podcast. We're here today with Amber Keyser, author of *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture*. Welcome to The Lerner Podcast, Amber. Can you tell us what is the definition of rape culture?

AK: When I talk about rape culture, what I mean is the constellation of beliefs and behaviors that work together in our culture to make excuses for and to normalize male sexual aggression, and violence. So an example, a boy in elementary school, grabs a girl on the behind, and that is a form of sexual assault, right? That is unwelcome touching of a sexual nature. But a really common response is: Oh, that's no big deal. Boys will be boys. So that's one of those beliefs that says it's normal for a boy to grab a girl in a sexual way, even when she doesn't want to be grabbed. And, and it's okay, it's not a big deal. So we've both said it's normal, and we've made an excuse for it. At the same time we're telling the boy, yeah, knock yourself out, go ahead, grab girls all you want. And we're telling the girl, your desire for bodily safety and bodily autonomy is not important. So it's a small example. But those things are happening all the time in our classrooms, in the workplace, within families, sometimes in the media we consume. And the book, *No More Excuses* really tries to dissect that to make us aware of the how that is happening in our everyday lives.

Host: What did you learn that really surprised you while you were researching *No More Excuses*?

AK: Oh, so many things. I don't think I realized that our criminal justice system was quite as broken as it is. And that even when it works the way we envision it ought to work, the system itself doesn't provide opportunities for healing. There are opportunities for retribution, and for upholding the law, but not necessarily for healing. And so one of the things that I didn't know anything about going into this book was restorative justice. And I feel like that is an area in which we really need to move, to be able to address some of these issues. And key pieces of restorative justice have to do with perpetrators listening and hearing survivors, believing those stories, acknowledging the hurt that was done not only to that person, but to entire communities. It's a concept we struggle with in the United States. I do think that restorative justice provides a mechanism for us to heal from very painful things that happen in our communities, and situations where maybe the legal case is not cut and dry. So I'd like to see us find ways in our schools, in our religious organizations, in our communities, to have these community conversations about the experience of survivors and how that impacts their lives and spirals out to the rest of our community.

Host: What do you hope that readers will take away from *No More Excuses*, and is it different depending on whether your reader is male or female?

AK: So in some cases, it is quite different. One of the things that I hope that male readers take away from this book is that they are able to see the experience of what it means to be a woman or girl walking through this world through a different lens, in a different way. There's a scenario in the book about, you know, walking to your car at night. Well, most men don't even think about what that would mean. But women are constantly making emergency plans for what they're going to do on that walk to their car at night alone. One of the things that the #metoo movement that was did that was amazing, was open the eyes of many men and boys to the experiences of women. And so I hope this book provides a really targeted way to go deeper. But I also want it to do that for female readers, I want them to be able to look through a different lens when they're analyzing media, when they're listening to each other, how they're treating each other at school. The ideas about rape culture are so pervasive, it's like the air that we breathe, right? You don't notice it until it's gone. So what we need to do, the challenge of analyzing a

culture while we're in the middle of living in that culture, is to be able to step back and look from a different perspective. That's what I hope this book does.

Host: What can teachers and librarians do to combat sexual harassment in schools?

AK: So lots of things. I think we have a lot of opportunities as adults who work with young people to make a safer, more egalitarian environment. So one of them is really just to be aware of the damaging effects of sexual harassment, slut shaming, of gender based aggression, of gender biased dress codes. There's a lot of really powerful research that demonstrates sexual harassment in our schools is creating a hostile environment. Hostile environments are not environments where we can learn. And that is really detrimental to the students that we're trying to serve. So, one is to be aware of those effects. Another is to really understand that Title IX protects against sexual harassment in schools. It is designed to provide equal access to education. And if the educational environment is hostile to girls than it is not serving them appropriately. Every school is supposed to have a Title IX compliance officer and schools that aren't protecting students in that way are in violation. Another thing that I think is really important is to consider de-gendering the way we teach and analyzing how rape culture and gender roles manifest in the classroom, you know, whether it's a new story that we're analyzing, or a piece of literature, or even a lot of science curriculum, you know, there are places to have conversations about gender equality, and gender stereotypes that I think can be really useful. And we have a whole bunch of other suggestions actually for to implement in schools. And I think we're going to put those on the website, right?

Host: That's right. So that whole list will be available at LernerBooks.com/go/NoMoreExcuses. You can get that list of things that teachers and librarians could do as well as some other things. Amber, one of the things that you provided with some fiction/nonfiction pairings that adults in schools can recommend to start conversations within the schools about consent and combating rape culture. Can you talk a little bit about some of those pairings?

AK: Since we were just sort of talking about the toxicity of sexual harassment in school, sort of the environmental toxicity of that, I want to give a shout out to a book by Emily Lindin, that's called *UnSlut*. It's both a diary and a memoir, meaning that when she was in middle school, she was severely bullied and slut shamed. And this memoir takes the diary entries she kept at the time that this was happening so her middle school diary entries, and pairs them with her perspective as an adult in a form of memoir. So that is really powerful. There's also a documentary about this and the link to that will be on the website too. But I would pair *UnSlut* by Emily Lindin with *The Nowhere Girls* by Amy Reed, a novel that also takes on the idea of the environment of misogyny and slut shaming at schools. Another one would be to look at the nonfiction memoir, *Brave* by Rose McGowan. She was one of the people involved in bringing accusations against Harvey Weinstein, and then the novel *Damsel* by Elana Arnold. Both of these books show how men in power use their influence and position to commit sexual assault and also to silence survivors. So that would be another pairing. I've got a couple other suggestions, and we'll put those on the website as well.

Host: And then you also provided a list of ten things that people can do to dismantle rape culture, and then you have some bonus extra things that men can do in particular to dismantle rape culture. Can you talk a little bit about why it's important that the work for dismantling rape culture not fall on the women and girls?

AK: Men have the opportunity to use their privilege in this culture, to be allies for girls and women. And I would argue, speaking as the mother of a 17-year-old boy, that he has a moral responsibility to use his privilege to make the world safer for the girls and women in his life. So one of the ways that men can do that is by listening and acknowledging the experiences of women. One of the really heartbreaking stories

that I heard during the boom of the #metoo movement when Twitter was going crazy, and when people were talking about President Trump's, then candidate Trump's comments about sexual assault on the Hollywood Access thing was that for the first time, women were telling their male partners about their experiences with sexual harassment and assault. And the way the men in their lives responded had profound impacts. So some of those male partners just completely dismissed and disregarded those women's experiences. And it actually led to lots of breakups. So, you know, I think the first thing men can do is listen, hear, zip their lip, acknowledge the reality of the experience being shared. The other thing that men can do in a way that women often can't is to use their privilege to speak up as an ally. So a reality of living in a patriarchal culture like ours is that men's voices often have more weight. So if you know if my son is in the hall at high school, and he hears some really sexist comment from another guy, I want him to call that out, he's going to be a lot more effective at calling that out, than my daughter, who's also a high schooler would be. So you know, I think men can use their privilege to make spaces safer. The other thing, and this might seem a little non-intuitive, is that the architecture of rape culture is bad for men and boys too. It creates really rigid gender stereotypes. It capitalizes on gender stereotypes, creates really rigid roles that boys and men then feel compelled to fit themselves into. And so I would ask the boys and men out there to consider, well, how do you feel compelled to conform to those gender roles? Have you done that at the expense of parts of yourself that you value, right? Do you love baking but avoid doing it because it's not a very masculine-sounding thing to say you love? How has that affected relationships with women, if you feel that you have to be a certain way in those relationships? I think men have a lot to gain from dismantling rape culture, because they can express more fully the whole range of their interests and personality.

Host: I'm going to switch gears into something a little bit lighter for a second. And that is what's on your nightstand to read?

AK: Oh, what's on my nightstand! Okay, so I just got back from a really wonderful writing conference. And so I have on my nightstand two books by Ross Gay. One is his most recent collection of poetry, called *A Catalog of Gratitude*. It was a finalist for the National Book Award. And the other is a book of short of essays also by Ross Gay called *The Book of Delights*. He is just a brilliant writer and I love the way his work points us toward joy, which feels really relevant for me when so much of my work is pointing toward things like rape culture that are distinctly not joyful.

Host: Thank you for that. So for all of our listeners, you can visit LernerBooks.com/go/NoMoreExcuses. You'll find there a discussion guide that links to additional resources, lists of things that you can do to dismantle rape culture, things that teachers and librarians can do to combat sexual harassment in schools, as well as the fiction/nonfiction pairings that Amber mentioned and some additional ones. So please check that out. Again, that's LernerBooks.com/go/NoMoreExcuses. Amber, thank you so much for writing this book. And for your time today on The Lerner Podcast.

AK: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate being able to be part of this conversation.

Host: Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.