


BOOK REVIEW

Getting It, Having It, Keeping It Up: Straight Men's Sexuality in Public & Private

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How do scholars working at the intersections of gender and sexuality make sense of men's sex lives, their understanding of sex, and their fears and anxieties about sex? Beth Montemurro's *Getting It, Having It, Keeping It Up: Straight Men's Sexuality in Public & Private* seeks to answer some of these questions and in so doing contributes to a growing body of scholarship on men's heterosexuality. Drawing on 94 interviews, conducted between 2014 and 2016, with straight men, Montemurro studies "how men's feelings about sex, sexual relationships, and their sexual selves have changed during their lifetime" (6). In this book, we learn that there are "three primary areas of concern," which are, quite simply, "getting it, having it, and keeping it up" (7). In her book, Montemurro argues that these primary concerns "allowed men to show their manhood" (7), recalling that gender is largely performative. The book itself is divided into three parts, each representing a part of the title. The first two chapters consider how men "get" sex, the next two chapters consider "having it," particularly men's expectations for sexual performance and proficiency, and finally, "keeping it up," which is as much about the temporal nature of the relationship as it is about erectile function and dysfunction. Together, then, readers are presented with a timely study that considers the nature of straight men's sexual lives, how they make sense of them, and what they desire of sexuality.

Throughout the work, Montemurro argues that sexuality is key to understanding how men understand themselves, and perhaps most especially, their masculinity. To do this, Montemurro draws on the idea of "manhood acts" which are largely understood as "'practices and processes' involved in being seen as a man; those that 'signify possession of a masculine self'" (8). This idea of manhood acts, which comes from the work of Michael Schwalbe and Douglas Schrock, is used to profitable ends throughout *Getting It, Having It, and Keeping It Up*. Indeed, Montemurro is to be commended for enlivening this theoretical work in this book.

This book contributes to ongoing discussions in the field of masculinity studies, and Montemurro introduces a new "type" of masculinity, "private masculinities," which she defines as "the way men demonstrate masculinity in intimate situations, where they are less likely to be policed" (16). I admit wholeheartedly that I have been critical of the proliferation of "types" of masculinity, but what strikes me as valuable here is that

the definition works with the idea of audience. Montemurro explains that “the scope of the ‘audience’ impacts the performance of manhood acts, as does the nature of the interaction” (16). Thus, instead of performing for a public, whether that be a group of men or a group of women, the masculinity here is limited and confined to a seemingly private audience in a private moment doing a private act, as it were. There is something beneficial here about reframing masculinity in this regard, where so much masculinity research has been about the social and the public, what of “private” masculinities? I could see this idea carried over to other sites of analysis, for instance, a patient and his doctor, or in the space of psychoanalysis, or the relationship between a child and a parent. That is, how might we begin to theorize and think about masculinities that are not dependent upon a public, but instead, are established, embodied, performed, and so on, in the private?

The first section on “getting it” explains that this happens on “two levels: comprehending sex and accessing sex” (23). In some ways, then, this is a chapter dealing with early sexual experiences, often told from the perspective of retrospection spanning decades. But more so, it is perhaps also a call to action as we witness continued attacks on formalized sex education. As access to reproductive health care is being challenged in courts, it is all the more imperative that people have an understanding of sexuality. And it is not just young people, as we tend to imagine, but rather all people. The men in her study reveal unawareness around sexuality well beyond pubescence. In these chapters, we see various discussions of pornography, which acts like a spectre over the sex lives of men—they’ve all seen it, they all know it. Indeed, there is much work that remains to be done on men’s relationships to pornography, not just as a matter of entertainment, but as a matter of education, learning, and performance. Montemurro’s study seeks to unpack these meanings, while recognizing the complicated challenges of pornography as an object of study.

The second section focuses on “having it” and explores *how* men conceptualize and understand *having* sex. It is perhaps this section of the book that I found most compelling. In the first chapter in the section, Montemurro focuses on ideas of “proficiency, pressure, and performance” where sexuality becomes more than just an act or a practice, but instead becomes something to be learned, mastered, and achieved so as to prove one’s claims to masculinity. The implications of this are significant. But more than that, this speaks to ideas of “private masculinities,” which might address the anxieties and fears surrounding sex. Not sex itself, but not being good at sex. We learn of the ways that men “study” to be good at sex, which speaks to a very real challenge. Where do men “study” this information? Answers range, but practically, in an age of increasingly scrutinized public sex education, perhaps there is an opportunity. Good, comprehensive sex education, that also attends to pleasure, may well be an important intervention. This education should be ongoing and not limited to but a few grades in school. One informant in Montemurro’s study speaks of reading a book called *What Women Want*, “parts of the Kama Sutra. Recently, I read this book called *She Comes First*” (108). At least for this man, there is a desire to know and so he seeks out information, so as to develop his skills. In this chapter, there are also perennial concerns addressed, such as penis size, but what is not accounted for is other anxieties surrounding the penis (for instance, circumcision status). In the next chapter, Montemurro attends to “desire, relationships, and sex,” and in this chapter, we find the idea that love becomes so important to sex and relationships. “Although dominant scripts suggest that sex is physical rather than emotional for men, more and more studies provide evidence that contradicts this” (126), and Montemurro’s study contributes

to this, especially with its focus on “private masculinities.” Love is not just an emotion or feeling, but rather speaks to a desire for “closeness and affirmation” (130). Sex becomes a communion between lovers: “relationship are important in providing affective connection as well as authentication of men’s self-worth,” and Montemurro continues, “if men consistently imagine themselves in competition with other men, then it is women partners, as agents of affirmation, who can provide needed emotional support and reassurance, in addition to bolstering men’s status by their mere presence” (131). Such an observation is important, but it also speaks to the emotional labour women are expected to provide, a point that could be further elaborated upon.

In the final part, Montemurro considers what it means to “keep it.” These chapters call our attention to aging and masculinities in productive ways, as well as speaking to the longevity of relationships. The first chapter considers both sexual and relationship problems. For instance, what happens if monogamy becomes monotonous? Included, as well are considerations of life transitions, relationships falling apart, divorce being experienced, and fatherhood. The following chapter is focused on aging and changing bodies, and unsurprisingly we find anxieties around erectile dysfunction, but also anxieties around the changing and aging body. Curiously, this section does not consider other situations involved with aging, for instance, hormone replacement therapy, about which more and more is being written as more and more men are being prescribed testosterone.

Montemurro closes *Getting It, Having It, and Keeping It* with a formidable conclusion that brings together the experiences of the men in her study on straight men’s sex lives. In the conclusion, readers are reminded that “for the men we spoke with, engaging in sexuality activity was an act of affirmation. Sex was not—or even mostly—about pleasure or gratification. Sex was a manhood act that affirmed men’s worth as straight men” (192). All of this has been aptly demonstrated throughout the book, but one is left wondering what this means for the study of involuntary celibacy, for example. What do these “manhood acts” around sexuality mean in an age of #MeToo and Toxic Masculinity? Obviously, this was beyond the scope of Montemurro’s book, but I suspect many scholars will be interested in how we draw on the ideas presented here and other examples of straight men’s sexuality, particularly when the topics are “negative.” One thing is clear, Montemurro has a great interest in the informants and their stories, and it would seem as if the goal of *Getting It, Having It, and Keeping It* was to tell their stories with care and generosity.

Getting It, Having It, and Keeping It contributes to a growing body of scholarship on men’s heterosexuality. If there is one thing, I wish we learned more about, it is the kinds of sex that these men are engaging in. When we speak about “men’s heterosexuality,” what do we mean? In the case of this book, the answer seems to be one of normative heterosexuality, and not the kinds of heterosexuality that someone like Jane Ward documents in her book, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* (2015), or as Tony Silva explores in *Still Straight: Sexual Flexibility among White Men in Rural America* (2021). Even beyond this, one wonders about sexting and the rise of the dick pic, which has been discussed broadly, and most recently in Andrea Waling’s *Exploring the Cultural Phenomenon of the Dick Pic* (2023). Waling’s project, like that of Montemurro’s, is one in which the men speak and articulate ideas of “private masculinity.” But my point here is not that the book *fails* to do these things, but rather that it *invites* readers to consider studying men’s heterosexuality and expanding our analysis and understanding. The goal seems to be one that recognizes that we need a nuanced discussion of men’s heterosexuality, one that moves beyond typological ideas of “hybrid” or

“hegemonic” masculinity, and towards an understanding that eschews the prepackaged answers to which we have grown accustomed.

Beth Montemurro’s *Getting It, Having It, and Keeping It* is an important contribution to the critical study of men’s sexualities, particularly heterosexuality. This is surely not the last book that will be written on the subject, but it is an exemplary one that should be in all university libraries. As we continue to debate men’s sexualities, particularly in the age of #MeToo and Toxic Masculinity, it is imperative that the study be critical, thoughtful, and rigorous. I am hopeful that Montemurro’s book will foster and provoke new discussions that continue to expand our horizons and ideas not only about men’s sexuality, but also how we might study it.

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