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Rape and the City: Another Side of New York

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Jana Leo's *Rape New York*, published by [The Feminist Press](#), takes what is often pushed into silence -- rape -- and blows it open as a social construct, and something everyone who lives in a community has to inevitably interact with in some form. Leo analyzes everything from the construction of cities, to the layout of apartment buildings, and the way developers, mayors, police and landlords construct their roles to avoid responsibility. It's a complicated tale of how we ended up in a society where one out of four women are raped. But Leo takes this too-often-silent reality and pulls her readers through a dark but necessary analysis of how we got here.

This book, however, shouldn't be assumed to be all abstract. The cover of the book is a familiar seeming photo of a futon upon the floor, a lamp and a simple set of drawers. It's of Leo's apartment. In the top right hand corner it is labeled as "Photo #5" "Crime Scene Unit."

The genesis of the book is Jana Leo's own experience of being raped. She was raped in the afternoon in her Harlem apartment. If you are a woman, you might be familiar with this scene. You walk through your apartment door with heavy bags of groceries. You have to pause to put them down before you can then lock the door behind you. Those seconds were too many for Leo to remain safe. When she turned to lock her door, a man stood there with a gun.

But Leo insightfully and bravely refuses to leave the analysis to only the actual crime. At the time of her assault, she was studying cities, architecture and crime and how the three are intertwined. She knew that cities made money by taking rundown neighborhoods and pushing the poor off of the streets so that developers can take over. But what happens when, block by block, a neighborhood is turned upscale, but the problems of poverty and crime are not dealt with? Leo convincingly posits that the crime moves inside. Into these public/private spaces, not guarded by city patrols, and which landlords turn their heads away from. The hallways. The laundry rooms. And private but accessible spaces that remain unmonitored.

What is striking about this book is Leo's refusal to let the rape remain in the boxes and experiences she was forced into or told to have. She goes back through the steps. Through how rape is treated like an emotionless act by police. How the system puts at risk rape victims/survivors who seek to bring charges. How no one wanted to take responsibility, from fixing her building's front door lock to believing her (accurate) assumption that she would see the rapist again in her own building. The entire experience of being raped and attempting to work with the legal system after a rape can be one of powerlessness. That is a necessary component to comprehend in order to understand the power of this book.

When violence occurs, it is a series of seemingly small windows entered. The afternoon trip to the grocery store. The too heavy bags. The seconds it took the gunman to be in her door. The interaction in which author sat in her own apartment, negotiating the threat of this man in an attempt to save her life.

But the reality is that the causes and effects reach out so much farther than just those actions. What allowed for them? What occurred for them to happen? And this reality is then mirrored back in the aftermath of a crime. Where is blame placed? Where is responsibility avoided? What is treated as an isolated experience -- both in relationship to patterns of a city and the long ranging effect the crime has upon the victim/survivors life?

Prior to the book's publication, Leo hosted an exhibit of her various police files, legal documents and crime scene photos. She took this material meant to be for dry analysis and presented it in a form that could be experienced as art. But rather than keeping it removed, other, something people could peer into without responsibility of interaction, she was present at the exhibit. Those requesting certain boxes of documents requested them from her. She was in control and a present force among those examining her experience. There was no space for it to be made impersonal for those who wanted merely to peer into the experience.

Rape New York is another iteration of that practice. It examines the crime from all sides. From the personal, to the legal, to the communal, and the relationships that surround it, and the environments and policies that allowed for it to occur. As anyone who votes, or pays taxes or lives in a community with others, there is no way to be removed from the examination.

What Rape New York does is to take the very personal experience of rape and holds it up as an intimate horror. But it goes out from there, into the larger realities around rape, and the many factors that makes the existence of rape anything but a purely personal trauma. How do we as a society talk about these things? How do we think about them and change our cities, communities and policies so that such violence does not remain such a common experience for women?

The answers to those questions are complex beyond one blog post or one book. But Jana Leo's Rape New York pushes us all in the right direction. In the direction we need to head in order to look, clear-eyed and honestly, into the reality of how we deal with crime. Leo's book is a heartbreaking and intense personal expression. But it is also a strong and clear call to us all to figure out how we can change our communities to truly be safer. And to not so easily turn our heads away from the crimes we don't see or want to acknowledge.

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