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## June 2011

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#### **Rape New York by Jana Leo**



Janet Leo's narrative begins with a stranger holding a gun in the doorway of her apartment. He is most certainly unwelcome, yet he didn't force his way onto the threshold between the outside world and Leo's private space. The locks to the front door of her building were broken, and so Leo's rapist walked right in.

Part memoir, part sociological investigation, *Rape New York* is the story of Janet Leo's rape and its aftermath. Yet the most compelling character in this amalgamation of the deeply personal and the keenly analytical is the city of New York, or more specifically, its empty, undefined spaces.

Leo uses an artist's eye for detail and the terse prose of an academic to provide a harrowing account of being raped on her own bed in her Harlem apartment. Through the brevity and simplicity of her description, she makes clear that it was precisely the banality of the circumstances surrounding her rape that made it so brutal: how could something so abnormal, so random, so damaging, occur within the context of the everyday?

It bears repeating that rape doesn't happen because a woman dressed provocatively or drank too much, or because a man just couldn't help himself. Rape happens, as it did to Janet Leo, because she momentarily left her apartment door ajar while putting her groceries down in the kitchen, and a man followed her inside. Rape happens when thresholds of personal and physical space are crossed, and the reasons for this transgression are far more complex than short skirts and guys looking to get laid.

Leo never goes back to the incident directly after the initial description. Her book comes at a time when insulting questions about rape (Was it "rape" rape? Was she asking for it? Is the victim reliable? What does she stand to gain from fabricating a rape story?) seem to be at the forefront of public consciousness, and Leo's narrative, at its most basic level, is a raw and searing reminder that rape is not just personal. She illustrates how the politics of space are negotiated on a site that has long been a place of appropriation and conquest: a woman's body.

And this, the why of rape, is what Janet Leo's story is truly about. Her narrative winds from the faulty locks on the front door of her apartment and the dynamics of gentrification playing out in her neighborhood to encompass the ways space is coveted, claimed, bought and sold throughout New York. Though Leo's book is driven by the story of her rape, it is the red tape and bureaucracy of police reports, investigations and a lawsuit against her

negligent landlord that transform her narrative into something much larger than her own story.

With writing that is both contained and effusive, Leo seamlessly transitions between a visceral, experiential understanding of rape to the probing intellectual analysis of an academic. Months after the incident, she describes seeing her assailant in a nearby grocery store, then again on the landing of her apartment building. She loses all sense of home and security, and those in a position to help don't offer consistent protection or do much to dispel her sense of vulnerability. Then she zooms out from her personal story and shifts focus to borders and boundaries, and the way that people, especially criminals, avoid crossing them in order to avoid being seen. It is the juxtaposition of the personal and the political -- and the notion that they are really one and the same -- that gives Leo's story incredible impact.

Part of what makes Leo's voice so distinctive is her ability to float across boundaries of power. As a foreigner educated in the U.S., Leo is able to view her situation with both the perspective of an outsider and the intimate knowledge of an insider. She makes bold statements about the power dynamics of American society that others may shy away from or not be aware of: that a rape on the upper East side matters more than one in Harlem, and that the American dream has sacrificed equality for profit. Leo straddles many boundaries, at once possessing the privilege of a prestigious education from Princeton yet lacking the financial capital to move to an area where locked doors are a guarantee. She acknowledges that she is the exception and not the rule to rape in Harlem, and accurately portrays both a world in which people are institutionally shut out from access to power and a parallel universe where power is not earned but entitled.

The acknowledgement that rape is traumatic and damaging is where the story begins, not ends. Leo refuses to settle for facile answers and is uncompromising about determining what rape means, not just for the victim, but also for everyone functioning within a system where violation is not just a possibility, but part of what keeps an economic apparatus based on power intact. Eventually, readers come to see themselves the way Leo saw herself: as pawns among many players vying for space on an urban chessboard governed by money and power.

That silence is institutionalized and corruption is normalized in order to keep existing power structures in place is not a novel idea. Yet the way Leo arrives at this conclusion is. By weaving her personal narrative with the story of a city, Leo manages to make herself her own case study. This not only proves to be a revealing tactic, but also a brave one. She takes a mental scalpel to her experience and does an autopsy on her emotional self. Both the city and her body are vulnerable, and she unpacks the idea with clarity, honesty, and ultimately, truth.

Eventually, Leo regains her footing and her voice, and both her struggles and victories are felt deeply by the reader. Leo never lets readers forget that at the end of the day, she's still dealing with a very personal, and ultimately private battle. Ultimately, she forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths, and recognize their own complicity. Though traumatic, we still can't look away.

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