

Book Reviews



Andrew Smiler, *Challenging Casanova: Beyond the Stereotype of the Promiscuous Young Male*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012.

I liked *Challenging Casanova*, even if Smiler's arguments did not satisfy my curiosity. I appreciate his keen eye in noticing how we leave men and their sexuality to their own devices, and his steadfastness in collecting numbers and opinions about men. His discussion for parents was helpful, and his awareness and concern for the harm we cause young men by reinforcing male stereotypes comes through clearly. I also appreciate his dividing men into different groups (Casanovas, emos, romantics, etc.) to sort male behavior into a few different temperaments, and I could not help but listen to his statistics with interest and compare myself to them. At the end, I was left encouraged that, according to Smiler's statistics, there are many men who wanted to love someone and settle down.

Sometimes, however, the book read like a collection of random statistics, with the story of the argument left to squeeze in whenever the chance was appropriate. Smiler's primary method of "challenging" the famous seducer was to ask young men what they wanted, as well as compile an impressive array of data to show that most young men do not want to be like Casanova. Unfortunately, surveys are not always the best ways of finding out what somebody wants, certainly not their deepest desires. That comes from watching how people act, given the opportunity. One of Smiler's questions, for instance, asked men how many partners they would like to have in the next month. While their answer was relatively low, it misses the point, which the author hints at from the first pages of the introduction to his book. While most men do not try to sleep with countless women, they wish they

could. While men may only want one or two partners for the immediate future, is that because they prefer only one or two partners, or because the work and desirability required to attract more women just are not worth it or even attainable for most men? This is why men like Tiger Woods (whom Smiler frequently mentions) engage their desires with multiple women. Meanwhile, if Tiger were asked about what he would like in a partner, he would probably give somewhat similar answers to the rest of the men surveyed.

This is, I think, one of the fundamental problems of Smiler's argument: he does not pay much attention to what makes the "Casanovas" different. Sure, he mentions statistics about them (like their higher likeliness of being sexist or having sex when they are younger), but he does not seem to challenge the assumption that "rock stars" (whom he only briefly mentions) and other celebrities who do sleep with countless women are no different than other men in their sexual desires. They just have better access to women and are able to live out their desires. It does not even necessarily mean they do not want a woman to marry or settle down with. Even the famous womanizer, Russell Brand, got married young.

While Smiler notes the love the media and culture pay to these Casanovas, he does not seem interested in answering why the media are this way. If being a Casanova is as undesirable as the author suggests (he argues it is undesirable primarily because of increased risk of health risks and possible pregnancy), why do the media value it to such an great extent? Why have the biceps of GI Joe increased over the years since its release? Why does our music talk more about sex than it used to? These fascinating psychological questions are pretty much ignored by the author, despite his awareness of the statistics that support these facts.

While he mentions the popularity of Casanovas like Barney in the television show "How I Met Your Mother," he ignores the fact that Barney ends up marrying one woman and living happily with her. Shows like "Californication" address the Casanova dilemma as well: no matter how many women the smarmy Hank Moody sleeps with, he is not able to stop loving the mother of his daughter. Chuck Bass in "Gossip Girl" is the same. Even Vincent Chase of HBO's "Entourage" ends an 8-season show full of sex and drugs by settling down with one woman. The theme often seems to stem from the idea of woman as a tamer of man, that when these Lotharios find the woman for them they can finally settle down and raise a family, if their personal demons do not prevent it from happening. This evidence all supports Smiler's argument that men ultimately want to settle down, but he seems more concerned with observing how culture disagrees with him to notice that, ultimately, the idea of some sort of "soul mate" is pervasive in American and Western culture. I would love to know how he views this idea in relation to his research.

This is the distinction I am trying to make: celebrities and other famous womanizers have women lining up for them in spades. Average Joe does not have that temptation nearly as much, and he knows that to sleep around with such attractive women is effectively out of his reach. Does that mean that most men do not highly desire sex with many women? Not at all. I think, more likely, a man capable of getting lots of sex easily will be much more tempted to do just that and likely succumb to the temptation. Casanova seriously considered settling down with one woman as he grew older and thought he could not attract women anymore. It becomes a battle of incentives: to marry or not to marry. As the incentives for men to marry decline, the temptation to sleep around becomes more

prominent. This manifests itself as an increase in Casanova-like behavior, and the subtle mainstream message that a man just needs to find the right woman remains. Unfortunately, Smiler's data do not tell us anything about the desirability of a man to women, which means we have no way of knowing if his Casanovas embody traits that women just find more attractive in general.

This brings up another gap in Smiler's data. While he makes brief mention of the popularity of romance novels and the stereotypical nature of their stories, he does not go on further to tell us about what women are like or what they desire in men. This misses a huge part of the topic of men's proclivities, which are logically driven by women as much as women's proclivities are driven by men. As he mentions in chapter 11, if men and women are at war, then why are they sleeping together? This particularly frustrated me towards the end of the book, where he mentions the difference in views towards women who sleep around (sluts) from men who sleep around (players). He gives it only a page or two, mentioning the double standard but pretending it has nothing to do with the relative difficulty for men to obtain sex relative to women. He ignores another very simple explanation for this: women criticize other women for "looseness" as much if not more than men do, because it makes it harder for other women to draw out commitment from men. I was chatting with a couple of 20-something girls recently when a Taylor Swift song came on the radio. "She's a slut!" they responded when I asked their opinion of her. Apparently she sees too many guys. But I had been referring to her music, not her personality. Why does it matter? I wish Smiler had taken more time to explore this.

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