

Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children, by Joe S. McIlhaney, MD, and Freda McKissic Bush, MD, Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008, 176 pp., \$17.99 hardbound.

Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus, by Kathleen A. Bogle, New York: New York University Press, 2008, 223 pp., \$17.95 paperback.

Sex & the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses, by Donna Freitas, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 298 pp., \$24.95 hardbound.

Hookup Ink

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When I critiqued the hookup culture back in 1999, and was

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summarily dismissed as a prude by my elders, it would have been an enormous comfort to know that less than ten years later my “prudish” position would be considered cutting-edge. But today there is little satisfaction in being buried under the avalanche of recent books like *Unhooked* (Riverhead, 2007) and *Unhooked Generation* (Hyperion, 2006), which have put the misery of postmodern sexual (non)intimacy utterly beyond dispute, and on the shelf. Even *The Hookup Handbook* (Pocket Books, 2005), billed as a chipper “Single Girl’s Guide to Living It Up,” can hardly be said to reflect living, much less “living it up.” The gem of this opus is a sample “hookup contract”—not with prospective partners who will soon be gone, mind you—but with the lady herself. One is encouraged to intone such self-brainwashing mantras as “I will resist the urge to mentally combine my first name with a hookup’s last name ‘just to see how it sounds,’” “I will not drunkenly dial him,” and “I will not wait in obsessive agony for him to call me.” This last point is evidently a sore one, as it requires repetition and later, a blanket prohibition on “me waiting for the f-king phone to f-king ring.” Since the *Handbook* is

intended as a bouncy, pro-hookup guide, it makes it all the more poignant when we detect that kernel of disappointment: the f–king men are not picking up their f–king phones.

Where to go from here? Three new books offer up three distinct answers.

Dr. Joe McIlhaney of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, with Dr. Freda McKissic Bush, claims that science has the answer. For too long, they write, “abstinence culminating in a lifelong committed relationship... has long been perceived as a religious position rather than a suggested course of action based on scientific reality.” These two ob-gyns aim to change this with *Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children*, which provides a wealth of neuroscientific evidence to bolster their claim that “humans are the healthiest and happiest when they engage in sex only with the one who is their mate for a lifetime.”

To that end, *Hooked* shares facts a-plenty with the reader, from the bonding role of oxytocin in ladies and vasopressin in gents, to the way that synapses governing sexual restraint actually deteriorate after sex, leading to the desire for—you guessed it—more sex. This explains why adolescent females who begin

sexual activity at age fifteen to nineteen will have, on average, over seven sexual partners during their lives (even if the experiences are quite bad), while those who maintain their virginity until age twenty-one will average two sexual partners during their lifetime. Since having fewer partners is associated with a greater ability to connect and, ultimately, a more fulfilling marriage, and since there are now more than twenty-five sexually transmitted diseases infecting one in four adolescents—in the 1960s, it was one in fifty—the message of restraint certainly has its appeal.¹

But is science alone equal to the task? *Hooked* will be most appreciated by those who agree with its conclusions—the cohort already familiar with much of the data the authors cite (that sexually active teenage girls are three times as likely to report depression, or that cohabiting couples who later marry face a greater chance of divorce, for example). Unhappily, those for whom this material is new probably won’t read the book.

These individuals may not be able to name the brain chemicals released

¹See Joe S. McIlhaney, MD, and Freda McKissic Bush, MD, *Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008), 115, fn. 19, 20.

by the sex act, the dopamine reward, or terms like “adolescent brain molding,” but they know all too well that sex can “set off a train reaction with profound consequences,” emotional and otherwise. The majority of sexually active young people say they wish they had postponed having sex, and I’ll bet they know, too, how sex can attach you to the wrong person. And yet they do it anyway. There, perhaps, is the problem: Are these life-determining decisions always made with the prefrontal cortex, or are they made in the amygdala, which processes fear? In this case, fear of being alone has a way of trumping all cost-benefit analysis.

The authors are to be commended for assembling all this recent fascinating research on sex and the brain, and *Hooked* will undoubtedly prove an invaluable resource for those who work with young people (particularly those who cry, “Give me a reason to say no that has nothing to do with religion!”). But it may be overly optimistic to hope that better science alone can reverse societal damage; it assumes that human beings are rational actors pursuing relationships—and giving advice—in accordance with the latest studies. Unfortunately, they rarely do. There is a very wide gap between science and conventional wisdom, particularly when it comes to sexuality. To change

things requires not merely more science, but understanding why the evidence we already have is not being absorbed by those dispensing advice. The intelligentsia continues to believe what it wishes to believe.

An excellent specimen of this tendency is *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*, by Professor Kathleen Bogle. Intended as the first comprehensive academic study of “the way that college students get together to engage in sexual activity,” Bogle interviewed seventy-six students from two universities: a large state university on the East Coast and a smaller Roman Catholic institution in the Northeast. Unfortunately for the reader, the book that rises from the ashes of these interviews seems penned by an alien who cannot comprehend the most basic Earthling mating rituals:

Two issues must be considered here. One is: How does someone select a potential hookup partner? The other is: Once a potential partner is identified, what needs to occur to facilitate the first sexually intimate encounter? With regard to the first issue, attraction is the central issue. Students across the board seemed to favor the idea that initial attraction is the trigger to

a potential hookup that evening...Once a desirable partner is identified, it is necessary to find out if the feeling is mutual. Ascertaining whether someone is interested in a sexual encounter is an important aspect of the hookup script...In this regard, students said that eye contact was important...

Now, it is no small feat to take a salacious subject and make the reader want to doze off immediately, but as a sociologist at La Salle University in Philadelphia, Professor Bogle aims for objectivity above all. She even suggests that those who take a “moralistic tone” in these matters are, well, morally wrong: “The [dating] script in any given period should not be analyzed for the purpose of deeming it ‘good’ or ‘bad,’” Professor Bogle chides us at the outset, “but to understand the role it plays in our lives.”

Hooking Up revolves around the convention of the same name, which, as everyone knows by now, refers to a variety of “no strings attached” encounters, from the drunken make-out session to intercourse. Despite the fact that hookups lead nowhere and are not usually enjoyable, most girls aren’t holding out for more. Even Lynn, a sophomore at the faith university, laments,

“Like if I was to tell a guy I liked him then he would get like so scared and freaked out because ‘Oh my God that means we have to be in a relationship.’” Here, “relationship” does not imply permanency, but “just something that’s more than just a couple hookups or casual sex,” in the words of one student. The majority pines “to turn hookup partners into boyfriends,” but would settle for someone “just getting to know you before anything sexual happens,” as one sad junior stated dreamily.

Bogle struggles to make sense of what the students tell her, of girls who have “fake boyfriends” and like to “pretend they’re dating” the boys with whom they have drunken casual encounters on a regular basis. There are the girls who think that “this time it might be different”—that the hookup might lead to a relationship. It rarely does. And there are those who receive a text message from their “booty call,” and immediately depart for their paramour’s dorm room, no questions asked.

Bogle recognizes that the coeds don’t particularly like this 2:00 A.M. “booty call” to come over and service one of their peers; to the contrary, they seek an emotional connection, and “the advantage of ‘friends with benefits’ for women is

that, unlike a casual hookup partner, at least the man is supposed to care about them as a friend (just not as a girlfriend).” *Any* ongoing relationship is better than a random hookup.

For their part, the men explained that “You can’t go psycho over girls, there are just too many of them out there.” (“Psycho” in this context means caring.) The female students don’t care for this attitude, but they can’t do much about it when the hookup is “the only game in town.” Pressed by Bogle to name a girl he cared about, Brian, a sophomore at the faith university says this:

I thought I liked...a chick last semester and then she just went crazy on me. Like she wanted the relationship...[for me] to be her boyfriend. She’s like: “Are you my boyfriend?” and I was like: “No.” And she was like: “All right, well we’re not hooking up unless you are my boyfriend.” I was like: “All right.” And that was the end of that.
[Laughs.]

The college men also “spoke about avoiding girls after a hookup, ‘not calling girls back,’ ‘thinking of good excuses’ to get out of spending time with them,” or for advanced players, ignoring them completely—“just [don’t] talk to them again.” Many coeds told Bogle that “it is men who

decide whether to continue seeing each other” and usually the choice is not to do so. Oddly, even Bogle seems to think that young women are wrong to hope for more; she attributes their desire for a relationship to social construction: “Another possible reason that women are more desirous of relationships than men is that women need relationships in order to protect their reputation...because of the sexual double standard.” This seems overly complicated. It never occurs to Bogle that seeking love and connection is a normal and beautiful part of being human.

Despite the fact that *Hooking Up* concludes that “many women on campus” express “frustration with the fact that hookup partners often do not initiate a relationship” and “were afraid to even raise an issue that a man might ‘not like,’” Bogle maintains that “women do have more sexual freedom today than they did in the dating era.” I suppose it all hinges on how you define freedom. She also notes that men are “free” in sense that they “do not have to put forth the amount of effort (e.g., phone calls, flowers, expensive dates, etc.) that their grandfathers did for sexual interaction to take place.” It is indeed true that everyone now is “free” to interact at the lowest standard, but for those wanting more—and whose hopes are continually

dashed—is it accurate to describe them as free?

Although we have already been informed that no social script should be deemed bad, even when it leads to tears, depression, STDs, and sexual assault, Professor Bogle nonetheless reserves a few choice words for the old dating script—or, as she prefers to call it (after Stephanie Coontz), “The Way Things Never Were.” Yes, it’s unfortunate that today’s students say virginity is “very shady” and hooking up “hurts too much,” but at least we don’t live in the 1920s, when virginity was a “treasure to be safeguarded.” For in that era women were “often left... waiting by the phone for a man’s invitation...[T]hey played a more passive role.” I wouldn’t describe the Roaring Twenties that way, but by Bogle’s own admission today’s coed waits by the phone, too—for her “booty calls” to ring up. Say what you will about our oppressed sister of yesteryear, at least she knew her caller’s last name, and the “pleasure of her company” was not sought *quite* so literally.

Bogle’s ideological suspicion of a more conservative time inexorably leads her to defend the indefensible: “Although the hookup script does not preclude two people from getting to know each other, it does not require it.” This, after nearly every

female student has complained to her, loudly and clearly, that the hookup scene actually does preclude two people from getting to know each other. She next makes the preposterous claim that the dating era “left many students sitting at home while...the hookup scene promotes a form of interaction where at least theoretically, anyone can join the party.” And some party it is. When the festivities include sleeping with someone who doesn’t care about you, being “left” at home surely has its appeal. Moreover, the hookup era hardly launched the concept of group socializing. Many social activities, mixers, and volunteer opportunities existed long before the hookup era; they just didn’t involve the exchange of bodily fluids.

But this charming tour down memory lane is not merely to smell the poppies. Bogle has a polemical purpose. She cannot pretend that hooking up is actually working for young women today, but she can make it seem an improvement by flinging mud at the past. Yes, the sexes took the time to get to know one another and yes, young men used to bring their dates flowers, candy, and the like, but beneath this floral, sugary cake of custom lay something downright sinister: “men had the power to ask women out...

men had the power to decide when and where the date would take place.” So women in the 1920s and 1930s never flirted with a man to prompt an invitation? No woman was ever consulted about when and where their date would take place? We are to believe that these men, raised in the era of manners and good breeding, would merely bark at a woman: “You—over there. You’re having ice cream with me at 6:00 P.M. and that’s final!” I am fairly skeptical of this historical revisionism. It was precisely due to modesty—and the social support for a woman’s power of refusal—which meant it was more often the men who were scared to raise an issue that a woman wouldn’t like.

It is no doubt true, as Bogle points out, that today’s college student tends to assume others are hooking up far more often and going further than they are in their own encounters. And yet, even if half of these cases are “only” oral sex, or if girls are “only” kissing other girls to get the attention of the frat boys, by the students’ own testimony we know that these experiences are not usually tolerable without alcohol. Without alcohol, one girl explains, she might think back and say “Ewww, why did I do that?” But if “I don’t really remember exactly how it got to that point,” the “eww” factor is reduced. Bogle is impressed that “[i]n some cases, a

specific woman would be asked to stay sober for the evening to make sure ‘nothing bad happened’ to any of her friends who were drinking.” The thick roster of sexual assault cases that appears the next morning, as this sober monitor safely sips a cappuccino, testifies to the efficacy of this arrangement.

In *Hooking Up*, Bogle wrests quotes from her students but ultimately cannot allow herself to experience the pressure they feel. She never humanizes her subjects beyond “Marie, senior,” which explains why, perhaps, she is so befuddled by the persistence of romantic hope and the search for marriage partners:

After college, nobody is watching anymore. The post-college environment is no longer conducive to keeping abreast of the “private” lives of hundreds of people. Therefore, with their reputations no longer at stake, it would be logical for women to feel free to “let loose” sexually after college. Yet the opposite is true....If women’s reputations are not on line, why does sexual behavior become more conservative after college?

Bogle twists herself in knots attempting to answer this conundrum, and

posits that a “sexual double standard after college” exists in which “sexual behavior is being evaluated by the two individuals on the date, rather than by the group”—to which the only appropriate response is: *Huh?* Not being a sociologist, I have a far simpler explanation: Women are indeed “letting loose” after college—but they are giving free reign to their romantic hopes, which were repressed to fit among the campus herd.

Bogle mentions social changes in passing, but vastly discounts the impact of ideology in reinforcing a part of campus life that produces so much misery. Bogle reminds us that “not only ‘bad’ girls like sex,” but her lesson comes about forty years too late; her interviewees report being labeled “bad” for their *inexperience*. Yes, girls, too, experience profound feeling, but they still need the space to wait for the right time and person to come along. It is the ideological attack on modesty as repression and a “hang-up,” the delegitimizing of all reticence as “passivity”—something Bogle herself falls prey to—that has given the hookup the monopoly it currently enjoys.

Sex & the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses, by Donna Freitas, is a refreshing break

from this quagmire of sex and ideology. Freitas creates vibrant portraits, such as pink-cheeked evangelical “Emily,” who turns out in a pale green suit and talks of “walking every day with God.” Emily surprises Freitas by blinking her big blue eyes and gushing about her “*very* healthy sex life”—until her left hand flashes a diamond ring and Freitas realizes that at twenty-one, Emily is married. At first glance, these detailed, engaging profiles may make the book seem less scholarly, but the sample is quite broad. An assistant professor of religion at Boston University, Freitas interviewed students at seven colleges and universities across the country: Catholic liberal arts schools, urban nonaffiliated private schools, state schools, and evangelical schools. After conducting an online poll in which 2,500 undergraduates participated, 111 students were randomly selected for face-to-face interviews concerning sex and spiritual life. They also chronicled their thoughts online—an original ploy to get the MySpace Generation to open up.

Professor Freitas “would have loved to hear more...stories of pleasurable sex, self-approval, and happiness with past experiences,” but she is a keen listener and notices that “[m]ost of what students talked about was negative.” Many expressed sadness that sex in the hookup culture

is “not very romantic or very loving.” Her students’ tears, and their frustration with theme parties like “CEOs and Office Ho’s,” all “made painfully clear that the hookup culture does not help young women and men discover the thrill of sexual desire or romantic passion, of falling madly in love and expressing this love sexually.” To the author’s shock, a sizable number of young women feel that men have the right to expect sex, and “many young women have been the victims of nonconsensual sexual violations... without any awareness that they were assaulted.” For example, a drunken girl who has nearly passed out might think it “disrespectful” for a guy to force her into sex acts, but she doesn’t generally consider it assault.

Who are these men? Freitas met movie star-gorgeous Aaron, who brags to his buddies about his conquests instead of talking to his hookups afterwards—which can be a “huge time commitment” and the young women might “end up liking him for real.” Twenty-year-old Tom, who is some kind of budding evolutionary psychologist, waxes theoretical: “If you’ve fertilized [women], then hanging around isn’t going to benefit you.” But nice guys abound, too. Perhaps because she involved the students in online journaling, Freitas uncovered “plenty

of men [who] expressed dismay about the sexual-predator-life-expectations for guys on their campuses.”

Freitas is most puzzled by girls like Maria and her friends, who are still hooking up despite identifying themselves as Catholic. They obsess: “Oh, I wonder if he’ll call me? Does he like me?” Even if “something more” materializes, this “usually entails nothing more than a string of consecutive hookups.” Freitas wonders why most students are failing when it comes to integrating their spirituality and emotion “into the realm of their sexual experience.” In this vein, the only shortcoming of *Sex & the Soul* is the exclusion of religious Jews and Muslims. It is not an intentional exclusion, but the randomized sampling of mainstream and Catholic universities doesn’t reel in, for example, Orthodox Jewish women at Stern College, who will only touch their husbands after they are married. Since religions differ in the amount of practical guidance they offer concerning love and relationships, it may have been relevant to ask whether more “legalistic” religious traditions produce students whose sexuality is better integrated with their spirituality.

But Freitas has other concerns. She correctly blames parents for being so achievement-oriented that they don’t

ask key questions about spirituality and romantic relationships before applying to schools: “Poor guidance, alienation, and regretful experiences in these areas can make or break a student’s college experience. It’s a mistake to ignore them—even if they may seem unorthodox topics for pre-college discussion.” Hear, hear. If parents are paying \$40,000 per year tuition for their child to attend “CEOs and Office Ho’s” parties, then let them do so knowingly:

Parents are in a frenzy over trying to get their kids admitted, and college administrators are in a frenzy over admitting the kids they want to enroll. In this process, is anyone asking the right questions about the college experience itself? Is anyone helping teens to think about what really matters and what they really want once they arrive at campus?

Freitas certainly is. Her excellent book accomplishes even more in spreading the word about regrets. The regrets of many college men after “hookup binges” prompt her to wonder: “What if these young men knew how many other male students felt this way? And what if the women knew that most guys aren’t too happy about hooking up, either?”

I have witnessed firsthand how amazed students become when they realize they are not “the only ones” who want something more than random encounters. But knowing you’re not alone only takes you so far. Consider my experience at Swarthmore College in April 2008, when a group of students brought me to campus to speak, then told me in whispers about their opposition to the biggest party of the year. I regret to inform you that it is called “GENDER F–K,” the theme being “Men Wear a Dress, Women Wear Less.” I wish I could say that the students were whispering because of the F word, but they were whispering because, even at a cost of \$45,700 for the 2007–2008 academic year, they did not feel they had the “right” to air their opposition to an event on their own campus. I thought they were exaggerating until I gave my talk—which focused on bringing back the notion of love—and was actually heckled during my speech. Afterwards, a number of students lingered to thank me and to apologize for the hecklers.

Later, on Facebook, others wrote such messages as “I am not a crazy partier and I consider myself a very strong woman, but I guess I still really needed to know that I am not alone in wanting to be authentic and

claim my boundaries” and “it was really nice to hear you say some things that I identify with, especially the fact that if someone is modest or is waiting for the right guy, it doesn’t mean that they’re uncomfortable with their body or sexuality, a prude, or repressed.” Dishearteningly, when I asked some students who had expressed similar sentiments why they did not speak during the Q & A, air their views in the campus paper, or at least express themselves to their friends, they said that they would be called “fascists” if others knew their real views. Even a sympathetic male student who was a *senior* felt it was “unwise” to open his mouth before graduation; it would be “too polarizing,” he explained to me via email.

Many Swatties, it turned out, shared regrets about campus life (three hundred students attended my talk), yet they still felt completely isolated because dissenters are literally heckled and ostracized. Consider this comment from “Dennis” in the *Swarthmore Daily Gazette* forum concerning my “unimpressive, regressive, and...offensive talk”:

To allow and conscience [*sic*] the expression of Shalit’s viewpoints as legitimate at Swarthmore, an institution that, before being academically prestigious or socially progressive, ought simply

to create for its students an atmosphere of inclusion or acceptance, cannot be other than an accession to the social silencing of marginalized groups and heteronormative, Eurocentric social norms that have always dominated and constrained discussion of sexuality. I applaud all the students who attended the lecture and made their opposition heard, in any form.

I never dreamed there could be such a fancy defense of heckling, but to students like Dennis, people with different opinions do not even have the right to be heard. This political climate of intimidation—under the guise of Quaker tolerance, of course—makes college students feel powerless to end painful college experiences.

There is but one solution: Having hosted the “Gender F–k” bash each year, Swarthmore’s administration ought to put on a Chivalry Ball (perhaps “Men Open Doors, Women Wear More” could be the theme). An honest campus debate on these issues may still be impossible, but if there were alternative social events to disrobing and hooking up, the students would definitely attend.

In ten years, we’ve gone from denial about the hookup scene to a section in the bookstore devoted to

the problem. Dare one suggest that enough ink has been spilled, and that it is now time for action? If the dear reader is not at Swarthmore and can speak freely, then let us admit that it is time for professors, administrators,

and parents to put ideology aside, band together, and begin to create viable alternatives for students. As with all monopolies, what is desperately needed is not more analysis but just a little healthy competition.