



Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town

Krakauer, Jo
Doubleday Books Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2015

Book Review

Tags: administration | sexual assault | sexual harassment

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Date Reviewed: November 30, -0001

Jon Krakauer's book on the epidemic of sexual assaults on American college campuses is hard to put down, both because it is incredibly well-written and engaging, but also because it is so alarming. For the faculty member who is already aware of the problem (either from a statistical vantage point or from hearing the experiences of survivors on her or his own campus), some of the information presented is not surprising. The scope of the issue is quite shocking, however: Missoula, home of the University of Montana, is the focus of Krakauer's case study and one gets the sense that this college town is especially unsafe. Towards the end of the book, however, Krakauer demonstrate that Missoula's rape statistics are actually typical - perhaps even lower than the national average. Even though the problem presented is horrifying, Missoula is not even the worse case scenario.

Through interviews and legal testimony, Krakauer narrates the stories of several college-aged women who were sexually assaulted while they were students. Most of the accused rapists were members of the football team, so part of the story concerns the untouchable status of campus athletic teams (or, at least, certain high-profile athletic teams). But sports are not the only unjust system implicated here: Krakauer looks unflinchingly at the ways that administrators protect colleges from litigation, often at the expense of victims. He similarly criticizes the legal system for re-traumatizing victims and for consistently doubting women's testimony when they come forward.

Krakauer's accessible explanations of technical matters are very helpful: for example, he explains the different burdens of proof that apply on- and off-campus. A college or university is required by the U.S. Department of Education to use a "preponderance of evidence" standard

as its burden of proof when adjudicating sexual assault accusations, while the criminal justice system uses the “beyond a reasonable doubt” standard (179). Thus, a rapist may be found guilty in an on-campus case and expelled, even while the same evidence might not have resulted in a guilty verdict or prison time in the state’s criminal justice system. As another example, Krakauer uses psychiatrist Judith Herman’s foundational work to explain that traumatized people often act in bewildering ways that do not make sense to the outside world (perhaps by contacting the perpetrator or by continuing to attend class after experiencing violent trauma; moreover, the memories of a traumatic experience can be confusing and non-linear). Although these behaviors seem to indicate to others that “nothing happened” or “the experience must not have been that bad,” Krakauer (via Herman) shows that these are utterly typical behaviors of a traumatized person. Trauma so reorients a person that the behaviors a person displays in the aftermath can be counterintuitive to what non-traumatized people expect.

This book should be required reading for faculty and especially for administrators who adjudicate sexual assault cases on college campuses; it would probably be useful for those in law enforcement, too. *Missoula* would also be excellent for campuses that have required first-year or campus-wide reading programs, as it forces us to consider the realities that victims face on campus and to realize that judicial systems, both on- and off-campus, can and must do better.

https://wabash.center/resources/book_reviews/missoula-rape-and-the-justice-system-in-a-college-town/