

# Not all in the garden is lovely

Something in attitudes to sex is 'off', Christine Emba tells **Sarah Meyrick**

ASK the *Washington Post* columnist Christine Emba, and she'll tell you that millennials inhabit a pretty bleak romantic landscape. Too many people are having "too much of the kind of sex that saps the spirit and makes us feel less human, not more — sex that leaves us detached, disillusioned, or just dissatisfied", she says.

She is in her early thirties, and, according to the prevailing culture for people her age, anything goes, sexually speaking — provided it's based on consent between adults. But this casual approach — and, specifically, hook-up culture — isn't making people happy. Her new book, *Rethinking Sex: A provocation*, is an attempt to try and find out what has gone wrong, and discover if there's a better way forward.

"Non-consensual sex is always wrong," she writes in the introduction. "But the inverse is tricky: Is consensual sex always right? Not necessarily. Can consensual sex be damaging to the individual, to their partners, to society? Absolutely. It's hard to look at the woes of our sexual 'marketplace' and say that we've got it figured out. Consent is a fig leaf, and it's falling off."

What motivated her to write the book? "I'm an opinion columnist," she says. "My beat is ideas and society, which kind of spans everything, but I've always been interested in social mores, ethics, and morals, and how we think about each other."

When the #MeToo movement erupted in 2017, "it showed that some of the problems that we thought might have gone away after the sexual revolution, after we've been clear on what rape is, just hadn't been solved," she says. "I thought maybe we needed to take a second look at what was going on."

Another trigger was "Cat Person", a piece of fiction published in *The New Yorker* in December 2019, about an awkward relationship between a young woman and an older man. In short, the young woman agrees to sex with the man because she can't quite face turning him down. It went viral.

"Everybody could relate to [that story], which made it clear that these encounters were so, so common. [Yet] we were supposed to be sex positive; things were supposed to be liberated and great," Ms Emba says. "It was all so much worse than what we had been promised, hearing those stories from people my age, from friends, from all of the women around me, who were saying, 'Oh, of course, this is what dating is like. It happened to me, too.'"

Her approach is informed by her beliefs. "My parents are Nigerian, and really devout. And then, in college, I think for many young people, you sort of have to make a decision."

The Evangelical tradition that she grew up with proved unsatisfying. "There were sorts of prescriptions, but they didn't necessarily have a very visible theological background. You know: 'Don't have sex.' OK, but why?"

"I converted to Catholicism in college, in part because it was beautiful to me. But, also, there was a longstanding tradition of thinking aloud, philosophically and theologically, about how to ask these questions. There's just a whole body of Catholic thought that was really appealing..."

"The question [for me] is simply: What do we owe to each other? What does it look like to be moral? To be good? That was a really intriguing way to think about sex. In our popular culture, those are questions that just aren't asked very much, or thought about out loud. What does it mean to be good? How do we relate to each other to a higher standard, not just a legal standard?"



Unlike the average American millennial, whose sexual debut is at the age of 17, "I came on stage more than a decade later than that: I was saving myself for marriage." This was the cause of bewilderment among her friends. "[But] what I heard again and again was a contradiction. Having sex was a marker of adulthood and way to define yourself — but also, the act itself didn't really matter."

"Good sex was the consummate experience — but a relationship with your partner was not to be expected. It was nearly impossible not to indulge your desires, and extended celibacy was a state near unto death — yet I could and did say no, and was clearly still alive."

She didn't wait for marriage, in the end. "I held on to my abstinence for a while and then let it go," she writes. "I stayed Catholic, but sex went from something longed for and maybe slightly feared to something far more down-to-earth."

MS EMBA interviewed a range of people to find out how common the dissatisfaction with modern dating was. "[Women] were having sex not because they really wanted to, or really enjoyed it, but because they felt they should."

"Mastering attachment-free sex was necessary in order to be liberated and urbane, to experience the truest form of pleasure, and to solidify their detachment — and also have something to tell their friends."

For anyone outside the dating scene that she inhabits, one example may shed light. A woman she calls Madeline spoke about her use of Tinder, one of the most popular apps for hook-ups. "I was texting a guy on Tinder, and then I was just like: 'Do you want to come over?'" Madeline told Ms Emba. "I remember text-

ing my friends and saying I ordered a man on Tinder for delivery!"

This, Ms Emba says, is both typical and problematic. "Our wholesale adoption of Tinder and its fellow apps are the culmination of this mindset, the prime example of capitalism invading our theoretically privately chosen practices of sex and dating," she writes.

"Madeline's description of her hook-up as a 'delivery' wasn't an entirely personal choice; the app explicitly portrayed him as one product among many to choose from, and the advertised choice to swipe right on him was an express on of sex-positivity and personal empowerment."

Aside from the commodification of sex, another problem with hook-up culture is that such sexual encounters take place without any context. Counter-cultural it may be to suggest that a sexual encounter between two consenting adults is anyone's business but their own, but this removes an important layer of accountability. "It's not necessarily always for the best that sex should be private," she says.

"In the past, if you were meeting someone, say through your friends, or your parents, or your church, you had to behave in a certain way, because you knew that if you acted terribly on this date with somebody, they might tell their parents or their friends, and then it would be very embarrassing."

Now, there's little to prevent people from behaving badly. "You know, sending a picture of their genitals, or ghosting you, because, like, who are you going to tell? Who are they responsible to?"

The book's subtitle — *A provocation* — is not intended to sound angry, she says, but to provoke people into questioning their behaviour. "I was writing for people like myself: people who are

existing in this sexual culture and thinking that they're crazy for feeling that something is 'off'.

"But, now that the book has come out, seeing who's responding to it, I have gotten so much feedback from young men and women who are like, 'Oh, I hadn't thought about it this way.'"

Parents, too, have read it and have been "kind of horrified" by the picture that she paints. "They want ways to enter into the conversation with their kids or their grandkids or young people they know; so I think it's been useful there, too."

Sex education in the United States is more about "the mechanics" than the ethics of sex. "In college is where many people begin to think about sex, and have sex with each other unchaperoned; much of it is talked about through the lens of consent, which I argue in the book is sort of a legal criterion, but not really an ethical one." Consent is a useful floor, but not a great ceiling.

"One of the things that people I interviewed for this book told me most frequently was that they wish that they had learned how to think about these questions earlier. You know, they wish that they had learned or been taught, or had the opportunity to discuss, what relationships should look like, like what a sexual encounter should be — apart from consensual and non-criminal, or safe in a physical sense."

Does she think that churches have a part to play here? "I think it's actually a conversation that should be had on multiple levels in multiple different groups," she says. It should start in the family. "Ideally, that would be the kind of a space where you could continue to work out the question, as children get older."

In the Evangelical tradition, "there are conversations about sex that aren't really conversations about sex," she says. "And that actually makes it harder, I think, for young people to ask questions. And, of course, a church setting is where you can really bring in moral questions and ethical questions. That would be the place where it makes kind of the most sense to discuss, OK, what does it look like to be good? What are our standards? What is the moral way to go about doing this? How does this align with our faith? In a way that's really open."

So, what conclusions has she come to? "What began as an academic question became a personal one," she says. Writing the book "really forced me to think about what I actually thought about sex. Like many of the people around me, had I ever really sat down and asked myself what I thought that sex meant, what was shaping my behaviour?"

It was a matter of resolving the tension between two competing narratives: purity culture, which treats sex as dangerous; and modern secular culture, which suggests that it doesn't mean anything ("it's just a physical thing . . . like shaking hands, but kind of riskier").

She finds her answer in Aristotle, via St Thomas Aquinas. "I propose as a kind of higher standard, to reach for this idea of willing good for the other person," she says.

"And then, in the final chapter of the book, I talk about the idea of reclaiming the pause; an idea that prudence and temperance are not actually bad things, and may, in fact, be great things at times."

"I think, having thought so much about sex and heard so much about how it has hurt people, and how the decisions that we make can have ramifications that we don't anticipate, I've become much more open to that idea of reclaiming that pause. And not going along with the pressure of the culture."

"I have a much, much firmer idea of, 'OK, that is actively not correct.' I feel more empowered myself to not go along with things."

*Rethinking Sex: A provocation* by Christine Emba is published in the United States by Sentinel ([penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)); 978-0-593-087656-5.



What does it look like to be good? What are our standards?