

**Fiennes, Natalie. *Behind Closed Doors: Sex Education Transformed*. London, Pluto Press, 2019.**

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1        Approximately 25% of relationships in the UK begin online, but for same-sex couples, the percentage is nearly three times higher, around 70% (Fiennes 137-138). At the same time, more and more people are putting off sex and relationships, making today's young people "the oldest virgins on record" (Fiennes 82). In *Behind Closed Doors: Sex Education Transformed* (2019), Natalie Fiennes explores this evolving landscape around sex, sexuality, and dating, as well as the ways in which we learn about and discuss these topics. Divided into chapters on sex, gender, (hyper)masculinity, body image, sexual consent, contraceptives, virginity, sexual violence, sexuality, pornography, sex work, and dating, this text offers its readers a number of useful entry points into a wide range of topics that Fiennes argues ought to play a larger role in sex education.

2        With several direct references to Moira Weigel's *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating* (2016), which examines the institution of dating in the United States, *Behind Closed Doors* similarly historicizes discourse around relationships and sex while reframing the field through a contemporary lens. Even Fiennes's archive is contemporary, drawing from a number of personal testimonies, online articles, and tweets. While curating a global archive, the author focuses her attention on the climate of sex education in the UK, specifically. And although the author identifies her audience as one that might be "considered beyond the age where sex education is needed" (148) her work reveals a number of gaps and misconceptions that remain prominent in discourses around sex and gender, which *Behind Closed Doors* works to fill in and correct.

3        One of the strengths of this work is the intersectional approach through which Fiennes addresses concerns facing more marginalized populations, whom schools and religious institutions tend to overlook in more traditional sex education curriculum. With reference to the growing number of articles commenting on "the trans issue" (25), for example, Fiennes writes that many journalists have framed this subject poorly, without properly understanding how transitioning works. "You can't pick up a gender in the morning like you would a pair of socks or shoes" (28), she writes, echoing a similar claim made by Judith Butler in a 1992 interview (see Kotz), although Fiennes presents these ideas using far less academic jargon. Even those new to feminist and queer theory will find *Behind Closed Doors* approachable and engaging. With a clear articulation of

gender's fluidity, Fiennes then critiques the ways in which transgender women are still often portrayed as a threat to cisgender women, identifying the misogyny and transphobia rooted in the stereotypes propagated by the media. "Whose safety have we prioritised?" she asks, "[r]ather than pushing the interests of cis people to the front and centre, let's ask another question: how does society pose a threat to trans people?" (31). This reframing seems particularly relevant in the wake of J.K. Rowling's transphobic tweets from earlier this year—tweets which repeat much of the same problematic rhetoric that Fiennes identifies here.

4 At only 152 pages, *Behind Closed Doors* covers an incredibly wide breadth of topics and would, accordingly, be a useful text in any introductory-level course in Women's and Gender Studies. Of course, as such a compact volume, this text cannot always provide the subjects it introduces readers to with the level of nuanced scholarship that a longer project would allow. Fiennes, herself, notes this limitation in being unable to address and explore every facet of her study that is *worth* studying, stating that certain topics and problems that she has identified deserve far more attention "than one short chapter written on the subject" (128) can provide.

5 With this caveat in mind, *Behind Closed Doors* functions best as a series of entry points to a wider array of discourses; examined in this light, the work succeeds brilliantly. Each chapter offers a useful framework for readers to extend the analyses that Fiennes has begun. In the case of a perhaps too-cursory claim around social media's positive impact on issues around body image, for instance, Fiennes's larger conclusion—that beauty ideals are set by those in power, signifying those in power (55)—provides a clear method for how readers might further engage with the cultural messages they will continue to encounter around sex, gender, and beauty standards. Unique interventions like this appear in every chapter. In her chapter on hypermasculinity (or masculinity in excess), for example, Fiennes highlights the negative impacts of this ongoing phenomenon by tracing these attitudes to present-day world leaders (36). And in addressing the topic of sexual consent, Fiennes suggests that the BDSM community's practice of open dialogue might benefit a more general discussion (69). In each case of discursive reframing, the author offers readers something new to add to their critical toolkits.

6 These new frameworks for navigating the history that has led us to our current practices around sex education are paired with innovative insights from Fiennes, who is herself both an educator and a journalist. Reflecting on this work, she writes, "[t]here's much more to sex than

putting condoms on bananas” (149). And although that is where many of us may have begun, Fiennes reminds us that this is *only* a beginning: “[S]ex education must be lifelong” (149).

### **Works Cited**

Kotz, Liz. “The Body You Want: An Interview with Judith Butler.” *Artforum*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1992, pp. 82–89.

Weigel, Moira. *Labor of Love: The Invention of Dating*. Macmillan, 2016.