

Women's bodies as capital

Laurie Penny's essays say women will gain power by saying, "No!" in all spheres

Marieke Bivar

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a review of

Meat Market: Female Flesh under Capitalism by Laurie Penny. Zero Books, 2011, 68 pp., \$12.95

"Contemporary pseudo-feminism is all about the power of yes. Yes, we want shoes, orgasms and menial office work. Yes, we want chocolate, snuggles, and straight hair. Yes, we will do all the dirty little jobs nobody else wants to do, yes, we will mop and sweep and photocopy and do the shopping and plan the meals and organise the parties and wipe up all the shit and the dirt and grin and strip and perform and straighten our backs and smile and say yes, again yes, we will do it all."

—from *Meat Market*

Laurie Penny is a UK-based author and journalist who blogs at **Penny Red** about various aspects of social justice with a strong focus on feminism, all by way of pop culture and other issues, which she manages to skillfully interweave into her writings.

Meat Market was Penny's first book of essays and has since been followed by *Cyber-sexism* (Bloomsbury 2013) and *Unspeakable Things* (Bloomsbury 2014). Her prodigious writing skills and uniquely clear voice have critics calling her everything from "ridiculously precocious" to "a respected commentator."

Published when Penny was 24, *Meat Market* is a rich collection of essays on the way capitalism affects women's experiences and perspectives when it comes to the body. The essays seek to show how "modern economies rely for their very survival upon women's paid and unpaid labour, purchasing power and reproductive capacity." This reliance breeds and maintains a deep fear and hatred of female power which affects women in a variety of ways.

The essays are arranged into chapters with specific themes, beginning with a breakdown of the dizzying contradictions hurled at women from every direction when it comes to modern sexuality. Penny argues that while on the one hand women are expected to reflect beauty standards set by the advertising and porn industries, they are also being closely monitored and attacked by proponents of a "reanimated puritanism."

The combined pressures of this reduce women to walking a tightrope between participating in "a culture of monetised, deodorised sexual transaction in the name of 'choice' and 'empowerment'" and avoiding becoming the subject of one of those "hand-wringing tabloid articles about teenage pregnancy...accompanied by model-pose photos of furiously smoking young women pushing prams around sink estates and scowling."

Penny's ability to nuance her position on contentious issues like prostitution and transgender politics are a welcome breath of fresh air in the swamp of feminist polemics. This allows her to explore, in such sections as "A note on whores and whorishness," the polemics themselves, leading to other discussions and reflections on the roots of the sexual and economic exploitation of sex workers denounced by both sides of the argument.

Although this might be seen as a way of ducking the issue, Penny goes on to address the class divisions that have led to the "glamorisation of bourgeois prostitution" in such shows as *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, and to the

conclusion that “under late capitalism, all female sexuality is work.” How Penny manages to do all this while still addressing the shame and sexual violence experienced by sex workers and giving space to both abolitionists and sex-worker’s rights activists’ voices is further proof of her intellectual strength and the importance of her voice.

In her other, no less interesting essays, she talks about eating disorders, gender identity, the division (or imbalance) of domestic labour in modern households, and the impact of capitalism on women’s lives. Her clarity of voice and ability to present these issues in an engaging and radical way make her an essential part of a new dialogue on feminist discourse that attempts to break free of the tug of war between second and third wave factions and present some new ground to stand on.

Penny writes: “Only by remembering how to say ‘no’ will the women of the 21st century regain their voice and remember their power...No, we will not settle for the dirty work, the low-paid work, the unpaid work. No, we will not stay late at the office, look after the kids, sort out the shopping. We refuse to fit the enormity of our passion, our creativity, and our potential into the rigid physical prison laid down for us since we were small children. No. We refuse.”

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