

### **A Dirty Word Book Club Discussion Guide**

1. Have any of the issues described in *A Dirty Word*—concerns over low libido or painful sex, sexualization or sexual violence perpetrated by others, poor body image, infertility, parenting fears, inadequate sex ed—ever affected your life in any way? If so, how?

2. What evidence does the author use to support the book's ideas? Was this evidence sufficient to make you think deeper about the issues at hand, or to reconsider long-held beliefs? If not, what, for you, is missing from the author's argument?

3. What kind of language does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate, or is it passionate and earnest? Does the author appear biased... inflammatory... sarcastic? Does the language the author uses help or undercut her premise?

4. In all of the ground that is covered in *A Dirty Word*, what are the implications for the future?

5. What solutions, if any, does the author propose for issues such as rape culture and the uneven application of comprehensive sexuality education? Do you think the possibility for change exists? If so, what might that change look like?

6. How controversial are the issues raised in *A Dirty Word*? What is it that makes some of these discussion points so controversial?

7. Which passages surprised you the most? Which passages make you angry or exasperated or sad? Which made you laugh?

8. What have you learned after reading *A Dirty Word*? Has it broadened your perspective about rape culture or sexuality education or women's health in general?

## Q+A with Author Steph Auteri

**1. Thanks to the #MeToo Movement, the media is rife with stories that acknowledge the reality of the forced sexualization women have been living with for years. Is *A Dirty Word* your #MeToo story?**

I began writing *A Dirty Word* about a decade ago. At the time, the #MeToo Movement didn't yet exist as it does today. And in fact, the story I was telling didn't look outward at these deeply ingrained societal issues as much as it looked inward, at all the ways in which I felt sexually broken, and the shame I felt because of that brokenness.

The book morphed over time, however, and I suppose it is my own big, fat #MeToo. But it's more than just that. It's also an exploration of the many ways in which our culture co-opts female sexuality for its own needs—beyond just sexual violence—and of the ways in which this leaves many women feeling less than. By the end, I look to the future—to what all of this means for my young daughter... and for women everywhere.

**2. This book is built around your personal story. Were you worried about what friends and family members might think when they read it?**

On the one hand...yes. Though I've been writing my story for years, for a number of media outlets, it somehow feels easier telling my story to complete strangers versus those I'm closest to. I'm nervous about the reactions I'll get. After all, these aren't random internet commenters. These are the people who are closest to me.

On the other hand, isn't that why I wrote this book in the first place? Because I want to shatter the silence around a topic many consider taboo? Because I want our culture to stop treating sex—and female

sexuality in particular—like a dirty word? I should be as ready to bring that message to friends and family as I am to the wider world.

**3. You say your book morphed over time. Why did the book undergo such a drastic transformation in the years you were writing it?**

One of the things that changed for me was a short-term job I had as a writer and editor for AASECT, an organization for sexuality professionals. The opportunity I had to work for them was a gift. It gave me the chance to chat with some of the most brilliant minds in the field of sexuality, and it provided me with greater insight into how our sexual health is an integral part of our overall health. I learned so much on that job.

But the biggest change came when my daughter was born. She was 4 when this book came out. Bringing a daughter into this world is to live in terror of all that you cannot control. All the ways in which you cannot protect someone. In becoming a mother, my book became less about my personal journey and more about what this meant for her future.

**4. What are some of the books that have inspired you in recent years?**

There have been so many awesome books in this space in just the past few years. The biggest inspiration for me was Emily Nagoski's *Come As You Are*, which pubbed in 2015. A research-based book on female sexuality and desire, it is the book that helped me realize I wasn't actually broken. Since then, I have gobbled up Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me*, Alida Nugent's *You Don't Have to Like Me*, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow*, Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*, Myriam Gurba's *Mean*, Morgan Jerkins' *This Will Be My Undoing...* You can stop me at any time...

**5. Now that you've written your big #MeToo, what are the topics that call to you?**

My number one interest right now is sexuality education, and the superhero educators who are advocating for getting essential information to the people who most need it. I've written a number of articles over the past few years that look at the bifurcated state of sex ed in the United States, and the ways in which some educators are finding non-traditional ways to share information with both teens and adults. I LOVE learning about this, and about the ways in which this is an important public health issue. I hope I can use my writing as a tool for advocacy, and maybe find other ways to get involved in this type of vital work.