



## Leora Tanenbaum

**Slut!**

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### What prompted you to write this book?

I wanted to educate people about the all-too-common experience of slut-bashing. Just about every high school in the country has a designated slut. Being known as the school slut is terrifying: classmates gang up on you and kids yell out "slut," "whore," or "bitch" when you walk down the hallway or enter the cafeteria: It is a humiliating position to be in and one that far too many teenage girls — whose self-esteem may be already suffering — are subjected to.

I'm in a position to know: I myself was known as a slut when I was a freshman in high school. The reputation developed after I fooled around with a guy whom a popular friend of mine had her eye on. Big mistake. She was so angry with me that she spread the word around school that I was a slut. For a long time guys and girls both called me names to my face and whispered about me behind my back. Everyone gossiped about me. I discuss my personal experience in *"Slut!"* — and writing about it was cathartic.

### Was it hard to find girls and women willing to share their stories about being labeled "sluts?"

It was a difficult process because most girls in the thick of a bad rep feel ashamed, and therefore tend to be unwilling or unable to talk about what is happening to them. Most adult women who had been labeled "sluts" in adolescence also tend to feel embarrassed and guilty, as if they had brought the label onto themselves, so they too usually prefer to keep silent. (If they have a boyfriend or husband, they may not want him to know about their past.) After four years of looking for and interviewing girls and women, I ended up with 50, ages 14 through 66, who had been targeted as "sluts" in junior high or high school and were willing to talk with me about their experiences. I spoke with black, Asian, white, and Latina girls and women from 12 different states around the country. They grew up with different economic circumstances and different values in cities, suburbs, and rural towns. In the Introduction I explain how I met them.

### Why did you choose such an ugly, sexist word for the title of the book?

"Slut" is, of course, a disturbing insult; but it is part of the vocabulary of adolescents (and adults) and a key word in the vocabulary of the sexual double-standard. The severity of the word may offend some people, but refraining from using it in serious discussion serves only to reinforce its power. After all, "nigger" is a profoundly disturbing word, but can we have an honest conversation about racism without using it? I don't think so. Likewise, we must use the word "slut" and openly discuss its ramifications in order to eliminate the sexual double-standard.

### Did anything in your research surprise you?

I interviewed 50 girls and women who had been targeted as sluts. The most surprising thing I discovered is that most of them had not actually been sexually active at the time they developed their reputation. Some of them had never even kissed a boy. The bottom line is that any girl can be picked on as a slut — including your daughter, niece, or sister. If you are a teenage girl, it could even happen to you.

### How do most people react to this book?

I've received a wide range of responses, from enormously supportive to very disdainful. Those who are supportive are generally girls and women who have had a bad reputation or who have witnessed "slut-bashing in action"; males and females with a feminist consciousness; parents concerned about their daughters; and educators, social workers, and health workers. Those who are disdainful are men and women who believe that girls who are called "sluts" are either innocent (i.e., they don't deserve the label because they aren't sexually active) or guilty (i.e., they deserve to be maligned because they are sexually promiscuous), and that I do a disservice by lumping the two categories together.

### How did writing this book affect you?

*Slut!* was both hard and easy to write. Hard because it's so personal, at times embarrassing, and because I revisited a painful chapter in my life. Easy because once I'd interviewed the girls and women whose stories form the core of the book, the words tumbled out of me. I felt so passionate about raising awareness of slut-bashing that I didn't suffer from "writer's block" or even procrastination. I turned on my computer every morning feeling motivated to write, and write, and write.

Having said that, the interviewing process was certainly educational. Individually, each girl and woman taught me about coping in the face of social cruelty. Collectively, they showed me that no matter how different two females are, they share something in common. They both have experienced the sexual double-standard in one form or another. After writing this book, I feel a connection with all females, regardless of differences in our backgrounds or values.