

BOOK REVIEWS

Losing It

Keith Gray. London, UK: Andersen Press, 2010.
ISBN-13: 978-1-84939-099-6. Price: £5.99. Pages: 256
(paperback)

The First Time: True Tales of Virginity Lost and Found (Including My Own)

Kate Monro. London, UK: Icon Books, 2011.
ISBN-13: 978-1-84831-240-1. Price: £11.99.
Pages: 000 (paperback)

Embarking on the review of the above two books on virginity, I was inexorably reminded of that classic comment about buses: you wait for ages and then two come along at once. As an agony aunt, the whole issue of virginity is one of my most asked-about topics, yet once I've given my advice I'm often at a loss to recommend excellent further reading. I will now no longer be at a loss. Even better, these two books are aimed at different markets and with different approaches – though the value systems that underlie each are the same.

Losing It, a collection of short story fiction for the teenage market, is edited by author Keith Gray, whose own contribution 'Scoring' is the first in the book. Seven further tales follow, well chosen and finely balanced – from a boy bragging to his mates,

through a girl changing her mind, through gay passion rediscovered, to darker tales of virginity lost through poverty-stricken prostitution, and an honour killing carried out because the bride did not bleed. My favourite perhaps was the hilarious 'Age of Consent' by Jenny Valentine, in which a mischievous 73-year-old brings a family dinner to a stunned standstill by speaking out about her own sex life and questioning her young companions about theirs.

The stories raise a slew of questions: what is virginity, what does it mean to lose it, what are the consequences, when, where, how and why should it be lost – in ways that leave the reader able to bring their own viewpoint to the issues. Hence, though aimed at the teen market, this volume contains wisdom from which we can all learn, plus it offers valuable insights into contemporary teenage culture, which despite appearances may well be more sensible than it first appears. Hence, Journal readers can happily recommend this to young clients and buy it for their own children – and if they do the latter, they should make sure to purloin it to read themselves!

The First Time: True Tales of Virginity Lost and Found (Including My Own), by Kate Monro, is the result of several years' sensitive interviewing by the author, whose interest was first sparked by a conversation on Californian beach about "mis-spent youth". The result is a stunning

collection of real-life stories spanning 68 years, reflecting the deep social changes that have occurred in that time, and linked thematically by thoughtful and insightful author commentary.

Unsurprisingly the themes covered cross over with *Losing It* – how does one define virginity and its loss, how do women experience it, how does that differ from men's experience and how should one view people who choose to keep their virginity. The stories are told in the subjects' own words and hence are less manicured than the tales in *Losing It* with a raw edge that is always moving; Monro's insights bring further adult-aimed seriousness and depth to the issues and so there is never any sense of sensationalism or *DailyMail*-itis.

In the final chapter Monro explores the point she makes throughout: that the telling of one's virginity story is itself transformational, often facilitating the reframing not only of the original experience but also of one's sexual history. Hence I would recommend the book for professional interest to Journal readers, but would also suggest that reading it may well give them personal insights into their own situation. This book could indeed change your life!

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