



Episode 108: Intellectualizing infidelity: A feminist remix

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VOICEOVER

Welcome to *Up Close*, the research, opinion and analysis pod cast from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER COOK

Hello, I'm Jennifer Cook. Thanks for joining us. We all know the scenario, an older married man has an affair with a younger single woman. This particular sexual paradigm may be a cliché, a staple of soap operas, movies, literature, magazines and blogs. And, depending upon your own emotional set point, this sexual imbroglio can evoke feelings ranging from disinterest to white hot rage. But what happens when you attempt to shine the bright light of rational intellectual discussion into the secret lives of those who love out of bounds? Is there anything to be gained or is it even possible to analyse the passion and the emotion that can explode between two people?

Dr Lauren Rosewarne believes there is and her book *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* published by Praeger, charts a challenging, fascinating, intellectually rigorous and highly personal journey about coming to terms with the collision between our sexual, social and political identities.

Inspired by her own experience as the other woman, Dr Rosewarne applies her feminist sensibilities to what she describes as the sexually-induced madness of the affair. She's Director for the Centre for Public Policy from the School of Social and Political Sciences University of Melbourne. Dr Rosewarne, thank you for joining us on *Up Close*.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Thank you for having me.

JENNIFER COOK

Now, let me begin by asking you why you came to write this book? Wasn't it enough to go through the experience of it?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

I think it's best to think about the fact that I wrote the book while I was in the experience so what happened was the man involved had moved overseas. So I was going to visit him on a trip while he was still living with his wife at the time. I knew before I left Melbourne that this would be an incredibly traumatic visit, that I'd go back to hotel rooms crying, bla bla bla bla bla. So what I did was plan a strategy of distraction.

I don't believe in the writing is therapy or writing is catharsis but I do believe in writing as a distraction. So I just came armed with books and my laptop and really it was just about distracting myself from the misery. I was still crying but I was typing and crying and typing.

JENNIFER COOK

So this notion of distraction; you're an academic, you're a feminist, you applied the full force of feminist rigor and theory to something highly personal and what just were you trying to achieve by doing that?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

I was trying to find a way to, I guess, intellectually understand how the hell I was in that situation but not only myself, him and his partner who would all consider ourselves intellectuals and all consider ourselves feminist and how did this situation come to be where she eventually knew about me, I knew about her? No one could plea innocence. How did this situation arise and how did we all go about justifying and rationalising our behaviour?

JENNIFER COOK

How do you feel about being so honest? Did the process work for you? Was it worth it? What do you think you've contributed to the feminist discourse?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

On one hand - and I still say this even though every feminist instinct in me resents thinking this way, but I still think I'd rather have had him than the book. And I still believed that as I was writing it and even now we're talking a couple of years on. That said, I was always going to lose him anyway. That even though this was going to end badly, which it did, I was still going to have a book at the end. And I was talking at a conference to a group of undergrads in the United States. A student came up and said to me - a young woman; would have been about 19 years old. She said, do you feel that because a book came out of this that wasn't time wasted, and I thought, oh my God, yes. It never occurred to me but I must say it did alleviate the guilt because if I had just lost a good couple of years of my life crying and being miserable and pining over someone that was going to always end badly I think - particularly my personality - there would have been a great deal of guilt. The fact that a book came out of it that the time wasn't wasted intellectually, I think yeah, that was a huge relief. It doesn't ease the pain of how it ended but it certainly was a consolation prize of sorts.

JENNIFER COOK

The book is so interesting; intensely interesting?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Thank you.

JENNIFER COOK

?because it is so personal. You take us to the beginning of the relationship where you stand there and you say, I'll be able to keep these feelings under control.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

It's wishful thinking, I think, to think you can do that because often other impulses and other inclinations take control and you find yourself acting in ways that rationally, before you're in that situation, of course I would never do such a thing. But when you're in it all your intellectual reasoning - you know, none of it matters when you're in that situation and I think that's something that I talk about in the book, about the fact that I didn't really feel guilt towards his partner. It wasn't that type of thing. It wasn't guilt in that regard but I felt guilty about my politics. I felt I wouldn't do such a clichéd stock standard soap opera thing. I'm smarter than that. How did I not make a better decision? As opposed to her, which I felt I can't be responsible for looking after her relationship and I think that's one of those conflicts with feminism, both branches of feminism but particularly third wave feminism is how much responsibility do I need to have for other women when it's so hard for me just to get up in the morning and do my own thing? But now I'm supposed to be looking after my sister as well. And this is where that sisterhood idea comes from as the title of the book.

JENNIFER COOK

I wanted to talk to you about that notion of cheating on the sisterhood. I mean, just how does this translate into the affair? Are women loyal to a sisterhood?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Yeah. When I put the book proposal to the publishers, you know, I actually had a question mark after sisterhood. The publishers took it out. That was their decision but, in essence, I wanted the question mark there because I actually don't really believe that there is a sisterhood. So I felt I wanted that to be a concept as opposed to a fait accompli. I think that was a battle in a lot of interviews and a lot of talks I had at book shops where people would say, hang on a tick, if you believed in the sisterhood you wouldn't have done this and I'm like, well, you haven't read the book. A sisterhood's one of those things that's very idealistic. I'd love to believe in one but I think we create micro sisterhoods around us. I think we have loyalties, quite possibly stronger than familiar loyalties with some of our female friends but the idea that I'm going to have loyalty to a woman I've never met, or in his case a woman who I'd only seen photographs of, I think that's a little bit hard to believe. Particularly since I work in academia where it's a cut-throat game and you've seen high-level bitchiness. I talk about in the book about things that I'd been involved with at conferences I've spoken at where sly comments or sneaky comments were made about my age etc, you know, those kind of things which make you think that feminism actually is quite a different thing to sisterhood in assuming a collective understanding of it.

JENNIFER COOK

This is Up Close. We're coming to you from the university of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jennifer Cook and our guest today is Dr Lauren Rosewarne and we're talking about Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism.

Now, in the book, there is a development, isn't there, where you do start to feel sympathy for his wife and not see her so much as the other. Could you tell us about that experience when you did begin to feel sympathy or a sisterhood with her and how did that challenge you?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

There was a number of different stages in that but I think the first stage was when - I won't go into the entire story but she wasn't living with him for a period of time and I was staying in his house. As it turned out, I'm staying on her side of the bed. I've got my luggage next to clothing that's hers, you know. I remember having stuff in the spare room and seeing her runners; in the bathroom, her tampons. All of these things started to make me realise this is actually a real person, a running, hair drying, bleeding woman. Of course, you can't be amongst another person's stuff and not feel you're in her place and it was very much the idea I was lying on her side of the bed and distinctly feeling that way.

Other times when I had that sympathy for her was when, as things were getting completely toxic, as he would be involved with other women and then tell me about it and I would feel that sense of betrayal, I started to realise I'm actually going to end up on the list of exes that his partner is now on. That idea that there's actually almost a sisterhood of women who have been betrayed in varying degrees by him. As it turns out, I joined them.

JENNIFER COOK

This leads me to this notion that you bring up in the book of a divided man. The lapsed feminist versus the domestic terrorist. As you say, he gets to choose. Either way, he ends up with someone.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

I think that's a really unique dynamic in this triangle, if you like, that the man really isn't going to lose. So he's got no reason or no impetus to make a choice between either woman because why wouldn't you ride it out as long as you can, if both women actually love him there's probably not a huge incentive for either woman to opt out or for him to make a choice so he could potentially string that on quite a long time playing both women off against each other if he likes doing that. It's a horrible insidious game but, at the same token, when love's involved suddenly all the rationale and the fact that this is actually disgusting behaviour on all our parts, you're not thinking about that. You're thinking about some vague notion of a happy ending.

JENNIFER COOK

You talk about this oft used phrase, 'the heart wants what the heart wants'. This expression that's trotted out and another one is, 'it's my choice', which makes it really interesting, doesn't it, because it separates the heart as almost a separate part of the whole psyche.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Separate from rationale, yeah.

JENNIFER COOK

Then this idea of it's my choice, of course, intersects with our consumer culture that, hey, why can't I have what I want when I want it?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

And exactly how I want it under whatever terms because we're very much, as a consumer culture, taught if something is not fulfilling us in whatever way, if it's not meeting our every single need, don't worry because you can go and enter the market and buy a product that will actually fulfil that need that you have. I think we've started to take items from our, if you like, consumerist patterns into our relationships. So we go in looking for a partner who is going to be perfect and if they're not perfect, well, that's okay because we can actually go and try a new partner out. This idea of also the fact that if one partner doesn't offer you everything and you may outsource, you may get some other bits from another person while maintaining that first relationship, that's when betrayal exists.

If you're not in a committed relationship, if you're not pretending to be monogamous, none of this is a problem but it's when you start saying I am in a relationship and I am committed to you and then one of those partners actually goes out and cheats, then that's betrayal.

JENNIFER COOK

You're looking throughout this book, at a particular kind of infidelity, aren't you?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Absolutely.

JENNIFER COOK

A single woman with the married man. Now, let's look at this institution of marriage. What insights have you gained into that? Is that where the feminist light should really be shining on because this is where the promise is of - it's an expectation of fidelity?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Look, if you go back to first wave feminist literature, that was highly critical of marriage; that marriage was an oppressive institution for women, that women became chattel in the marriage contract, that women were basically at the behest of men. Now, admittedly, you know, we've started to see feminists, you know, baby boomers from that second wave generation marry and do marriage in a quite feminist way. I think it's very difficult for me, as a 30 year old, now to condemn an institution that so many second wave feminists have done seemingly well. So I think this idea of an instinctual gut reaction; a feminist gut reaction that marriage is bad, I don't think we can say this any longer. Particularly given that, since feminism, a lot of women have made marriage work in a way that's more egalitarian. It's not necessarily perfect but I think they've made it work for them. So I think that now puts marriage on the agenda of third wave feminists of saying, well, do we still need marriage and then what are the boundaries in terms of fidelity etc?

JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook and on Up Close, this episode, we are speaking with Dr Lauren Rosewarne. Now, you do this lovely thing in the book where you just say, look, if you do a simple cost benefit analysis of the affair and your position as the single woman the cost is too high and it's likely to end badly. Highly likely to but then you explore

this assumption that a bad outcome outweighs the pleasures offered and that this assumes it would be rational to forego those pleasures experienced. In other words, you would start doing it because it feels good and you keep going because it would feel worse to stop, wouldn't it?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

That's exactly right because I know now, and I also knew very close towards the end of the book, what it was going to feel like to be completely without him. As much as it was painful to be with him there was still - and this goes back to the idea of 'something better than none'. It's the same as, you know, why do people smoke? Why do people do anything bad for them? Because there is some pleasure and that pleasure is disproportionately weighted. People give the pleasure of a cigarette more weighting than the future consequences of lung cancer or whatever those consequences may be.

In my case, of course, I felt that this is going to end badly, I'm going to be in the foetal position, it's going to be horrible but you're still getting some. Even if it was negative contact, even if we would have conversations where we'd both be crying, you know, it's still contact and it's still something. I still think, well, I'm without that now. I know that I preferred having it.

JENNIFER COOK

So, Lauren, let's move now to very focused feminist concerns and can a woman's body ever really be non-politicised in feminist terms? I'm thinking of our right to choose. You've written and lectured on the ways in which women's bodies are used in advertising in many societies. Is this the place where we draw the line and so between the second wave feminism, which is marked by activism and third wave which is characterised by analysis and intellectual discussion? So, what you've done is really taken that cry of the 'personal is political' and you've put it in the most personal private space of all.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

But I think that's very much indicative of my age group. I'm 30, I was writing the book. I was about 27 when the whole thing started. It's very much that idea of having been at university and being lectured by second wave feminism, then starting to have sex and have a sexual life and starting to think my politics is not marrying with my personal life and then I'm feeling tremendous guilt that I'm not sure I need to be having. So then it's a force of having to actually rethink what is going on. So it meant going back and thinking, well, look at what the second wave feminists were fighting for. They were fighting for control over our bodies. They were fighting for rights to abortion, rights to say no to sex.

What we seem to forget that they were also fighting for the rights to say yes but we often forget that in that sense of second wave feminism is often portrayed as radical feminism and being very sexually conservative in that sense of there's debates at the moment with second wave feminists criticising the way younger women dress and this notion of provocative dressing, that this isn't what feminists fought for. In fact, I would argue feminists fought for my right to choose. And that idea that feminists fought for my right to choose everything, be it abortion, who I have sex with, when I have sex, how much sex I have and under what circumstances. I think

that's one of those interesting junctures between second wave and third wave feminism is where women are actually, in the third wave, taking advantages of the choices that second wave feminists fought for and yet there's some sort of angst around that in the sense that some choices are considered wrong. It's the same as things like breast implants. Second wave feminists fought for us not to be objectified. Third wave feminism is saying we can have breast implants.

JENNIFER COOK

Now, Lauren, you've travelled around promoting this book. You've done lectures. You've done book launches and you've said you've had some really, really strong reactions from people coming to see you. Tell us about that.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

One example, I spoke in the UK to a group of older women. They were all second wave feminists. It was honestly like walking into a room where they were ready to lynch me. I hadn't even opened my mouth. I felt like the young upstart but I felt like an idiot. It was an awful experience and these were all married women, of course. Stupid me for thinking that - you know, not me personally but what the book was about was threatening to their marriages in the sense that I was a reminder that there is the possibility that your husbands, God forbid, may cheat. So I was going in there as an embodiment of all that they fear but, not only that, I was trying to claim myself as a feminist which then gave them a further sense that I was the betrayer.

JENNIFER COOK

So they were there to put you back in your place?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

They were there to remind me what they had done for me as second wave feminists but also to teach me that what I had done now was wrong.

JENNIFER COOK

Had they read your book?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

No. We laughed at that because that's one of the common reactions but I would do radio interviews. I did television interviews. I'd talk at book launches where people would come with hostility but they hadn't turned over the cover.

JENNIFER COOK

That is really interesting because I'll just describe the cover. It's a couch and you have?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Horrible cover.

JENNIFER COOK

I quite love the cover.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

To me it looks like it was stolen from a Cosmopolitan magazine circa 1993.

JENNIFER COOK

It's very provocative. You've got a couch and you have a man sitting there with obviously his girlfriend or wife with the arm around the shoulder and then behind the couch he's holding hands with the girl who's sitting on the wife's right-hand side. So, yes, if you just looked at the cover, if you just read the title, I can see why you'd get that reaction but if they'd actually taken the time to read the book and the arguments?

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Or listened to what I was saying in the sense the book in no way is an endorsement of infidelity. It's not. I don't champion infidelity as a lifestyle choice. It was an awful experience. I would advise you not to do it but the fact that I'm alleging that there was some cheating on the sisterhood portrays me as a betrayer so I can understand the problem. I will blame the publishers for not putting in that question mark.

JENNIFER COOK

That is a wonderful place for us to end with you today, Dr Rosewarne, and I'd like to end with you reading out, if you would, just the last paragraph of your book which I think sums up your position very succinctly.

Melbourne University Up Close Episode 108 Transcript

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LAUREN ROSEWARNE

All right. I will simply end with the triumphant acknowledgement of feminism enabling me to have the courage to do what I thought was best for me; to do what I thought would bring me pleasure, would bring me empowerment and I used feminism to analyse it. No, my feminist foremothers did not burn their bras to pave the way for me to try and steal another woman's partner but they did facilitate me to critique my actions, to painstakingly dissect every word, every action, every gesture to give me a way to think about the continuing debacle that is my life.

There is not a conversation or sexual act or song I can listen to any longer than doesn't motivate a political critique and the consequences of such analysis frequently result in guilt, righteousness, satiety or empowerment. Sometimes all at once and I have feminism to thank.

JENNIFER COOK

Dr Lauren Rosewarne, thank you so much for joining us on Up Close today.

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Thank you for having me.

JENNIFER COOK

Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our

website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up close is brought to you by Marketing and Communications at the University of Melbourne, Australia. This interview was recorded on 16 July 2010. Our producers for this episode were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel. Audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jennifer Cook. Until next time, good?bye.

VOICEOVER

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