



The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America

Michelle Tea , Ben Meyers (Designed by)

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"Passionate Mistakes" helped catapult the nascent queer girl culture of San Francisco's Mission district to the world. The novel charts the turbulent adventures of one girl in America as she moves from Boston's teenage goth world to whoring in New Age Tucson before finally arriving in San Francisco's dyke underground. Honest, sarcastic, lyrical and direct, Tea's writing is possibly the most literate and sophisticated treatment of underground dyke culture ever written and circulated. She is a reincarnation of when Jill Johnston used to be cool.

The Passionate Mistakes and Intricate Corruption of One Girl in America Details

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Mara says

The very best of Michelle Tea starts with her first work. Never has she been able to truly capture her ragtag, unedited, juicy, straight from memory to zine, writing style since this first book (well, "Valencia" is a close second). Stream of conscious never read so good or so well. Of course her sex work dirt is the best and most notorious writing--we all wonder what it might 'really' be like to sell ourselves for money. But prior to this experience, she writes an anthropologist worthy account of growing up poor in Chelsea; shoplifting, Catholic school, taking bus rides into Boston wearing heavy, black, polyester witch dresses and cursing their impracticality. From her Goth days to early experimentation (be it drugs or sex) in Arizona, Boston, or San Fran, there is so much vibrant, delicious, gossip circa the early 90's--a beholden time when grassroots activism didn't know email, riot grrl culture was blossoming, and women's rights in America were still intact. (Besides: Danny from New Kids on the Blocks once grabbed her ass!). I re-read this book once a year and every time I discover a new detail I'd missed before.

Cow says

This is the second book of Michelle Tea's that I've read; I read Valencia a couple of years ago. This is her first book, far more raw, Boston instead of San Francisco, first kiss and first betrayal instead of Discovering Who You Really Are.

What disappointment I had came from having the wrong expectations. This isn't a novel, and it isn't building to anything. If anything, one of the stories I really want to hear comes after the last page of the book: much as this snapshot of her youth is fascinating, I'm really curious as to what happened next, when (I suspect) she walked away, decided it was time to grow up and actually become herself (the strong inner voice behind Valencia) instead of just being someone's girlfriend, along for the ride and doing as she was told.

It's still good, it's still refreshing. But those teenage days of the first hundred pages or so, the youth busting out at 16 to see the world, the 3:00am drunken adventures around Boston... that part is great, and it felt like the last 2 1/2 vignettes just fail to be much of anything after that.

And yet, even when you're like "okay, this isn't going anywhere," she can drop a line that wakes you right back up out of it. All the potential of her later writing is here, and every now and then it shines through.

Oryx says

I think this book was very much 'of its time'.

It was honest and captures, something.

The prose was pacy and probably appeals to, someone.

It just read a little shallow, a little nonsensical nonsense and not sensical nonsense, i.e. it was nonsense for the sake of nonsense that didn't point to any sense of non-nonsense in the nonsense, there was no sense of critique in the nonsense, no real feeling or expression of something, of anything that made any sense, and

nonsense has to make sense if it wants to be valid nonsense, and this chaotic nonsense really gave no sense of anything but hollow nonsense, just a sense of no sense of anything but nonsense.

It was dull. It didn't say anything. I didn't hate it.

I just thought it was pointless and I kept putting it down.

Kind of felt like if Kerouac was Tea then this would have been the result, at least prosaically (us.?).

Meh.

Black Wave was brilliant.

This was not.

3.4

HeavyReader says

I just read this book in one sitting, in a few hours, to review for the Feminist Review Blog. Once I write a proper review, I will post it.

Here's the whole review:

Beware! If you pick up this book, you may not be able to put it down!

I read this book in one sitting, in a few hours on a Sunday evening. I hadn't planned to read it all at once. I thought I would read a little, just get started, but the next thing I knew, it was 11pm (on a school night!) and I felt compelled to keep going until I completed the last page. It wasn't so much that I had to know what happened next; this story isn't even so much about what happened as it is about how the story is told. The writing just sucked me in and wouldn't let go.

This writing is real. Like a latter day beat poet, Michelle Tea writes like people talk, all breathless and rapid, sometimes staccato and sometimes in sentences that seem to go on forever. Here's an example: "It was all that dark red blur from the wine, we were so drunk and sweaty in that hot room and Kate was putting all these fingers into me and moving them like crazy and no one had ever done that to me before and it was making me fly right out of my skin. What Are You Doing I remember asking. How in the World Are You Doing That. Do It Again. She made me say please." Michelle Tea is better than Jack Kerouac for all of us queer freaks and outcasts who came of age in the 80s and 90s, those of us who may be nearing middle age but know we're nowhere near middle America.

This volume was Michelle Tea's debut publication, first released by Semiotext(e) in 1998. This new edition includes critical essays by Brandon Stosuy and Eileen Myles. I read those essays, but I don't really think they were necessary. This book can definitely stand alone without even well written critical essays to prop it up.

In any case, I am glad this book is back. It should be required reading in feminist studies and queer literature classes. It should be required reading for a new generation of working class and poor queer goths and punks and other black sheep who think no one has ever before felt the way they feel and done the things they do. It should be required reading for anyone who likes fast and furious writing that grabs you by the scruff of the

neck and doesn't let go until the story is told.

Phillip says

I really like Michelle Tea's novels (at least the few that I've read). I understand why a lot of people don't care for her, and I think it's like the reason a lot of people don't care for Holden Caulfield. There's a reluctance for many people to take emotional pain and the confusion it causes as legitimate if there's not an objective cause for the pain, or if it seems like the character is suffering due to her own choices. But one result of being a suburban kid is that your whole world conspires to convince you that choices are an illusion. The appeal of subcultures is that they present the illusion of escape (and I say that knowing that many subcultural participants genuinely believe in their individuality and their freedom outside the system), but the real of subcultural desire is that it needs a mainstream against which to define itself and against which to derive a sense of personal fulfillment--because we know the truth and straight society lives its lie we are better than them. But this is also an unfulfilling experience because it is grounded in the lie that 'we know the truth,' when in reality subcultures are merely alternative societies. I think this tension is ultimately at the heart of Michelle Tea's novels and the characters' struggles to find stable, safe identities.

Chris Urquhart says

Hilarious, sad, very readable memoir about a queer babe growing up in Massachusetts.

Amy says

Michelle Tea talks about growing up lower class in New England - being a goth teen, dating jerk dudes. The majority of the book is about being a lesbian and then later a prostitute, with a lot of focus on one particularly toxic relationship with a girlfriend.

Nicole McDonald says

Michelle Tea is now well-known for being a San Francisco based writer with works based on the city such as the infamous queer novel Valencia. However, *Passionate Mistakes* is from a much earlier time in Michelle Tea's life when she was a goth high school kid who lived in Chelsea, a suburb of Boston. It follows her through her teenage years and early twenties in Provincetown and ends with her move to Tucson, Arizona. This is Michelle's experience with growing up but it is also contrasted with the larger story of our generation of queers as well as the new generation of feminism.

The memoir follows Michelle through various expressions of sexual orientation and identity. At the beginning of the book, she starts out as a straight girl who endures boring and awful sex with her boyfriend. She then explores a little bit further and starts to hook up with girls while still having a boyfriend. Finally, she comes out with the courage to let her boyfriend go and starts dating women intentionally. She explores open relationships and is in and out of love triangles and finally has a long-term girlfriend. And all of this is

told with the (intricate) innocence of a Michelle who existed in a time before she even knew what the terms "butch" and "femme" meant and way before she was known as a queer icon of our generation.

The last part of the book chronicles Michelle's relationship with her prostitute girlfriend, a career which Michelle also chooses to pursue. Some of Michelle Tea's experience as a prostitute is chronicled in *Rent Girl*, her graphic novel which I would highly recommend. From my understanding she became a prostitute not really because she needed the money but mainly out of her desire to alleviate boredom and lead an unconventional life.

I think *Passionate Mistakes* is a book that many can relate to because in some sense I think we all have the desire to both find ourselves (Michelle coming out as a lesbian) and the desire to lose ourselves (Michelle choosing to prostitute, even though she loathes it). I think sometimes that we learn just as much in losing ourselves as we do in finding ourselves. I can appreciate this duality and often find myself living inside the duplicity of lost/found, broken/unbroken, bored/entertained, fulfilled/nihilistic. Although sometimes being lost can damage I think surrendering to uncertainty and mystery is sometimes necessary in life.

Michelle explores this surrender to loss beautifully, both in *Valencia* and in *Passionate Mistakes*. Another thing I appreciate about Michelle Tea is her dedication to feminism and her exploration of what it means to be a feminist in this generation. In *Passionate Mistakes*, Michelle teaches us that modern feminism is about acceptance of all women, regardless of whether they are prostitutes or housewives. That's not to say that modern feminism is without struggle, because I think there is still much to be discussed. But my hope is that modern feminism embraces all women inside its discussion and is big enough to encompass many expressions of identity.

Other writers have called Michelle Tea the modern-day feminist Jack Kerouac and have compared *Passionate Mistakes* to Kerouac's most famous work, *On the Road*. I don't hesitate in doing the same. While Kerouac I think emulates the restlessness of Americans, with our desire to move and explore new frontiers, I think Michelle Tea's novel *Passionate Mistakes* is also about restlessness. It's about the desire to be passionate and wandering in looking for one's truths. It's about sometimes losing oneself in passionate mistakes but still exploring life in a most intricate fashion. Despite the corruption and the darkness that Michelle sometimes gets lost in, this book is also tender and pure, containing such sweet gems as:

"I had no idea I wanted to be kissed that way but there it was, like a dream remembered."

About turning her first trick she says, with brutal honesty:

"...the more I thought about it the funnier it really was until it was hilarious, that a girl could sink to this, the ultimate depths of femininity right, the worst case scenario of womanhood, and that it meant absolutely nothing, this was funny. And strangely liberating, not in a I've-Reclaimed-My-Sexuality way because there was nothing of mine to be claimed here. It was the feeling of another societal myth shattering in my cunt, hitting bottom only to discover there was no bottom, only me, and it was possible to go to these places and come back unscathed like a Persephone eating not a few seeds but the whole bleeding pomegranate and flipping off Hades as she skipped out of Hell."

Besides presenting modern feminism in a real way, class-ism and sexism are also important subjects in this book. Bookslut says:

"Anyone who wants to understand exactly how, why and in what form sexism still exists in America must read it"

While reading book reviews for this book I was really surprised to learn that many people hated it. They seemed to hate its lack of proper punctuation, the fact that it didn't really seem to have much of a main story or point besides chronicling Michelle Tea's life and wanderings and they also have criticized Michelle's vapidness. However, I would say that these are the same exact techniques that Jack Kerouac implemented and was criticized for in his writing, except Jack Kerouac is now celebrated as one of the great American writers, despite his ramblings. It makes me wonder if even in our day and age Michelle Tea is more harshly criticized because she is a woman and a queer woman. However, I think her writing is the epitome of feminist revolutionary writing for our generation. And sometimes the revolution doesn't have proper grammar or isn't properly punctuated.

I will happily give her a shout out and embrace her as the Jack Kerouac of my queer generation. Oh, and rumor has it that a movie is going to be made about her novel, Valencia...

Joey says

Today I would like to provide you with a recipe for success that will allow you to write this book and become a darling of the shiftless indie generation we all love and emulate. First, be born. Next, become angst-filled, smoke cigarettes, drink booze, date a man, date a woman, date a man and different women simultaneously, drink more, fuck quotation marks, break up with a man, delve into feminism, date a woman, realize that this woman is insane, continue to date her, become a prostitute, move across the country with the emotionally abusive girlfriend, move back, write up all your adventures in a stream-of-consciousness format, and submit them to a publisher. If the publisher refuses to accept your manuscript, please refer said publisher to this book and say that someone somewhere is publishing the exact same thing. Roll in the dough and enjoy being an icon for a vapid generation.

Brienne Diebolt-Brown says

The subject material is probably off-putting for some, a "Catcher in the Rye" type story of a young girl who explores heterosexuality, homosexuality, guerrilla feminism, prostitution, drugs, all of the things that might be a parent's nightmare. Toward the end, almost as an aside, you find out that she was possibly molested as a child (or not), grew up super poor with a mother who married a few times. It's not the driving force behind the angst-y behavior. And yet, at the end, you leave the book positive that she turns out alright. The first-person narration has a tone that makes you think that these were choices that didn't destroy her. What I love the most is that Michelle Tea has an amazing facility for writing, at times its poetic. The words alone, and her solid description of being a teenager in the 1980s, kept me reading; the "shocking" subject material was secondary.

Cher says

An annoying lesbian hipster girl uses and abuses several girlfriends in a sort of On The Road style tale. While I enjoy Tea's prose style, I do not like her stagnant, shallow characters. Her books read more like snapshots than stories.

Zelda says

What I like best about Michelle Tea so far is her emotional honesty. It's not about looking good, or being afraid to admit to what you don't know. That goes a long way. When i first began reading it felt like a knock-off of Cool For You. Inspired, but language-wise, not as good. As long as I kept comparing, I found it unsatisfying. It raised that question for me of how is this different from reading my journals of what i was doing back in high school and post high school. I kept asking myself, Why am i reading this book, and now in the midst of another one of hers, Chelsea Whistle, I find myself returning to that question. I think it goes back to that emotional honesty, of reconstructing the adolescent process of making sense of the adults they live with and the larger world they'll soon be actively participating in but are now completely at the mercy of. (some would say adults are too.) For some reason, I back to wanting to read about this now. Maybe i'm having a mid-life adolescence? okay, enough!

Heather says

what i learned from this book... i guess i learned to think carefully before i make a michelle tea selection.

i found this book at the library, with a bunch of "new" books (this being from 1998, obviously it was just new to that library), and since it was queer, seemed a bit edgy and not a mysterious/thrilling/historical bit of fiction, i grabbed it. plus, i could swear i'd read - and enjoyed - some of her work before, but after mostly reading this, i have to wonder if i was mistaken about the author there.

this is essentially an autobiography of tea's, a certain slice of life from her youth. kudos for fully experiencing a substantial depth of grunge, angst and depravity before she's even out of her 20's. not that i recommend that to anyone, and i don't think she would either, but it certainly gives her source material that some writers would kill for. and also, kudos for her brutal honesty about that life, and to the publishers, since these stories are rarely put out there.

the problem here is execution. my biggest complaint is the lack of paragraph breaks, which leads to pacing problems, making more evident the lack of storyline. though this is broken into chapters, this book essentially reads like a big blur of drugs, sex, and idling one's way through life. there is no plot, no progression or wisdom gained through the passage of time (well, not much anyway). though this is autobiographical, and thus maybe could be exempted from hordes of 20/20, for me it really needed more perspective, and a better editor.

Ciara says

more michelle tea. *shudder* this was the worst of the worst worst of the worst. as much as i have hated & detested every single one of michelle tea's books, this one was THE WORST. one of the top ten worst books i have ever read? possibly. it actually went out of print for quite some time, but was re-released after valencia proved to be fairly popular with a certain segment of readers. this is kind of like valencia, except even more boring, non-sensical, & painful to read. maybe there are some people who find the title poetic. personally, i find it difficult to read & it doesn't inspire me to make the effort to understand the words. now multiply that

by the content of the entire book & you have something as hateful to read as, like, hakim bay or something. i guess this is autobiographical, & there are plenty of punk-y feminist-y queer ladies i have known in my day who ate this shit up & were like, "yeah, this is totally my life! oh my god! michelle tea is totally our bretheren!" then why is that a bretheren you want to be a part of? it's nice that she didn't try to sugar-coat her persona in the book & make herself all like-able, but, i mean, her character is insufferable. i couldn't be friends with someone like that. i wouldn't want to identify with a protagonist like that. i just HATED this book with every fiber of my being. WHY WHY WHY?

Kathleen says

Michelle Tea is hands down one of my favorite writers. I had read bits and pieces of this book years ago, but now with the semblance of good weather in massachusetts, I got itchy to read it straight through on my porch along the highway. Many thanks to my housemate who brought it home from her trip to sanfrancisco. Right then i stole it for a few days.

This book jumps from her goth days in high school to her nascent queerness to her experiences in sex work. I could be more entertained by her descriptions of following the punk subcultures in Boston by my own connections to it. There's certainly a lot of money to be made off of writing/moving making about white, working class folks in boston. I fucking hate that industry. It's as if white suburbia misses the city and blood so much they drool (and throw as much money as possible) towards shitty movies like "Good will hunting."

Yet Michelle's writing feels really honest about her life around Boston. Her observations are very class based, but doesn't makes excuses or celebrate degeneracy as an ideal. The real strength in her writing are her descriptions of growing up queer, angry and shameless. I can't help but be fascinated by former Catholics who are shameless about sex.

I love this book!

Blythe says

Eh. I've read better "shocking" sexual memoirs. At least Laura Palmer had better grammar. Now and again Ms. Tea has a bold turn of phrase or a humorous reflection that endeared her, but mostly I found this self-indulgent and boring. She strings out the vagaries of her frustrating relationship, then quits the book just as it was getting to the interesting part - when she gets her shit together and moves out to Cali.

Ruby says

3.5

writing's super good, excited to read more by tea

Meg Powers says

Apparently a lot of people hate this book. Although I tend to avoid any feminist work that emits the slightest odor of man-hate, I really enjoyed Michelle Tea's account of her young adulthood. It's honest without being obnoxious, and it doesn't reek of self-importance nor does it carry on in a "boo hoo" pretentious self-deprecating way. Her abundance of commas really irritated me at first, but when I realized an abundance of semicolons would be way worse, I got over it. Anyway, it's pretty key to the stream-of-consciousness thing. It reads like her brain is puking her memories onto the page in a poetic and engaging way that never gets overwhelming or boring.

What first drew me into this book was Tea's descriptions of her and her friends' teen-gothdom in Boston. I've dipped into goth culture pretty consistently, and it's interesting to read a first person account from the era my generation of goths romanticize the crap out of. The bulk of the book, however, focuses on Tea's growing understanding of her sexuality, and her exciting, frustrating, and disappointing experiences with lesbianism. Although Tea was way more successful at getting hit on by femmes (and way more successful at the goth thing) than I was at the age of 20, I found myself relating a lot, and I recommend this book to anyone struggling with their own sexual identity.

Elizabeth Chorney-Booth says

I adore Michelle Tea. So much. This book offered great insight into her early years, but I do feel like she's become a better writer as the years have gone by.

Jason Pettus says

san francisco's michelle tea is the most vital writer of her generation, one of the few people from our era they'll still be studying 100 years from now, and in this first full-length book of her career she shows just why so many people pay attention to what she has to say. dirty, shocking, subversive, with an embracing of a complex sexuality and lifestyle that needs no apologies, tea's work has a good chance of permanently changing your life after being exposed to it or at least getting you looking at the "war of the sexes" in an entirely new way. highly recommended.
