



The Joy of Sexus: Lust, Love, and Longing in the Ancient World

Vicki León

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In her previous books, Vicki León put readers in the sandals of now obsolete laborers, ranging from funeral clowns to armpit pluckers, and untangled the twisted threads of superstition and science in antiquity. Now, in this book of astonishing true tales of love and sex in long-ago Greece, Rome, and other cultures around the Mediterranean, she opens the doors to shadowy rooms and parts the curtains of decorum.

León goes far beyond what we think we know about sex in ancient times, taking readers on a randy tour of aphrodisiacs and *anti*-aphrodisiacs, contraception, nymphomania, bisexuality, cross-dressing, and gender-bending. She explains citizens' fear of hermaphrodites, investigates the stinging price paid for adultery despite the ease of divorce, introduces readers to a surprising array of saucy pornographers, and even describes the eco-friendly dildos used by libidinous ancients. Love also gets its due, with true tales of the lifelong bonds between military men, history's first cougar and her devoted relationship with Julius Caesar, and the deification of lovers.

The Joy of Sexus: Lust, Love, and Longing in the Ancient World Details

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From Reader Review The Joy of Sexus: Lust, Love, and Longing in the Ancient World for online ebook

Taylor says

I love this book, and I want to be Vicki León when I grow up. She takes a sex positive view of life and translates it to the ancient world while not glossing over any of the ugly parts of history. The book is funny, witty, and sexy even though it also gives weight to very serious subject matter like genital mutilation and slavery.

I wished that she had been able to include images of the art that she mentioned (statues in the Louvre, paintings by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, etc.) but I'm so glad that she didn't let that stop her from mentioning them. I'm an art historian and amateur classicist so I spent plenty of time looking up these artworks and really thinking about them in relation to the book. I love the incorporation of art and archaeology with philology, and I love this book.

Cornerofmadness says

This was a fun little book on the sex lives of the Ancient Greeks and Romans (occasionally there is some info on the Egyptians but mostly it's just Greco-Roman). Like many books in this style it tries to be quippy and fun and above all *brief*. You're not going to get any long, in-depth look at any one thing here but rather a shallow view of things.

It isn't particularly well footnoted and the bibliography is a bit sketchy in places if that matters to you. What I really wished she hadn't done was include mythological people like Orpheus.

However what was nice was that it does shed a light on the cultures of that time especially what little freedoms a housewife would have had vs a high level heterae (sort of a top tier courtesan) and it didn't shy away from the homosexuality/bisexuality of some important people like Phillip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. So for a writer this would be a nice entry level research place for things often ignored in the history books.

Alex Telander says

Vicki León certainly seems to have an ability for discovering and unearthing the bizarre and unusual, no matter what moment in history it seems to be from. She has written and published books for children, as well as adults, known for her popular anecdotal volumes, *Uppity Women* and *Working IX to V*, she now turns to a hotter and more illicit subject in *The Joy of Sexus*. Many people have heard certain “things” and “rumors” about what certain Romans, or Greeks, or Egyptians or people of the ancient world were up to during those pre-Christian times. In this book, León puts this all to rest with supplied evidence and confirmation or denial of what you might’ve heard or thought you knew to be true.

León is methodical in her approach with *The Joy of Sexus*, categorizing and laying the details out in an organized manner. She begins with “The Birds, the Bees, & the Body Parts,” covering subjects like

aphrodisiacs of the ancient world, circumcision, contraception, pregnancy, and abortion. On numerous occasions León begins with the history, and then links it with either contemporary times or particular times when some of these strange practices were en vogue. Each entry is usually only a couple of pages long, giving the reader the salient and lascivious details, but not dawdling on for too long. Some of the other subjects covered in this book include: masturbation, pornographers, prostitution, Helen of Troy, eunuchs, hermaphrodites, adultery, divorce, gladiator sex lives, menstruation, sexual preference, and so much more.

Perhaps the key to *The Joy of Sexus* is that it is a short (320 pages) and small book that can easily be concealed in public, and by the same token with the short entries and thorough and exact contents listing, a particular section can easily be turned to and read, and the book quickly secreted away again. Whether you intend to take snippet reads of this book during your daily agenda, or plan to hide out somewhere and read it from cover to cover, the knowledge you will learn from this book will make you the envy at every gala and ball. *The Joy of Sexus* is also a great ice breaker and conversation starter for parties and social events, or perhaps even a first date.

Originally written on February 19, 2013 ©Alex C. Telander.

For more reviews, check out the BookBanter site.

Jo Butler says

Anyone who reads or writes about the ancient world has to wonder how human sexuality was expressed in those days. Was it overt, or kept behind closed doors – or whatever passed for closed doors before the doorknob was invented? Vicki León answers these questions in her 2013 nonfiction *The Joy of Sexus*.

Exploring sexuality from the beginning of humankind to Nero's infamous appetites, and from contraceptives to castration, is a broad field. Fortunately the Greeks and Romans weren't shy about their tastes, and Ms. León combs literature, art, and archeological remains for her accounts. She introduces us to famous lovers of all types, including gods and satyrs, pornographers, and Amazons, and tells us how they liked to "do it."

If you love reading about the Classical Age, *The Joy of Sexus* is for you. It covers topics which are often glossed over, and does it with detail and humor. If you are a writer, this is good research tool, and it's a fun read too.

Eavan says

Easy nonfiction read when I was feeling a little overwhelmed and down. Lot's of fun. Actually learned a good deal of random sex and fertility gods, goddesses, cults, and rituals. Refreshing LGBT accepting, though very obviously written from an overeager ally (you know the type). I found this book unfortunately pretty repetitive by about halfway through and the short nature of all the texts made me a little annoyed. Definitely a highbrow bathroom book.

I have over 250 highlights in this thing though. Pick it up for yourself.

Sarah says

When I first caught sight of a copy of this book for fairly cheap at a used book store, I was excited. The study of sexuality in the ancient world is something dear to my heart, and reading through the story headers in the index had me laughing hard. I was prepared for a humorous read about some truly bizarre ancient ideas. Unfortunately, I put this book down feeling disappointed. It's well-written enough, and León's humor is charming. But not far into the book, I encountered an error that made me hesitate. I don't like to be nitpicky about the occasional error in a book. But it was something so easy to research- she claimed that the Lex Julia regarding adultery that was so famous under Augustus's rule was named after Julia, when anyone who had bothered to look it up would know that the "Julia" description was actually just the feminine version of Augustus's nomen, Julius, used because "lex" is a feminine noun"- and when I caught that mistake, it made me doubt everything else I'd read. More than that, I found that León was often biased in her portrayals, to such an extent that I could not turn a blind eye to it, much though I understand being partial to particular historical figures. The Joy of Sexus seems like a promising read, but if you're going to go for a book about ancient life, I'd look elsewhere.

Mary says

Vicki León has been out collecting ancient trivia again and this time her subject is sex. In her latest collection of the obscure, she has assembled anecdotes about ancient aphrodisiacs, wandering wombs, practitioners of erotic mysteries and victims of doomed love.

By reading her book I learned about Callipygia worship - a fixation on a person's derriere and divine gender-bending that affected such ancient prophets as Teiresias the Seer. I think my favorite passage from the book, though, was a retelling of the story of Pherenike of Rhodes.

I have not studied ancient Greece as extensively as I have studied Republican Rome so, although I knew that the ancient Greek Olympics were conducted in the nude and that women were not allowed to attend, I had never read any background material to explain why. León provided me with all the information I could have hoped for in her passage about Pherenike of Rhodes.

It seems that Pherenike was a young woman born into a family of Olympic victors. Her father was a champion boxer at the Olympic Games in 464 BCE.

"Her big burly brothers continued the winning streak. In boxing and the ferocious boxing-wrestling event called the pancratium, Pherenike's brothers swept six different Olympic Games."

León goes on to surprise me by observing that Pherenike probably watched her athletic family compete in the games when she was a young girl and later before her marriage. Apparently, young virgins were allowed to watch the games - just not married matrons!

Then León continues saying Pherenike also married a famous athlete named Callianax and bore two sons who also trained for the Olympics. Pherenike's older son, Eucles, won his boxing event but, because Pherenike was now married, she was not able to witness his victory.

A few years later, Pherenike's younger son Pisodorus entered his name as a contender for the boys boxing competition but before he could complete his ten months of training, Pherenike's husband died. So, secretly

Pherenike took up the mantle and resumed training her son dressed in the male garb of an official trainer. When his time came to report for the 388 BCE Olympics, his mother went with him disguised in the full length robe of a trainer and carrying the traditional wooden staff.

When her son was ultimately victorious, Pherenike, forgetting her precarious situation since a woman attending the forbidden event faced the death penalty of being thrown from the Typaeum cliffs, let out a high-pitched whoop and jumped over the fence to run and kiss her son.

"Either the high-pitched sound of her voice, or perhaps what her jump over the fence revealed, blew her disguise."

Fortunately for Pherenike, the ten Olympic judges decided not to punish her because of her illustrious family's contributions to the games, but forever after both trainers and athletes were decreed to appear in the nude.

So now I know why athletes are always depicted in the nude on all of those red and black-figure vases!

I also learned about Koan silk, a sheer see-through fabric. I guess I hadn't kept up on all the latest discoveries and still thought silk worms were a closely guarded secret until much later in history than ancient Greece. León reveals that some silk worms were purloined by the ancient Persians and made their way to the Greek islands of Amorgos and Kos. Unlike the Chinese, who killed the worm to harvest the silk from their cocoons, the Greeks let the worm emerge naturally, breaking the threads as it went. Then, using the same method they used with flax known as hackling, the women produced a gossamer silk that commanded a premium price. The silk was so popular that Aristophanes referred to it in his play *Lysistrata* where women go on a sex strike to keep their men from going to war and sexually tease their husbands by prancing around "naked in their Amorgian chitons."

Apparently, in a surviving letter from Plato, the famous philosopher (and León questions "cheapskate?") orders three tunics for the daughters of a host but says "not those expensive Amorgian ones!" (I always love little tidbits that reveal what kind of person a famous ancient was!)

The fashion eventually reached Rome and León found a quote from Pliny who called Koan silk "the vestments that cover a woman while at the same time revealing her naked charms."

These wonderful little glimpses about the truly personal lives of the ancients is what makes León's book so enjoyable.

There were only a couple of missteps that made me say "What?" In her chapter about Alexander and Hephaestion, León explains that the Macedonians defeated the Persians at the battle of Issus. Then in the next sentence she says Persian King Darius was killed and his queen Statira captured. (p. 69 - 70) She may have been simply trying to condense the chapter but it makes it sound like Darius was killed at the battle of Issus and, of course, he wasn't. Darius was killed some time after he fled the battle of Gaugamela and was assassinated by his own officers, who hoped to impress Alexander. Alexander was not impressed with their treachery and ordered their execution.

León made another confusing statement about the Roman emperor Caracalla. She alluded to his death being the result of too many mistresses and a gladiator. This sounded much more like Commodus. Caracalla was killed by a member of his own body guard when he stopped to relieve himself while marching with his army near Carrhae during a war with Parthia. Historian Cassius Dio said the assassin, Martialis, was disgruntled for not being promoted to the rank of centurion.

But, I salute Vicki for such a revealing and fascinating look at lust, love and longing in the ancient world!

Stacie Wyatt says

I reviewed the Joy of Sexus by Vicki Leon, in exchange for review from Netgalley. The book was published by Walker and Company. The book discussed the history of sex throughout the ages. I enjoyed reading about the different aphrodisiacs and anti-potency remedies. Some of the aphrodisiacs included mandrake roots, satyrion, red coral, and wormwood. People also used herbal potions and plants; amulets and rubs; and also inserted hair, excretions, and nail clippings to improve potency.

On the other hand, sometimes people wanted to lower their mate's sex drive by using hippo forehead; mouse dung; wine, in which a mullet has drowned in; or male urine in which a lizard was killed.

The book was an interesting read. I loved reading it. Definitely am thinking about buying a print edition.

Lolly's Library says

As others have pointed out, the latest in Vicki Leon's guides to the ancient world could've used a bit more fact-checking and editing as there are some timeline as well as grammatical errors. However, like Leon's other works, if you're looking for a fast, entertaining, and flippant peek behind (actually up) the togas, chitons, and tunics of the classical world, than look no further. An amusing mix of apocryphal, mythological, and historical (occasionally without clear distinction from the author, one of the book's failings), the short blurbs cover everything from abortion and birth control, to sex pioneers around the Mediterranean, to those peculiar individuals who lent their names to the kinds of love they inspired (Callipygia, I'm lookin' at you), and everything in between happening in the many countries (or one big country if you happened to be Rome) circling that little pond of water known as the Mediterranean. *gasp* Damn, that was a long sentence!

As a fan of Leon's for many years (I adore her *Uppity Women of...* series) I can say that, small mistakes aside, I gobbled up **The Joy of Sexus** and had a giggle fit along the way. I also find her books extremely useful as a great jumping-off point to deeper research. Leon does provide some helpful maps and a five-page bibliography and list of online resources to act as a guide, and from there it's easy to find more substantive, serious, scholarly tomes on the personalities and peccadilloes profiled within *The Joy of Sexus*. Which is the whole point of these popular history books: lure people in with flippant, funny language, get them hooked, and make them realize that the dull, boring history lectures they received in high school are a far cry from the color, zest, and excitement of which our history is actually composed.

Lucy says

Here are my thoughts on THE JOY OF SEXUS: (If you'd like to watch my MINI Review on Youtube go here: <http://youtu.be/jW0x6IMzIbE>)

I love Vicki Leon's books! These are filled with utmost originality in content, presentation, details, facts and entertainment- and that's in Nonfiction- History books!! It's true. If you've ever read any of her books you know exactly what I mean.

So, when I was offered THE JOY OF SEXUS for review- I lunged for it! I know, I know, some of you may be reluctant because of the title...Let me begin by saying, it's HISTORY! This wonderful little book contains all the beliefs, superstitions, spirituality, love and more that originated back then.

Ever wonder how all of the above ever came about? Where did the terminology come from? What is the root of those beliefs and practices? Well, THE JOY OF SEXUS, will clear that up and give you sometimes more information than you need...but in such good taste and humour that you will be chuckling the whole way through it. And historically speaking, this book will put you at the forefront of 'the reasons why'- conversation starters and movers that can be used at cocktail parties or nerdy history conferences alike!

I particularly loved the stories on the 'celebrities' of back then. Who knew that Caesar loved a certain Cougar to death? (...me who thought no one could top Cleo!) My all-time favourite couple was Pericles and Aspasia- such romance!

Vicki Leon engages her readers by peaking our interest from the very first page to the last. This is the kind of history that will be retained because of the immediate interest it evokes and the in-depth info it provides. All those juicy details that beg to be told don't just pop in here and there- the book is filled with them! I can honestly say that I learned something new and interesting on every page.

A quick read that fully satisfies and quenches that historical wonder...

A five-star read!!! I highly recommend this book!

Tad Crawford says

There are many interesting stories drawn together here. It's not just about the joy of sex, because some of the ancients (Nero, Caligula, Elagabalus, Tiberius, etc.) were horrifying and violent. But if you love reading about the Greeks and Romans, as I do, it does offer pleasures. I did have some animadversions, such as poor fact checking. For example, Emperor Elagabalus insists on marrying a vestal virgin despite the virgin's vow of chastity. The text goes on to say, "About two centuries later, among his many infamies, Nero brutally assaulted a vestal named Rubria . . ." The problem is that it was two centuries earlier, not later. Similarly, the Macedonians confront "the Athenians and Thebans at Chaeronea in 358 B.C." In fact, the correct date is 338 B.C. Also, the author is often flippant (Alexander the Great, for example, is "Alex the Great") which I found annoying rather than funny. But the lens of sexuality makes for a fascinating kaleidoscope that rewards the viewer with insights into the grotesque, joyous, and unending human encounter with sexuality.

Serena says

I found this a mostly humorous collection of stories about, yes, lust, love, longing, with largely ancient Rome as a focus.

Mainly my annoyance was in the sorting of these stories and how there is very little distinction made between "true" historical accounts or sources and that of the mythical accounts of sexuality, nor a "timeline" within it.

There is dabbling here of the cultures of Egypt, Greece (Athens, Thebes and Sparta most predominately), and early Christian biblical pieces and a 'martyr' too.

There were helpful explanations of word origins and meanings, and attempts to unravel confusion about the "mysteries" and certain sexual taboos that Romans had that might otherwise be mystifying in the light of modern day's culture.

Rinn says

I received a copy of this book for free from Netgalley, in exchange for an honest review. Also posted on my book blog, Rinn Reads.

Sex sells. Simple. The media is full of it: scandals, the porn industry, sex tips – but rarely is an actual discussion of sex positive. Often it is shown in a negative light, something that, despite being the most natural of human acts, is ruining and corrupting lives and generations. So it's nice to finally see a discussion that is positive.

What's interesting is that despite the leaps and bounds we've made over the past two or three thousand years, sex is still the same. At least, essentially. Some people are completely accepting of all facets of it, others have issues with things like same-sex relationships, some see sex for pleasure rather than procreation as a total sin. And whilst so many things have changed since the times of Homer, Pericles, Nero and various other important ancient figures, the varying views on sex have not.

The Joy of Sexus is a fascinating look at various areas of sex and sexuality, told through short stories and anecdotes and organised by 'topic', for example adultery, masturbation, same-sex relationships, aphrodisiacs etc. Although at times it felt a bit haphazardly organised, I found each story very interesting – and revealing.

My main complaints are that some of the stories felt a little too short, like information was lacking. However, what is there has obviously been very well researched and Leon has a wide variety of anecdotes. Occasionally, some facts were repeated several times throughout the same chapter, but as I read an ARC I hope this has been corrected in the final version. Sex is always going to be an interesting topic, and this book doesn't let that down. A fascinating collection of tales, anecdotes and facts about sex in the ancient world, categorised by topic, this is an easy read that reveals just how little things have changed in at least one aspect of human life through the ages.

What makes me sad after reading this book is that some people in this modern age are much more narrow-minded when it comes to sex and sexuality than those thousands of years ago.

Andy Oram says

This little, lively book is an amusing and detailed introduction to daily life among the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. Although the book talks plenty about sex--fascinating, rare insights--it also provides windows into other topics such as childbirth, fascination with pets, and notable great women. There is far more to know about ancient life than one sees in the usual tomes about Alexander's conquests or the speeches of Cato (both of whom turn up in this book). And sometimes Leon offers fairly deep scholarship, as

in a discussion how the ancients viewed same-sex couplings, and evidence that Amazons existed.

Danielle says

I previously read León's *4000 Years of Uppity Women* and was disappointed with the layout and how brief the biographies actually were, so when *The Joy of Sexus* started with actual chapters, detailed descriptions, and a cohesive narrative, I was very excited. If *Sexus* was 200 pages instead of 320, I'd be writing a very different review.

Unfortunately, there just didn't seem to be enough material to cover an entire book. 45 pages in, loved it. 150 pages and it started to feel repetitive. 280 pages and I was actively wishing for a reprieve. Maybe it needed to stretch into love and sex in the medieval time periods. Maybe it could have elaborated more on the stories it presented. Regardless, by the time section VII - For the Love of it - Pure Passions took an interlude into how awesome dolphins are, it was obvious the source material just wasn't there. (The sections are very odd and arbitrary. Section VII covers empresses who became goddesses and section VIII - Demon Lovers & Gods Dark & Light, where you would expect that chapter, instead covers Amazons.)

Some of the facts were common knowledge, but much of the book was new to me and it did cover an interesting array of topics. It was presented in a fun, lively way that kept the book from feeling too textbook-y, but I did feel that much of the dialogue was too spiced up, such as this excerpt regarding Teiresias the Seer's blinding at the hands of the gods:

Zeus hung his head. "I feel terrible," he said.

Grimacing, Teiresias said, "You feel terrible? Try getting your eyes gouged out, and then get back to me."

"I'm going to give you the gift of prophecy," Zeus said. "It's the least I can do. Oh, and instead of one lifetime, you can have seven."

"What about my eyesight?" Teiresias asked.

"No can undo," Zeus said, looking nervously over his shoulder for Hera.

First, the dialogue is presented like quotes, which rubbed me the wrong way in a nonfiction account, but worse, it's poorly written and reads to me like a YA fantasy novel. It's a stylistic choice that actually took me out of the book instead of making history relatable, as I suspect it was intended.

I did really enjoy learning about Hymen, god of maidenheads and marriage ceremonies, and the Erotes. I highlighted and made a lot of notes about the interesting facts and etymology of words. I wish the section on transsexuality had presented it better, as it seemed the book was confusing it with crossdressing or homosexuality. And the author did take a very odd detour on why sperm donation causes inbreeding in modern society, but most of the topics were handled very sensitively with a definite focus on women's history and rights. In the end, it was a promising, engaging beginning that didn't know where to cut off. It may be more successful as something to refer to, rather than read straight through.
