

DISCUSSION GUIDE:

Lived Through This: Listening to the Stories of Sexual Violence Survivors

by Anne K. Ream

In 2004, writer and [Center for Story & Witness](#) (formerly The Voices and Faces Project) co-founder **Anne K. Ream**, along with documentary photographer **Patricia Evans**, embarked on a unique journey. Their goal was to bear witness to the stories of sexual violence survivors who have been shaped – but refuse to be defined – by what has been done to them. Their passion was to put names and faces on an issue that too often leaves its victims silent, and invisible. The result was a book of narrative and photographic profiles, *Lived Through This: Listening to the Stories of Sexual Violence Survivors*.

The best book discussions are open discussions.

Is this book discussion guide just for survivors of sexual violence? No. Reading the stories and seeing the faces of people who have survived trauma and gone on to live rich and full lives can be helpful for anyone, including people who are rebuilding their lives in the wake of loss or other forms of violence, people who are dealing with their own trauma, and those who want to learn more about gender-based violence.

One book guide, lots of ways to use it.

This discussion guide can be used by facilitators of sexual assault support groups, book clubs, and individual readers to help think through their own experiences and find meaning within the context of these stories. It can also be a powerful training tool for advocacy organizations preparing their staff for interacting with those who have lived through gender-based violence, and therapists and counselors who are working directly with sexual violence victims.

INTRODUCTION

“This book is a story of hope.” (page xi)

- The first word of the introduction is “Hope.” Can a book about rape ever be about hope? Why or why not?
- The book includes stories of people “who have been shaped, but refused to be defined, by their histories of violence.” What has happened in your life to shape the person you are today?

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

“[Her grandmother] then leaned forward and said softly, but very firmly, ‘Isn’t it wonderful, my darling, that you have your work to get back to?’” (page 4)

- After she was attacked, many people told Anne what she should do and expect. What worked for her was the gentle message from her grandmother to resume her life. What are some of the ways other profiled survivors found to “keep calm and carry on”?
- Anne provides several varied and perhaps unexpected examples of what was most helpful for survivors. What has helped you get through difficult or traumatic situations?
- What do you think makes people resilient?

UNBREAKABLE: SASHA WALTERS

“Hearing people talk about rape as a human rights issue, not just a thing that happens to women who make so-called bad choices, really opened my eyes.’ says Sasha. ‘I had not thought about rape as something systemic , or the fact that there were people fighting, dedicating their lives to ending it. And I had never thought about what it meant to be a feminist. Once I grasped that, I was just, “Yeah, sign me up.’” (page 16)

- What role can advocating for other survivors have in healing and recovery?
- For a year, Sasha did not disclose to anyone that she was raped and then disclosed to her family. She began talking publicly about it years later. What might make it difficult for a survivor to disclose sexual violence to someone close to them?
- In what ways, if any, might it be less difficult for a survivor to make a more public disclosure, compared to telling family and friends?

THE GOOD MAN: ROGER CANAFF

“Time and again, I have watched rape victims come forward, sometimes at great risk to themselves,’ Roger says. ‘I won cases because they were willing to say, “Yes, rape happened.” How could I claim to speak for victims as a prosecutor when I didn’t have the courage to acknowledge that I had also been abused?’” (page 22)

- How does Roger’s story challenge many people’s beliefs about rapists and rape survivors?
- How do you think the experiences of male survivors might be different than those of female survivors?
- Historically, we have seen rape as an issue that affects only women and girls. Is that changing? Does it need to?

Because silence is the enemy of change.

THE REALIST: NOBUKO NAGAOKA

“The rape was just one hour. I cannot let one hour of my life have that much effect on me.” (page 33)

- Nobuko acknowledges that her attempt to minimize being assaulted may be denial. Is there a difference between denial and coping?
- When Nobuko told her boyfriend she was raped, she remembers he was more upset than she was. If you are a survivor, how has disclosing the sexual violence you lived through changed your relationships?
- Nobuko and Anne forged a very strong bond and broke through their own stereotypes because of their shared history of sexual violence. How has a shared history of trauma impacted your relationships, or facilitated new relationships?

A LOW HUM: MICHELLE LUGALIA-HOLLON

“It is the absence of language, not language itself, that most often accompanies sexual violence. ‘All truth is good, but not all truth is good to say,’ says the well-worn African proverb, and Michelle’s silence over the years was consistent with such a belief.” (page 39)

- Why do survivors of sexual violence often stay silent?
- How can you talk to children about sexual assault so they know it is safe to tell someone if they are assaulted?
- Michelle says the thing she most regrets is not telling her father. “I underestimated my father’s love, his sense of justice, and his ability to support me...I should have trusted him and myself enough to tell him.” When Anne asks when she told her father, Michelle reveals that she still has never told him. If you are a survivor, are there people you are close to with whom you have not shared your story? If so, what has kept you silent? And what might it take for you to break the silence?

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THE HEARTBREAKER: DOROTHY ALLISON

“Look at your life as a story, and revise it.’ Dorothy tells me. ‘Write yourself a new ending. Because you don’t have to be what they tell you you are going to be.’” (page 44)

- What do “they tell you you are going to be”? Do you believe it?
- If you were to write your own ending to your story, what would it be?
- Even though Dorothy’s mother turned a blind eye to the abuse Dorothy was living through, Dorothy loves her mother fiercely. Should she? Why or why not?

MY AMERICA

“And [Kun Kande] called on the girls present to use their own voices in the fight to end violence. ‘You must express yourself! You must not be quiet about what is happening to you, to your daughters, to your mothers!’ She then turned, gestured to me, and cried out, ‘Your stories matter so much that even the Americans have come to hear you!’” (page 57)

- In Senegal, America serves as a beacon for women’s rights. Why do you think that is? Does America deserve this image?
- What, as a country, are we doing well in promoting women’s rights and where do we need to improve?
- What more could we do as a country to promote women’s rights globally?
- How can you promote and listen to women’s needs and experiences in different cultures and avoid imposing your own cultural standards on other communities and countries?
- The stories of women are what changed public policies in Senegal. In what ways have you seen sexual violence survivor stories create change?

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THE MORE THINGS CHANGE: BETH ADUBATO

“People will do anything to pretend someone they think they know would not commit rape.” (page 64)

- Beth was raped in the 1980s on a college campus. Today, the rate of sexual assault on college campuses is thought to remain largely the same. Why is it that little has changed in this time?
- Some colleges are shifting a focus from “no means no” to “yes means yes” and educating students about affirmative consent. What is consent and why is it important? What does it look like for all parties to take responsibility for communicating and listening?
- What drives our desire, or perhaps need, to believe that someone we know would not commit rape?
- Beth says, “But you shouldn’t just care when it happens to your daughter. You should care when it happens to any of us.” Why is it that some people don’t care until it hits close to home?

DEFIANCE: TORY BOWEN FLYNN

“The word *rape* is difficult for a jury to hear. But the act of rape is infinitely more difficult for a victim to live through, which is why the legal and cultural language that exists to describe such violation is so important for victims. Saying these words in a court of law—‘I was raped, he raped me, I am a rape victim’—is an act not only of courage but also of clarity.” (page 75)

- When Tory testified at her assailant’s trial she was forbidden by the court from using the words rape, sexual assault, victim, and assailant during her testimony. How else are survivors silenced in our culture?
- What is it about the word “rape” that makes it such a difficult word for some people to use and hear?
- How do you think the possibility (or lack of possibility) of justice factors into survivors’ recovery and healing?

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THE SISTERHOOD: BRENDA MYERS-POWELL

“Prostitution also made a sort of terrible sense to an adolescent Brenda. ‘My uncle had been taking off my panties for years,’ Brenda says. ‘And I would look out onto the street, and I would watch these women—from a distance they seemed so beautiful, so shiny—getting paid for what was being done to me anyway. And I wanted to have some of that shine.’” (page 79–80)

- How does Brenda’s story line up with your beliefs about prostitution? How, if at all, does it change your view?
- Brenda makes clear that she could not have gotten out of the sex trade alone. What support should we provide to prostituted women so they can get out of the sex trade?
- Brenda was first prostituted when she was 14 years old. Most women and girls enter the sex trade while still in their teens. What is your reaction to these statistics?
- Most trafficked and prostituted women have been victims of sexual or domestic violence. How does this affect the view that women enter the sex trade by choice?

IN THE NAME OF THE DAUGHTER: STEVE AND JENNY BUSH

“‘When I first learned that the man who had raped my daughter would be granted a military honors burial, I couldn’t grasp that this could be our government’s policy,’ says Steve. ‘It was such an affront to victims, and to good veterans, men and women who deserve to be buried alongside other heroes, not criminals.’” (page 88)

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THE ADVOCATE: TRACEY STEVENS

“‘Men who rape and abuse are thieves,’ says Tracey. ‘They steal our peace of mind, our feeling of being safe, and the lives we had before. And then they get a slap on the wrist for it, and that’s so wrong.’”
(page 101)

- What is fair punishment for a rapist? What, if any, extenuating circumstances do you think should affect sentencing?
- If people knew how rarely rapists go to prison or the time they typically serve if convicted, how might that affect a survivor’s willingness to file a police report, if at all?
- Tracey did everything she could to keep her assailant in prison, including writing letters to the parole board for over 10 years. What does it say about the criminal justice system that such a burden falls on victims of crimes? What must change in order for victims to be able to avoid the responsibility for keeping their perpetrators in prison?

NEW RULES FOR RADICALS

“Here’s the empowering, and possibly uncomfortable, truth: most of us have been outsourcing the ability to create change for far too long. We look to politicians or activists or the ‘chattering classes’ to move the needle on issues that matter to us. What we really need to do is look at ourselves.” (page 106)

- How do you react to the idea that many of us have been reluctant to take responsibility for creating social change? What can you do to create social change?
- What issues matter to you so much that you are willing to demand change?
- How can the power of stories move the needle?
- Anne argues that storytellers, opinion shapers, and subversives are at the heart of all social change. Which are you, if any? Who do you know who fits this profile?
- Anne uses examples of Democrats and Republicans coming together to address sexual violence issues. Do you think one political party owns this issue more than the other?

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IMPASSIONED: SISTER FA

“‘Hip-hop, rap, they are supposed to be about protest,’ says Fatou. ‘That’s the history of the music. I’m a rapper, but when you ask me how I define myself, I have to say that I am a human rights activist first. Rap music is a tool; it is how I put my beliefs into action. It can bring people together, tell a message of change. But only if we bring that music where it is needed.’” (page 120)

- How does music bring people together and help create change?
- What are the tools that are uniquely yours that you can use to create change?

GREY MATTERS: CHRISTA DESIR

“Christa believes her childhood silence about being sexually assaulted was the product of what she calls an ‘almost instinctive’ sense of responsibility for what had happened to her. ‘Even at five years old, I completely blamed myself for the fact that I had been sexually molested,’ Christa says. ‘I was the one who wandered away. I was the one who got in that man’s car.’” (page 124)

- How does the world send messages to women and girls that they are responsible for keeping themselves safe?
- As a writer, Christa found a way to talk about rape by writing a young adult novel. How can music, books, and art play a role in creating change?
- What can you say to men and boys about being part of the solution?

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FREEDOM IN MOTION: THE WOMEN OF ATENCO, MEXICO

“When I ask the women what justice will look like, Edith again turns her attention to the broader struggle. ‘It is not enough for the perpetrators to pay for what they have done to us as individuals. Justice will arrive only when there is change for the benefit of all people.’

Claudia nods, but qualifies her agreement. ‘Yes, justice will be something systemic, a social change. But it will be a very long transformation that perhaps we will not live to see.’” (page 137)

- Anne argues that the Women of Atenco were raped specifically because they were part of a social protest. Do you think this happens in the US – or is it a Latin American phenomenon?
- The Women of Atenco are speaking out at great risk to themselves. Why do you think they are willing to take such a risk?
- We know that police violence and torture also occurs in the US. How can we talk about injustices beyond our borders in a way that doesn’t leave the impression that these things only happen somewhere else?
- What, if any, political, societal, or judicial changes do you believe you will live to see? What do you wish you could live to see, but probably won’t?

THE VOICE: JENNIFER HOPPER

““After all of these years, I am starting to like my “new” self better than the person I was before. I am more intentional now. I am at my best when I speak out about who I am, what I have been through, and what I want to change. I have not let fear stop me from that. And I have loved learning what I am capable of.’” (page 147)

- Can the positive that may come out of tragedy ever outweigh the negative? Why or why not?
- Jennifer says, “...justice doesn’t bring peace. It only brings justice.” Do you agree or disagree?
- Jennifer also says, “rape kills even if it doesn’t kill.” What do you think Jennifer means by that statement?

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IT'S (NOT) ALL ABOUT THE CHILDREN

“That’s the thing about social change. It benefits the next generation, and the generation after that, until someday it is no longer recognized as change at all—it just is. We work to make the world better for our children, and to imagine the future as a kinder, more just place.”
(page 153)

- What change do you hope the next generation will experience?
- Do we care more about sexual violence when it happens to children rather than women? Should we?

TIMELESS: HELEN FINCH

“During the time that I spend with Helen, she lives honestly and openly in her grief, talking about her past without losing sight of what she loves in the present. ‘If we don’t go on living, they may as well have killed us,’ she tells me.

Helen’s words—so simple, so true—have become a mantra for me. I have found myself saying them when, for whatever reason, the pain of my own past feels especially heavy.” (page 160)

- Helen asks, “If we can’t talk about it, how will they know it is happening?” Who do you think “they” are?
- Do you have a mantra to focus on when your life feels “especially heavy”? If so, what is it? If not, what might be a good mantra for you?
- Helen’s story makes clear that rapists target vulnerable people. How does that challenge your view of who perpetrators usually rape and why?
- Helen exhibits a great deal of compassion, telling Anne, “I’m just so sorry that you will have to live with these memories for so long. It’s not right.” What do you think it takes to develop the compassion to get out of your own trauma and focus on the pain of others?

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THE SAFE ZONE: KAREN CARROLL

“When you have that pride that you’d never let any man do that to you, and then you’re raped by your own husband, you feel so much,’ Karen says. ‘Shame. Shock. Having to face that you are not so different after all.’

It took me a long time to realize that it wasn’t about me, or my mother, or any other woman. It was about the men who did this to us.’” (page 165)

- What unique issues may a woman whose husband rapes her have to face?
- How can we shift the focus of responsibility from survivors to perpetrators?
- Karen decided to become a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner after she was raped. How have your own personal experiences changed what you want to do professionally?
- In many of the profiles in *Lived Through This* Anne focuses on the survivors’ lives rather than the attack. What difference does this focus make? What more would you like to know about these survivors’ stories?

PAYING IT FORWARD: KATIE FEIFER

“Years later, Katie was able to turn back, in search of a justice that would last longer than six years, in hopes of stopping a violent man from doing again what he had done to her. Today someone, somewhere, is safe and well, doing the most ordinary of things—taking out the trash, complaining to a coworker, dressing the kids for school because Katie Feifer was willing to do something extraordinary.” (page 175)

- Katie’s experience with the criminal justice system was largely positive, which Anne makes clear is the exception and not the rule. How can people working in the criminal justice system interact with survivors in a way that does not create additional trauma?
- What should “support people” keep in mind when a survivor discloses, so they are more likely to say or do the right thing?
- Katie remembers several ways in which her co-workers and bosses responded very compassionately when she returned to work. How can employers support employees who survive traumatic events?

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THAT SENSE OF PLACE: THE SURVIVORS OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

“Holding a child rapist accountable is rarely a single, simple act. It means exposing not only the individual who is abusing but also the system of thought that has allowed him or her to do so with impunity. And it means facing one of the most uncomfortable truths of all: the number of adults who might have done something, but didn’t, the number of should-be protectors who managed to look away.” (page 183-184)

- How can you avoid being a “should-be protector” who looks away?
- What questions might you ask a child if you notice unusual behavior that concerns you?

HAVE YOUR OWN STORY TO TELL?

Take part in [The Stories We Tell](#), an award-winning, two-day testimonial writing workshop for those who have lived through or witnessed gender-based violence and other social injustices.

Learn more at storyandwitness.org.