

Monro, Kate. *The First Time: True Tales of Virginity Lost and Found (Including my Own)*. London: Icon Books, 2011. 220 pp. £11.99.

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Ten years ago, when I was seeking a publisher for the book manuscript that would eventually become *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*, one prominent academic press responded in a way that spoke volumes about popular perceptions of the relationship between romance and virginity loss. “You’ve got all the ingredients for a great monograph,” the editor told me. “But how about calling it *Rites of Love?*” I was utterly dismayed. All I could think to say was, “Didn’t you read the sample chapters? For most of my study participants, it wasn’t about love at all.”

The latest writer to step into the complicated terrain of virginity loss in the contemporary English-speaking world is British journalist Kate Monro, and she navigates it well. In *The First Time: True Tales of Virginity Lost and Found (Including my Own)*, Monro offers a lively and detail-rich account of women’s and men’s understandings and experiences of virginity and virginity loss. Although distinctly a work of journalism—it makes no claim of being otherwise—*The First Time* has much to offer scholarly readers, not least thoughtful, empirically-based analyses of sociological and psychological processes surrounding sexual initiation. (Readers should know that I spoke with Monro while she was working on the book and am mentioned in her acknowledgements.)

Monro bases her analysis primarily on in-person interviews with over 50 men and women from various walks of life. These are bolstered by references to popular cultural texts (like *Sex and the City* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*) and excerpts from some of the hundreds of emails sent to Monro’s blog, The Virginity Project. She deliberately sought a diverse sample in terms of social background and personal histories, a technique social scientists call *purposive sampling*. In addition to including men as well as women (all too rare in popular and scholarly studies, as Monro notes) and people with disabilities as well as those without, *The First Time* features virginity-loss narratives from individuals who lost their virginity in committed relationships, with sex workers, and with every kind of partner in between; from those who lost their virginity once, twice, and not at all; and from those who lost their virginity with same- and with other-sex partners (and via a variety of sexual acts). It is less clear how varied Monro’s sample is in terms of racial/ethnic background

and social class, but it is neither all white nor all middle-class. Her data have the further advantage of being recently gathered.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Monro's sample is the exceptionally wide age range it encompasses. The oldest person she interviewed was born in 1915, the youngest in 1990. This enables her to situate the particulars of individual biographies in the broader context of the dramatic social and economic changes that took place during the twentieth century. Her analyses thereby reveal social trends rather than individual idiosyncrasies. However, insofar as each birth cohort is represented by only a handful of interviews, Monro can say less about patterns within them. (To her credit, she doesn't make grand claims about generalizability.) Notably, the stories in *The First Time* come primarily from the United Kingdom, so they do not touch on social phenomena or trends specific to the United States, such as the resurgence of moral conservatism or the rise of abstinence-only sex education since the 1970s.

The First Time consists of five chapters as well as a brief introduction and conclusion. After a concise history of virginity loss in the Western world, the first chapter addresses the extent to which attitudes about and approaches to virginity are patterned by gender. It also draws on Monro's interviews to chart the myriad ways in which people define and experience virginity loss, including technical, multiple, and gay/straight virginities. The second chapter features women's stories, highlighting diversity among women and foregrounding change over time. In the next chapter, we learn about men's emotional responses to virginity loss and the ways their approaches to virginity have evolved in response to changes among women. (For example, younger-generation men seem to value virginity more than do their older-generation counterparts.) Chapter four tells the tales of several virgins, including their different reasons for, and responses to, their sexual status. Chapter five presents a series of painful stories, prompting Monro to argue that even the "worst" experiences have transformational qualities.

Consistent with the extant scholarly research, Monro finds that beliefs about and experiences of virginity loss have changed over time and that men and women's beliefs and experiences differ, albeit less, in both cases, than most people typically assume. Regarding romance and love in particular, *The First Time* likewise mirrors previous investigations. Some of the women and men Monro interviewed wanted to lose their virginity in the context of a romantic relationship (in a few cases, marriage) or with romantic trappings ("like in the movies"). Others sought to avoid love and romance on purpose. Some interviewees' experiences unfolded according to their dreams and expectations, while others' diverged; the consequences were not always what one might predict. Like other contemporary observers, Monro notes that women and men recalled their experiences in a more positive light when they, at minimum, liked and were respected by their virginity-loss partners.

Scholars of popular romance will benefit from reading *The First Time* chiefly insofar as it sheds light on the relationship between romance and virginity loss—a common theme in popular novels and films—in the "real world." The book represents an up-to-date, journalistic account with ample sociological insight, although Monro does not analyze her data as deeply as a social scientist would or situate her findings in an existing body of knowledge. (Nor would it be fair to expect her to.) She presents her conclusions thoughtfully, however, occasionally linking them to key scholarly works on virginity and virginity loss (including my book). These, along with practical resources (e.g., for sex

therapy, support and interest groups, and factual sexuality information) are listed in the book's appendix. Scholars of popular romance should find *The First Time* a witty and entertaining read, one that whets their appetites and provides a good jumping-off place for further systematic research on romance, love, and virginity loss.