

Book Review: Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017. ISBN: 978-0062657862 (Hardcover). 256 Pages. \$26.99.

Reviewed by Chauntelle Tibbals¹

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Laura Kipnis starts out *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* with a bit of a disclaimer – that she really didn't mean to stumble into the middle of a Title IX tirade, but that she may've ended up doing so somewhat inevitably. Between her penchant for stirring up trouble and her shortsighted naiveté regarding what students do and do not read, simply *being Kipnis* was enough to land her in hot water related to divisive contemporaneous issues.

This thread connecting individual experience to bigger things -- from larger personal events to wider social events -- runs throughout the book. Regardless of how an individual reader may feel about this specific style, one thing is never unclear: You are reading *Kipnis' assessment* of the situation, and *Kipnis' assessment* alone. Unlike conventional scholarship that attempts to feign objectivity, this amalgamation of autobiographical account and scholarly rigor makes sure to situate itself within the standpoint of the author. I appreciate this approach.

The divisive issues being addressed in *Unwanted Advances* all relate to sexual discordance on college campuses, as well as various invested parties' subsequent roles in dealing with instances of said discordance. More and more frequently, issues of sexual discord are manifesting in Title IX inquisitions. Consideration of this phenomenon, both in general as well as via the unpacking of key cases, serves as the centerpiece of the text.

According to Kipnis (via the book's jacket), "feminism is broken and anyone who thinks the sexual hysteria overtaking American campuses is

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a sign of gender progress is deranged.” Kipnis then attempts to contextualize “the backdrop of the hysteria” for readers who have not spent any recent time on a college campus in the U.S. In her view, a duo of somewhat at-odds “stories about sex” are having a significant impact on campus culture and individuals’ experiences therein. The notion that people have the right to sex in whatever way they so desire is juxtaposed with the idea that sex is dangerous and potentially traumatic, with lifelong negative effects – for women (page 7). According to Kipnis, these contrary notions serve to bolster traditional ideologies about femininity and are not going to reduce the incidence of actual sexual assaults happening on campuses.

For the duration of the text, Kipnis goes through an in-depth unpacking of her own experiences with Title IX, as well as those of Peter Ludlow. Ludlow was once also an employee at the same university as Kipnis. Ludlow’s Title IX experience, however, went much differently than her own.

In Chapter One, Kipnis outlines “The Accusation Factory.” She explains how, in 2011, the Department of Education expanded Title IX from gender discrimination to also include sexual misconduct, issuing guidelines “so vague” that Kipnis could be accused of “creating a hostile environment on campus” simply by writing an essay (36).

Kipnis then details the events that led to Ludlow’s Title IX inquisition, which began in 2014 and ended with his resignation in 2015,² goes through inconsistencies in the testimony levied against him by “Eunice Cho” (a woman who was once Ludlow’s student, though not at the time of the events in question), and makes a compelling argument for the existence of bias favoring traditional gender roles factoring into assessments of conflicting narratives describing interpersonal encounters. Namely, a man could never step back from a sexual come on, especially not from a young woman. At the same time, a woman could never be sexually forward, especially not a young one. As a consequence of these beliefs, Cho is elevated to feminist hero status, while Ludlow is damned. In sum, Kipnis writes: “I could only see Cho as the unlucky product of a system devoted to persuading a generation of young women that they’re helpless prey” (90).

In Chapter Two, “Flip-Flopping on Consent,” Kipnis writes that, in today’s world, “sexual consent can now be retroactively withdrawn (with

² See “Another Harasser Resigns” by Colleen Flaherty. Published November 4, 2015 on InsideHigherEd.com. Accessed December 2, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/04/northwestern-philosophy-professor-resigns-during-termination-hearing-over-sexual>

official sanction) years later, based on changing feelings or residual ambivalence, or new circumstances,” (91). She then goes on to recount another relationship of Ludlow’s, this time with a graduate student called “Nola Hartley,” which lasted “three or so months” and occurred two and a half years prior to the incidents related to Cho (92).

Hartley was never Ludlow’s student nor under his supervision in any academic capacity, but she felt compelled to come forward and retroactively withdraw consent from her and Ludlow’s relationship after hearing about Cho’s accusations. In addition to highlighting problems and inconsistencies peppering Hartley’s story, Kipnis points out that the license to rewrite consent also requires “historical amnesia” about women’s struggles to shed sexual double standards and patriarchal expectations of innocence (95). Put simply, sexual autonomy requires, for better and for worse and for everything in between, sexual honesty. Though one’s feelings about said decisions may evolve or change, the facts of the matter do not. According to Kipnis, allowing women to reframe sexual encounters after the fact is both a throwback to traditional gender roles, as well as a complex issue for institutions to have to then fairly manage.

In Chapter Three, Kipnis recounts her own Title IX inquisition. What happened was this: Kipnis wrote an essay titled “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe,” which was published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in early 2015.³ The essay recounted some of Ludlow’s circumstances related to both Hartley and Cho, including seven out of 5,000 words pertaining to the former. Soon after, students produced a petition against Kipnis, and two graduate students – one of them was Hartley, though Kipnis did not know this at the time -- filed Title IX complaints against her. They alleged that, via her essay, Kipnis had created a hostile environment on campus, among other things.

In a subsequent essay, also published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,⁴ Kipnis explained that new codes banning professor-student dating were an act of paternalism – not feminism. Such codes vastly increased administrators’ (and, thus, institutions’) power over individual lives. And then, as if seeking to prove her point, “here were students demanding that campus administrators protect them from someone’s

³ See “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe” by Laura Kipnis. Published February 27, 2015 on Chronicle.com. Accessed December 2, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Sexual-Paranoia-Strikes/190351>

⁴ See “Eyewitness to a Title IX Witch Trial” by Laura Kipnis. Published April 2, 2017 on Chronicle.com. Accessed December 2, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Eyewitness-to-a-Title-IX-Witch/239634>

ideas.” In the remainder of the chapter, she recounts the intensely complex and highly mutable “process” of moving through her resulting Title IX indictment.

After Kipnis published an account of her case, her email inbox became a sort of sounding board/venting receptacle for others who’d had to deal with their own Title IX inquisitions. In Chapter Four, “F*** Confidentiality,” Kipnis recounts some of the myriad tales people shared with her. In each case, according to Kipnis, outlandish circumstances, as well as outlandish non-circumstances, were the norm. She also discusses the murky and problematic confidentiality requirements and information withholdings that shaped many of these inquisitions – especially when it comes to critically evaluating the actual accusations being levied.

Finally, in Chapter Five, Kipnis puts forth “a plea for grown-up feminism.” Kipnis poses an interesting discussion about alcohol consumption. Namely that engaging the “third rail” (189) of campus assault is tricky business. To discuss alcohol consumption in the context of campus sexual assault is to risk violating a “pretty strictly enforced code of silence” (186), but to not discuss it ignores prevalent and troubling patterns. She discusses “grey rape” (198) and learned compliance, as well as the notion that drunken men are just as unable to consent to sex or understand cues from their partners as drunken women. She also discusses how painting women as victims in all these situations is, ultimately, regressive and destructive. She writes: “The current approaches to combating sexual aggression end up, perversely, reifying male power” (214). This is the key point of this entire work, which she caps off with a final revisiting of Ludlow’s Title IX hearing in the book’s afterward.

Though she does not put any of this gently, Kipnis makes two larger scale points in *Unwanted Advances*. Her first and most obvious is that, in spite of lip service to the contrary, efforts to keep women safe – including “safe” from their own decisions, even those made under stressed out circumstances and/or that they later regret – are repressive. I would imagine that Kipnis would only further underscore this point if it were to be applied to other spaces outside university life or industries besides academia -- even more so today than when the book was initially published.

While Kipnis cautions against protecting young women, her other, more subtle point relates to over-assigning autonomy to young men. The author suggests this juxtaposition of infantilizing young women while young men are assumed to be fully-formed and autonomous (and,

naturally, predatory) is problematic because both rely on arcane gender roles.

It would be easy to pick up this book, read some, get offended, and move on. From Kipnis' brusque way of describing everything to her unfettered willingness to pin down exactly where arguments unravel, a person committed to today's compulsion to believe accusations and assume guilt will certainly be ruffled by her arguments. It only takes a moment though to realize that Kipnis is talking about believing people in *Unwanted Advances*. People, and evidence.