



Sex with Shakespeare: Here's Much to Do with Pain, but More with Love

Jillian Keenan

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A provocative, moving, kinky, and often absurdly funny memoir about Shakespeare, love, obsession, and spanking.

When it came to understanding love, a teenage Jillian Keenan had nothing to guide her—until a production of *The Tempest* sent Shakespeare’s language flowing through her blood for the first time. In *Sex with Shakespeare*, she tells the story of how the Bard’s plays helped her embrace her unusual sexual identity and find a love story of her own.

Four hundred years after Shakespeare’s death, Keenan’s smart and passionate memoir brings new life to his work. With fourteen of his plays as a springboard, she explores the many facets of love and sexuality—from desire and communication to fetish and fantasy. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Keenan unmasks Helena as a sexual masochist—like Jillian herself. In *Macbeth*, she examines criminalized sexual identities and the dark side of “privacy.” *The Taming of the Shrew* goes inside the secret world of bondage, domination, and sadomasochism, while *King Lear* exposes the ill-fated king as a possible sexual predator. Moving through the canon, Keenan makes it abundantly clear that literature is a conversation. In *Sex with Shakespeare*, words are love.

As Keenan wanders the world in search of connection, from desert dictatorships to urban islands to disputed territories, Shakespeare goes with her—and provokes complex, surprising, and wildly important conversations about sexuality, consent, and the secrets that simmer beneath our surfaces.

Sex with Shakespeare: Here's Much to Do with Pain, but More with Love Details

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From Reader Review Sex with Shakespeare: Here's Much to Do with Pain, but More with Love for online ebook

Viktor Quinn says

This book is brilliant. Really.

Reading about how someone else thinks about sex and lives sex - especially someone so unassumingly honest - is touching.

Reading about how someone got over insecurity of the deepest kind is uplifting.

Reading about how someone learned to live better by conversing 300+ year old characters is the dream of every bookworm.

re. sex - I felt like when a good friend, at the end of a long talk, looks me straight in the eye and tells me exactly what she's about. With only an outsider's perspective, armed with nothing more than half-truths and prejudices, BDSM feels weird and alien, but after reading Keenan's account, it just went into the 'apparently some people are into that sort of thing... good for them' - where it joined bungee-jumping, poppyseed-brioche and Wagner.

still sex wasn't the most liberating of its themes. I've never seen the idea that you can treat literary works as one side of a conversation more beautifully laid out. Talk to Shakespeare and you'll learn something about yourself - and the same is true for many other pieces of great literature.

this book is going to test people - test their openness to sex and to literature. For your own sake, read it.

Lesley says

Ick. Confused young American discovers her sexual identity as a spanking fetishist, clarified by goofy imagined dialogues with Shakespearean characters. I lost the little sympathy I had for Keenan when she described her masochistic initiation/affair with an ex-pat coke dealer using analogies to *Romeo and Juliet*. Okay, the connection to *TamIng of the Shrew* maybe works, but still.) Honestly, *Fifty Shades of Grey* is better than this.

Samantha Allen says

I usually fall asleep on planes, sometimes before it even takes off. Something about the movement makes me super drowsy. But Sex with Shakespeare is so good it kept me glued to the book on two separate late night 4 hour flights. I've never stayed awake on a plane ride that long, so this is really saying something. I couldn't put it down. Sex with Shakespeare is so brave and funny and smart. Without exaggeration, it's the most engaging memoir I've ever read. It somehow manages to be hilarious, deeply moving, and surprisingly educational (about both Shakespeare and the world of fetishes) all at once. Keenan writes so bravely about her difficult upbringing, her awakening as a spanking fetishist, and the relationships in her life, and she does it in such a funny, personal way that you feel like she's in the room spilling her guts to you personally. The world of fetishes is one most people don't usually see, unless they're already a part of it, and it was really

thrilling to get a glimpse of that, and explore the challenges and joys of that world. Also, it's honestly incredible that one person knows so much about Shakespeare. I'm a former English major, so I'm not completely unfamiliar with his work, but damn---I'm not even sure my lit professors knew as much as Keenan does. But you really don't have to be a Shakespeare buff or literature nerd to love the Shakespeare parts, because she makes the work so funny and relevant you really won't even know you're learning things. And hey, bonus points for being able to bluff your way through a conversation about Shakespeare at your next fancy party. Anyway, in summary, **READ THIS BOOK**. And then **MAKE YOUR FRIENDS READ THIS BOOK**, because you'll be a more empathetic and knowledgeable human afterward.

Kelly says

This is a modified version of the review that originally appeared on my blog, Shoulda Coulda Woulda Books.

Time on to-read list: A few months

Reason for hesitating to pick up (in the form of an internal monologue): "Ooh, that interview was great, I really want to read that, on the list it goes! Oh wait.... won't that make me look weird for wanting to read that? I don't know.. maybe it's all really narcissistic and stupid anyway... I'll wait... I'll wait. Oh wait, there it is at the bookstore. No wait, too embarrassed to pick it up. Maybe next time. Next time."

*Reason for finally picking up (Part II of monologue): "...fuck it, I'm getting it this time. Gonna start reading it while I'm waiting to go to dinner.... *half an hour passes* Damn. Oh man, what time is it? I have to get this- must finish. Plans CANCELLED. Not even the checkout lady's loud, weirded out announcement of 'Sex with Shakespeare'?!?! is going to deter me, nope, nope, but thanks for that anyway, lady. Taking this home now and-*reads for rest of the night obsessively*"*

Verdict: This is why book-shaming sucks. This book was wonderful. At least it was for me. I hope, below, you can see if it might be for you, too.

(Caveat: Before I even start, if you're here looking for just sexy Shakespeare roleplay or fanfic, look elsewhere. That's not what this book is, so I'm going to save you some time and send you off in more profitable directions right now. Everyone else, let's dive in!)

Sex with Shakespeare is Jillian Keenan's memoir of growing up and trying to form an identity, and the deep external and, most agonizingly, the deep internal resistance she encounters in this attempt. Keenan's struggle, however, focuses especially on her sexual identity as what is commonly referred to as a "spanko,"** a person for whom being spanked is the highest possible sexual gratification, if not the *only* sexual gratification possible. She differentiates early and often between people who have a "kink" of liking to be spanked occasionally as part of generalized BDSM play and people who have a "fetish" for spanking, which she defines as people for whom spanking comes first and sex comes a very very distant second. Keenan calls sex a "dessert", an optional thing that is nice, but as she says, "if I had to give up sex-all kinds of sex-or spanking, I'd flush sex like a drug smuggler ditching his stash in an airport bathroom. My fetish isn't something I do. It's something I am."

As you might imagine, Keenan encounters more than a few problems growing up as she becomes more and

more aware of her fetish, and just how central it is to her core identity. (And she's got a rough enough childhood situation to contend with without this situation, to be honest.) But luckily, she's got a pal with her on this journey, one she was lucky enough to meet early: Will Shakespeare. Each chapter focuses on how a different play of Shakespeare's helps Keenan process a different moment in her life. This can range from an academic discussion of ways to interpret Shakespeare's verse to wonderfully hallucinogenic, personal conversations Keenan has with Shakespeare's characters, who dispense advice to her like older sisters, best friends, demanding mentors, bro-tastic frat boyfriends or offer her ambiguous, helplessly tempting words that could transform her or destroy her, according to her interpretation of them.

This truly wonderful device should be recognizable to anyone who loves literature to this same obsessive degree. It's the most direct demonstration I've ever seen of one of my favorite passages by one of my favorite writers, where he says, *"Sometimes I sensed that the books I read in rapid succession had set up some sort of murmur among themselves, transforming my head into an orchestra pit where different musical instruments sounded out, and I would realize that I could endure this life because of these musicales going on in my head."* *** Keenan is able to get through each day because these characters swoop in and save her in a variety of pensive, soul-searching, comedic, tragic or tragi-comedic circumstances. Again and again, these were my favorite parts of the book. One example of her analysis comes with Macbeth, as she processes through the nature of trying to develop an identity and fit within the fabric of life, faced with someone in her life who is lying to himself in a way even more extreme than she is, a friend with a girlfriend who is against gay marriage that she finds, unexpectedly, in a gay bar in Singapore:

"Macbeth is a play about doubles. But there is a twist.

In Shakespeare's tragedies, the hero (or antihero) often has a double, or a voice-a secondary character who speaks for the main character, linking him to the real world and to the audience. Marjorie Garber describes these sidekicks as "someone on the stage who encounters things and verifies that what seems impossible or unbearable is, nonetheless, true." In Hamlet, Horatio fills that role: at the end of the play, Horatio is the one who promises to tell Hamlet's story. In King Lear, that voice is Edgar...

Macbeth's obsession with equivocation speaks to this idea of double voices. The word equivocation itself comes from the Latin oequivocus, which means "of equal voice". In Macbeth, where even the fundamental premise of the play demands verification- are the witches real, or merely a product of Macbeth's imagination?- that double voice is more important than ever. At first, Banquo fills the the role of the double. He links Macbeth to the audience. We know Banquo saw the sisters too. Unlike the dagger that Macbeth sees, or imagines, before he kills Duncan, Banquo's voice verifies that these sisters do exist.

But Macbeth has a tragedy that sets it apart from every other Shakespeare tragedy: Macbeth mrders his voice. Mad with fear that Banquo's heirs will seize the throne, Macbeth has Banquo killed. After that, our antihero is on his own. There is no one left to verify what is real and what is not. In fact, the night after Banquo dies is the very last time we see Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who previously had the strongest marriage in Shakespeare canon, speak to each other. When Macbeth's voice dies, everything else disappears, too. Macbeth is alone.

He can't survive that way. No one can.

And the hallucinogenic voices, beyond even the analysis, come to her aid at even more desperate times, like when she doesn't tries to process something beyond kink, something even more threatening to her that she can't name:

Cleopatra was standing at the foot of the bed. "Where's David?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied coolly.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Why had David left? I sighed.

"Cleo, is Antony's love for you just an Oedipal thing?" I asked.

"That's none of your business," Cleopatra snapped. "If you want to know why David is attracted to you, ask him yourself. Stop displacing your fear onto us."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. "I'm not 'displacing' my feelings onto you," I replied. "I'm processing them through you. That's how people experience literature."

Cleopatra scoffed. "Are you sure there isn't something more?" she asked. "Something you're unwilling to face?"

I bristled. "Hey," I said, pointing my finger at her. "I faced it. I was honest with David about that shit from the beginning."

Cleopatra's lip curled in contempt. "Good grief, I'm not talking about your 'kink'," she said. "This incessant whining doesn't impress me at all."

There were angry shouts upstairs. I slid off the bed. "Is there a point to any of this?" Cleopatra pressed, her voice rising to a yell. "Or are you just wasting our time?"

And again and again at the most compelling moments of her life, Shakespeare's characters appear to offer her understanding, judgment, laughter and temptation. (The best one comes later and is too much of a climatic moment for me to reveal it, but it's a great and fitting crescendo.) The endless hours that Keenan has obviously spent studying Shakespeare until he became an extension of her thought and her body, until she can reach for him without effort and feel his lines flowing through her body with such natural ease makes that it makes her use of him both touching and moving to watch in a way it wouldn't with someone who didn't really earn their use by feeling them in their bones. She does not always reach for him, but the way the story is set up, maybe she should. Each time, something in him reflects her back to herself, whether that mirror is flattering or not. She finds, as so many have found before her, truth in Shakespeare. For her, that truth happens to include seeing kinky sex all over Shakespeare's world. The instinct of the reader is, at first, to of course be skeptical, and even be thrown out of the narrative by what seem like, at best, highly selective interpretations of Shakespeare's stories. But that would be to miss the point entirely.

Nobody reading this, by the end, will care whether or not Keenan's interpretations of Shakespeare are the most correct or convincing things you've heard. Some definitely aren't. (Although a few of them- like Helena's situation in *Midsummer*, like Kate and Petruchio of *Taming of the Shrew*, like her particularly disturbing *Lear* reading are challenging enough that I think it would make for excellent debate material to throw them into the mix of any discussion on those plays). But it doesn't matter. Because if you can see anything at all, it is that the knowledge, fierce intelligence, passion and care she puts into each interpretation is what matters most. It is watching her take these pieces of the greatest playwright the world has ever seen and reshuffle them into their best of all possible uses: self-understanding, acceptance, love, the breaking down of walls and the defeat of her worst impulses. It is watching literature become the savior we all already knew it was, allowing this clearly fierce woman to emerge from this place of seclusion and doubt she's been imprisoning herself in for far too long. It's watching an uncertain child become a woman. Not a perfect woman by any means, but a woman who has figured out a path that feels true at long last and at great cost.

Yes, there's some sex (and a few scenes of really *sexy* sex, if you ask me). Yes, there's some sad parts and some truly scary parts and some parts where you might cry or be enraged, but what I left this book with was, in the end, however unlikely it seemed at the start, a great feeling of joy. I felt like I'd just watched Keenan climb the Himalayas, and all I thought was: *You did it, girl. You did it.*

Or, more precisely, *we* did it. If you've got any skin in this emotional game- and no, I don't only mean the kinky one- you'll feel like you've gone through it with Keenan. I found memories flying through my head as

I read, blending with what I was reading. Sometimes I needed to stop and process, it felt like all too much. But like Keenan's relationship with Shakespeare, her memories allowed me to access my own, opening up the hard to access path that only a few authors seem to really get to walk with each person: the path you don't always want to walk, but the one that leads you, ever so slowly, to yourself.

(Disclaimer: As I stated in the original review, this is a personal five stars. So lest you think I am totally blinded by my personal experience, I should mention that Keenan's writing style perhaps doesn't appeal to all due to its highly personalized nature. She can also of course be highly self-centered, as you might expect in a biography. She can be melodramatic as you might expect in her teenage scenes and her surreal sequences may not appeal to everyone's sense of the ridiculous and enjoyment. I didn't really care about any of this though, and my bet is you won't either.)

**(A word she despises and compares to "cans of spray cheese", but I'll use it just this once for clarity's sake and then not again, since I happen to agree with her that even the sound the word is both hilarious and gross.)

***Orhan Pamuk, *The New Life*. He's good, guys. Get on that. *Istanbul* is by far his best book, but *My Name is Red* is pretty brilliant too.

Simon Patience says

I'm really surprised by the positive reviews. I was so excited about getting this book. I started it with enthusiasm and it didn't disappoint at first. It quickly, however, degenerates into self-indulgent twaddle. If the writer's life were a bit more remarkable or interesting then it would warrant the kind of scrutiny that the memoir gives it here. But it aint, so it don't.

Exploring sex and sexuality in Shakespeare is a worthwhile endeavour but it requires a much more sophisticated and deft touch than it receives here.

TK says

Not for the uptight or conservative! (So, fine for me.) *SEX WITH SHAKESPEARE* is a rich and thought-provoking read. Jillian Keenan's writing is wonderful, her spirit intelligent and funny. What I enjoyed most of all about her memoir is how she shares her path towards vulnerability and intimacy with (first) herself, and (then) with her romantic partners. I appreciated this very much, and found this part of her memoir was the universal message, transcending her personal story of coming to terms with her kinky sexuality.

Her story alternates with literary criticism of several of Shakespeare's classic plays. The plays she chooses to write about serve as guideposts for her as she matures into and accepts her kinky sexuality. Keenan's lit crit is no joke--she is steeped in her scholarship from way back; do NOT underestimate her depth of knowledge and understanding of the Bard's work. The way that Shakespeare's plays reinforced her journey towards truth, honesty, and love was seamlessly done.

Apart from all this (the kink, the lit crit), Keenan reveals herself as a daring globetrotter, pursuing stories in very remote, undeveloped parts of the globe as a journalist. If I didn't already admire her for being

remarkably well-adjusted and erudite, her fearlessness and sense of adventure in her professional life would have won me over. I think other readers will find Keenan just as impressive (and maybe even as inspiring) as I do.

Alex says

And now someone's written a book analyzing her spanking fetish through Shakespeare. It's like putting pie on cake.

Melissa Yael Winston says

A brave, deeply touching memoir for anyone who has wrestled with their own sexuality.

Readers who've ever dealt with a part of their sexuality that they couldn't accept—that they felt somehow was “ugly” or “wrong,” who sought out books as a release from real or perceived isolation—will enjoy Jillian Keenan's work.

Sex with Shakespeare leads the reader through intriguing and frequently heart-wrenching scenes from Keenan's own life while interweaving them with an entertaining analysis of 14 of Shakespeare's plays. Simply put, Keenan is obsessed with being spanked. All other sexual activities pale in comparison to this ultimate erotic experience. “I had often wondered what caused this bizarre obsession,” Keenan says about spanking, “but eventually I gave up. It was exhausting to psychoanalyze my erotic life. Recognition and experience didn't translate into comfort.” Instead, Keenan seeks comfort in dialogues with Shakespearean characters.

My favorite part of this book centers around Keenan's first experience with a boyfriend who shared her kink, an American she meets while living in Spain. (What is it about living overseas that makes it a weird never-neverland of hiding from oneself?) As she describes her first erotic spanking with the intensity of a PG-rated romance novel—there is the obligatory fadeout—she grips the reader with one of the better analyses of *Romeo & Juliet* I have ever read. “*Romeo and Juliet* isn't about young people in love. It's a story about two young people who desperately hope for love, with tragic results.” Like *Romeo and Juliet*, Keenan and her boyfriend get caught up in an intensity that's should never be confused with love or even real passion. Extreme it was, but like *Romeo and Juliet*'s four-day rollercoaster ride, it was a powerful, all-consuming trip that would ultimately end in tragedy. (Note: no one died, but the pain was not limited to the blows landing on Keenan's butt.)

The book also includes a much-needed discussion of the poisonous nature of “privacy,” and how “privacy” is a silencing technique leading to perilous situations. “‘Privacy’ is one of the most potent and insidious weapons a sexual majority can use against people with nonnormative sexualities...it sounds responsible and mature. But ‘privacy’ is tied up with isolation and shame. It drives people underground. It puts people in danger.” When pop culture condemns fetishes, people who have them suffer in silence or turn to unsafe outlets to express them. Sometimes all it takes is a book or a TV show to validate a sexual identity. “Privacy,” which has been losing value in other areas of our lives, including “normal” sexuality, keeps it in the dark. (“Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” anyone?)

Serious Shakespeare scholars may disagree with her take on things. Shakespeare dilettantes (like me) may appreciate the new perspectives that never came up in college literature courses. Those who don't care for Shakespeare at all may appreciate how real her struggles feel through no-holds-barred writing. And people who have hidden from their sexuality because it didn't fit in with what they thought was normal may find it a breath of fresh air.

Quinn Collard says

As both a kinky person and an English major, I was very excited about a book combining kink with literary criticism. Finding links between the two was done well, and it was interesting to hear about the writer's history with her kink. The parts about her relationships that weren't related to her sexuality bored me, and the imaginary conversations with Shakespearean characters device started to feel forced by the end, but for the most part I enjoyed this book and think it would do a good job giving non-kinky people some insight into how it can work.

Nicole says

This book was great! I learned so much about kink and Shakespeare! A+

Leanne says

I expected to enjoy this book. I expected to laugh and to learn a lot from it. I did not expect to completely fall in love with it. Yet here we are.

Most of the other reviews have covered the qualities that make this book 5-star-worthy. It's funny. It's touching. It's unflinchingly honest. It covers a lot of uncomfortable subjects with self-awareness and grace. And it taught me a lot about kink that I never knew before. Bonus points for learning something new!

But it's mostly about people. And words. This is a truly astounding work of literary analysis, wrapped in a memoir, wrapped in kink. The things you think it is about - it is not about.

Read it & be amazed!

Lynn Weber says

Memoir is the genre of our age for a reason. As a culture we are just learning to confront reality, and each new story opens another window onto it. This memoir of a young Shakespeare scholar working through her sexual identity is so rich and honest and smart and humane. And her readings of Shakespeare's plays are

really insightful. Thrilling, even.

Jim says

Honest, forthright...and tedious. In a minor miracle, the author combines Shakespeare with sexual kink and comes up with something tiresome.

Emily Stearns says

While not wholly for the conservative, there are only a few scenes which were really out there - well, in a world where adults should be able to talk honestly about sex without blushing.

I loved this book. Keenan beautifully mixes Shakespearean analyses into her own life, sexually and not necessarily so. She taught me much about the Bard and BDSM, about life in general and love. The writing is open, honest, and riddled with humor; the serious moments strike as relatable instead of far-fetched, as I personally find many biographical books to be.

Please, read this book.

Kent Winward says

So what do you call literary criticism that is done through the lens of your sexual fetish? Not sure, but it is refreshing. Spank the author if you disagree -- she'll enjoy it.
