

A Conversation with
KERRY COHEN

author of
LOOSE GIRL
A Memoir of Promiscuity
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Q: What is a loose girl?

A: A loose girl is a girl who has been badly emotionally hurt and attempts to ease that hurt through male attention and sexual behavior. She yearns to feel worthwhile, which she usually defines as worth loving. She is *not* wantonly or gratuitously trying to get sexual attention. She doesn't simply "want it."

Q: What sparked your intense need for attention, and why do you think sex seemed like the way to fulfill it?

A: It began with not getting enough attention at home, a circumstance that stemmed from my parents' unique personalities and limitations, and also from broader factors like my parents' divorce and my mother's moving to the Philippines to pursue her career. These events coincided with my sexual awakening—I was 11 and 12—so I was keenly tuned in to what seemed to make me feel better emotionally. Sex and male attention were right there. They came after me, really. It would have taken more effort to resist than to give in and feel for awhile like I was loveable.

Q: At what point did you realize that you had a different relationship with male attention than other women did?

A: By the time they get to high school, most girls are well aware of the so-called "sluts" of their schools. There is a clear designation. From what I could tell as a high school student, girls could have sexual experiences inside relationships (though even these seemed limited to certain behaviors), but it wasn't acceptable for them to do such things outside of relationships. If they did, then they were sluts. I saw the girls around me engaged in sexual behavior, but most of them had boyfriends. I felt constantly like these girls knew something that I didn't, something that made them worthwhile.

I couldn't seem to hold on to boyfriends. I wondered constantly why boys seemed to fall in love with other girls, but never with me. The only answer I could ascertain was that I simply wasn't lovable, and I figured that I wasn't lovable because I had needs. Needy girls are undesirable; the media certainly makes that clear. As hard as I tried, I couldn't stop feeling and acting needy, and in my case, the need to feel worthwhile was entangled with boys.

Q: You write about the importance of discovering writers like Louise Erdich and Carson McCullers as a teenager. What did they mean to you? Were any other writers pivotal in your development as a writer and as a woman?

A: Writing and reading happened simultaneously for me. Most writers have stories of being voracious readers as children, but I wasn't. I was too busy, of course, obsessed with boys. My twelfth grade English teacher introduced my class to writers who, for the first time, spoke to me. Their stories of particularly female loss and longing were the first ones that helped me feel less alone. They also gave me the freedom to feel things I had not dared let myself feel outside the careful lines of other people's stories. These feelings were otherwise too big and overwhelming. I quickly started reading tons of mostly contemporary female writers—Barbara Kingsolver, Janet Frame, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Sandra Cisneros, I could go on and on. I was drawn mostly to writers who seemed able to capture emotional pain and then rise above it through the power of their words.

Q: Recalling some of the material in your book must have been difficult. How do you feel now, looking back at your younger self?

A: Oh, man. Regretful. Sad. I wished a lot during the writing that I could go into the pages and save myself. I carried the fantasy that I simply wasn't lovable, and most everything I did grew from that lie. Sometimes I look back on those times and think how much was wasted. My fixation on boys kept me from doing lots of things that might have truly filled me. I gave up trips to other countries, becoming friends with interesting people, and writing more, to name a few. I gave up the opportunity to know myself as a whole person, to find out who I might have been had I not spent so much of my time thinking about what boys were thinking of me. I might have been someone worth thinking of more.

But I also feel hopeful. I mean, I'm still that girl in the book. I still have some of those struggles. Yet look how far I've come.

Q: What emotion, if any, has replaced the desperation you have felt in the past?

A: Awareness has replaced the desperation. It's important to note here, I think, that the pain itself hasn't been replaced. This kind of thinking—that we can one day be free of our childhood trauma—is dangerous. It makes us look for replacements, and that's exactly what I was doing through the course of my loose girl years. The difference between what I do now and what I did then is that I don't react to the pain anymore. I don't let it control me. I'm now able to feel it and know what's causing it without feeling compelled to *do* anything about it. When I feel that pain, I might cry or let a good friend or my husband know how I'm feeling, and then it passes until the next time.

Q: Do you ever fall back into needing male attention the way you did in the past?

A: Yes, and no. I still want male attention often, but the 'need' has quieted down a great deal. Only once since the writing of the book have I really dropped back into feeling like the "loose girl," and that was when I saw my ex Lief when his band came to play here. I had a crazed evening of emotion, a morning of devastation, and then by the afternoon I had talked myself back down. After all this time I just recognize the "loose girl" feeling for what it is pretty quickly and know it isn't real. The pain and desire are real, of course, but they aren't about what's really happening in the present moment. They're about feeling unlovable, a feeling I will probably always struggle with.

Q: Throughout the book you refer to 'guys' and 'boys,' but you never use the word 'men.' Why?

A: Men are grown-ups. They're human beings with feelings and needs of their own. Such a creature couldn't figure into my loose girl mind. The way I saw it at the time, boys were there only to answer my needs. They were almost more like toys than real people in that they always seemed both unattainable and endlessly desirable. I wanted only for them to want me.

Q: How do you think these 'boys' would react to reading about what you were feeling when you were with them?

A: Oh, I hope they do read it! In many ways, *Loose Girl* feels like one long apology to all the boys—and some girls—from my past. I imagine they would think, "Yup, I sensed you were too needy." But who knows? Maybe they would think, "Really? But I *did* like you." If they did, you see, I wouldn't have known because I was too caught up in my own self-absorption. In general, though, I think boys and men could benefit from reading the book to get a better, more realistic, perspective on what girls are thinking and feeling in these

kinds of situations. There's so much cultural silence on the subject, and that silence includes the invisible lines between boys and girls.

Q: Your young adult novel, *Easy*, draws on your personal experiences, but *Loose Girl* is an out-and-out memoir. How does it feel to discuss your past so openly?

A: It's a relief, actually. It's a chance to explain myself in honest terms, to explore what happened, and to take some responsibility for what I've done. Seeing my story as a whole gives it meaning. All that loss and pain wasn't for naught. It had shape and beauty and significance, and perhaps others can find some meaning through it, too.

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: My own saving began when I saw myself in the pages of a book so my hope is that girls and women will find themselves in *Loose Girl*. When I first formulated what I wanted to communicate in this book, so many women told me, "That's my story." So many girls I counseled were struggling with similar feelings and behaviors. It was shocking to me, actually, that no one had written this book yet. It took me ten years to get from the first nugget of an idea to the completed first draft of *Loose Girl* partly because I couldn't find any precedent for what I wanted to say. No one was talking about teenage girls and sex beyond the tired old notion that girls are either sluts or virgins. It took me a long time, but by going deeper inside my own psyche, by talking with girls, and by researching everything I could on the subject, I finally understood that what I needed to say was both entirely new and epidemic among girls and women. I knew I had to get this perspective out there.

So many girls and women feel alone with feelings similar to the ones I wrote about in *Loose Girl*. I want them to feel seen. I also hope readers will gain a deeper understanding of female promiscuity, that more often than not it's not a girl simply "asking for it" or (another belief growing out there these days) being empowered. It's a girl who is likely trying to fill her emptiness with what feels like an easy fix. It's a girl who is trying, and failing, again and again to be loved. It's a girl who doesn't love herself.

Q: What helped ease your cycle of addiction to male attention? Are there repercussions of your past behavior in your life today?

A: It's so hard to know, but I think some combination of therapy, life experience, friendships, reading, and my personality led me to finally change my life. One of the ways I knew I was dealing with an addiction was that the pull to go back to my old ways was strong. Like an addict, even though what I was doing made me feel like absolute shit, my instinct was always to go back to it. The belief that male attention would make me feel better remained awfully stubborn through the years in spite of every rational

indication otherwise. At some point, though, I stopped thinking of this part of me as powerful and real. Instead, I thought of it as what it really was: a sad little girl, a part that needed some petting and love—from me—that would quiet it until it rose up all teathy and needy again.

The only repercussions are emotional, thank God. Obviously, I dodged some real bullets there—STDs, pregnancies, HIV. The biggest emotion is regret. I regret that I lost my single years, years that could have been a lot of fun, to all that desperation and self-abnegation. I didn't travel or do interesting things in my life because I was too busy trying to make a boy love me. Also, I'm an attractive girl! I could have taken advantage of that! I could have enjoyed my time with men rather than feeling like every experience had to fill my emptiness, rather than considering every failed relationship to be evidence of being unlovable.

Q: How does your experience affect how you're raising your sons?

A: Often people ask me, "Do you have any hesitation about this book being out there when you have two young sons?" My answer is: not at all. I think it's a mistake to think that what we teach our daughters doesn't directly affect our sons. Boys do not have anywhere near the same restrictions put on them as girls do when it comes to their sexual identities. We expect boys often to have more experience than they do, but that's it. Boys are allowed to direct the course of their sexual growth, whereas girls can't own their sexual desires, even in a presumably healthy way. As a mom to sons, I see it as my job not only to talk to them about their own experiences, but to help them understand girls and girls' behavior from a more realistic perspective.

Q: Looking back at your teenage self, is there something that could have been done to save you from the neediness and anguish that engulfed your life for so long?

A: My biggest obstacle was having no one to acknowledge or help me with my feelings. Indeed, certain emotions were simply not allowed in my household, and both parents made it very clear in their own ways that I was not to make them feel anything unpleasant. They didn't want to know about my anger or my sadness because that made them feel bad, and I felt sacrificed in this way. And so, I grew up with lots of painful feelings I couldn't contain, and lots of shame about those feelings. Usually when this happens, kids turn to an outside source—drugs, alcohol, or, in my case, promiscuity—to express themselves. Ideally my parents would have wanted to listen to and accept my emotions, and have let those emotions be about me rather than about them.

Q: What advice would you offer girls facing similar struggles today?

A: The most important thing is communication. I'm not going to be so bold as to say I know what causes girls' promiscuity, but I do know that had I found just one adult to

listen—really listen—to my feelings and concerns, I may not have gone so quickly down the path I did.

The other thing is education about being a girl in our culture. If you take some time to look around, it won't be long before you recognize how much and how consistently girls are given limitations. Boys are limited, too, but not in the same ways and not nearly as much. You can tell by the way boys walk, the way they yell to girls from their cars, the way they sit, their legs open, bodies relaxed. In general girls are not afforded these same freedoms, but most every girl wants it. Hoping to get it, many of them attach themselves to boys, and then take it way too far, like I did. They grow dependent on boys liking them, and they lose sight of themselves.

Getting a boy to notice you is easy—it's the easiest thing in the world for a girl—but it's also selling yourself short. If, rather than stringing themselves along with boys, girls started demanding more freedoms, like the freedom to be who they wanted to be, to flaunt their intelligence, their creativity, what would happen? I fully believe girls have the power to change the cultural restrictions put on them, but as long as they keep latching onto boys, nothing will change.

To arrange an interview with Kerry Cohen, please contact:

Allison McGeehon, Senior Publicist, Hyperion & Voice
212-456-0173 / allison.mcgeehon@abc.com

Pamela Peterson, Publicity Assistant, Hyperion & Voice
212-456-0171 / pamela.peterson@abc.com