

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Girls Play Dead: Acts of Self-Preservation*

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<https://doi.org/10.65589/001c.161679>

Military Chaplaincy Review

Girls Play Dead: Acts of Self-Preservation. By Jen Percy. New York: Doubleday, 2025. 272 pages.

Girls Play Dead: Acts of Self-Preservation by Jen Percy revises dominant narratives around sexual assault by telling real-life stories of sexual assault. The book's title means many things all at once: infantilizing women by referring to them as girls, making all of us take seriously what happens to the bodies of women and girls, figuring the actions of women as frivolous or fatal, and blurring the lines between all of these things. Women's own experiences told in their own voices are at the heart of the book. And Percy interlaces those accounts with the standard account or accounts of intimate partner sexual violence and the new ones that she narrates. Percy writes against versions of sexual trauma that understand women's seeming passivity—silence, not explicitly saying no, body language and even sexual responses that may seem to welcome instead of reject the escalating violence, and remembering some details of the assault with excruciating accuracy while blotting out others in the face of it—as consent or something very like consent. Instead, she foregrounds understandings of sexual trauma that underscore the various origins of that seeming passivity, how it gets expressed during sexual violence, and its ongoing effects in real women's real lives.

Not all unwanted sex is sexual assault. If having sex is reduced to binary terms, our resources are limited for both describing and understanding sex that doesn't feel right to at least one partner. Percy's book is expansive in its discussion around the hugely various forms of unwelcome sex. She situates her book within the context of wider conversations about unwanted sex, including consensual sex (or sex that is, as one woman she interviews puts it, "consensualish").¹ Unwanted sex doesn't have to involve physical force or the fear of force. Women report feeling forced into sex "by the situation and not the person."² The very act of sex becomes a way to

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¹ Percy, *Girls Play Dead*, 173.

² Percy, *Girls Play Dead*, 172.

exit the room when performing it seems to be expected by a potential partner or fulfill social norms around their own desire, attractiveness, and sexuality to which women conform themselves. Even consensual sex can be uncomfortable, embarrassing, disgusting, painful, or creepy. Understanding how Percy does this delicate work is important for military chaplains because it helps chaplains situate their own stories, the stories they hear from service members, and cultural stories within a broad understanding of unwanted sex.

Percy provides accessible conceptual resources for lay readers, but her book is about more than making the latest research accessible. The upshot of this approach is that Percy invites readers to be part of the very kind of community she describes at the end of the book. Percy concludes by naming the harm as a rupture of community, rather than locate the harms of sexual assault within individual victims. The rupture is communal, so too the work of healing. Percy writes of Luisa, who comes to understand that her healing from rape isn't individual or linear: "She sees that her body lives among the community, responding to these new memories and sensations, unlike before when she felt nothing and there was only a single memory that pulled her away from the present and back into the arms of the rapist."³ It's overblown to say that the book itself tries to enact the very healing it depicts, but that description is only a bit inflated.

Percy tells her own story and stories throughout the book. The book opens: "There is no single anecdote. What I'm talking about is an accumulation."⁴ A single story of an individual life or experience, the single story of an individual life or experience, or even the compilation of many stories from an individual life are all lacking in Percy's estimation—they don't have the power to bring into full view the full range of uncomfortable sex and even sexual violence. It's the way that the events and experiences move through a single life and are shared experiences across lives that she's after. So when she narrates instances of when she was on the receiving end of unwelcome looks, comments, gestures, touches, and penetrative sex, it's because the whole range of activities matters. The escalating severity brings into focus the harms done by even seemingly innocuous interactions.

Individual women's experiences of sexual violence are at the heart of the book. Percy does not pretend that her work is in-depth, exhaustive, or definitive. That is a part of its strength. She does not act as though she is writing the authoritative account of sexual assault (or sexual assault in the military), or about the relationship between domestic abuse, sexual assault,

³ Percy, *Girls Play Dead*, 238.

⁴ Percy, *Girls Play Dead*, 3.

and homicide, or even about sexual violence on college campuses. She sketches the stories of multiple women's lives to trace how violence begets violence.

She meaningfully and sensitively engages with the conventional ways of thinking about women's experiences of and responses to sexual assault. *Girls playing dead* sums up this line of thinking. Women's seeming passivity in the midst of unwelcome sexual attention and even assault signals, to this way of thinking, their willingness, even eagerness. Percy rewrites this conventional story. *Girls play dead*, it turns out, to protect themselves. The freezing, the zoning out, the blocking out, and blacking out that so many women describe in the face and wake of unwelcome sex are in fact ways to survive horror. A single voice in the book asks what so many others will echo: "Why and when had I learned to respond to fear with a look of joy?"⁵ Freezing—not saying no, for instance—looks like compliance. Fawning—moving towards the encounter instead of fleeing it, for example, a woman lifting her hips to make unwanted sex less painful—can also look like compliance.

That fawning and compliance resemble one another vastly complicates not just the act of sex itself, but all that comes after it, and how to understand it. Making sense of unwelcome sex that seemed welcome in the moment is enormously difficult, which is true in different ways for the different parties involved. Having sex again with the person who assaulted them may redouble an external party's sense that the sex was in some way welcome even if the person who was assaulted knows differently. At an extreme end of this gap between what a survivor knows and what might be understood from the outside is lying about sex to be believed that you didn't want it by saying you said no to convince someone in authority, for instance a cop or a jury.

And, of course, there are other sets of responses to unwanted sex and even sexual assault: ongoing physiological responses. Percy describes a huge range of bodily experiences that follow sexual violence. The history of the study of trauma is a story about both the traumas of women and men, bound up with stories of sexual violence and the violence of war. Percy likens a survivor of sexual assault to a soldier:

She knew that soldiers fighting in combat didn't get hungry. They didn't sleep. They didn't feel the urge to drink or defecate or urinate. Everything was shut down so that all their energy and attention could go into fighting, which meant staying alive. But once there was a break, the soldier might be overcome with pain and hunger and thirst. Stacie had been living life as stressed as a combat soldier.⁶

⁵ Percy, *Girls Play Dead*, 10.

⁶ Percy, *Girls Play Dead*, 106.

The resonances between sexual trauma and war trauma run deep. Hysteria was the earliest psychiatric diagnosis for the sexual trauma of women and military psychiatrists during World War I likened the symptoms of traumatized soldiers to that of hysterical women. It was the advocacy of both women and soldiers that led to inclusion of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The parallel symptomatic responses are a function of violence, which may be fairly easy to see. The attenuated agency of women and soldiers in these circumstances may be harder to see but it is there. Percy only sketches these connections, but that outline invites her readers to draw a fuller picture.

Percy's narrative connects to the practice of military chaplaincy in a few ways. Chaplains may be intimately familiar with stories like the ones Percy shares. Chaplains may also carry the same biases around believing these stories that the women in her book faced. Many women service members are scared off from going to their chaplain with stories of unwanted sex and sexual assault on that basis alone. Many turn to their chaplains in need, nevertheless. Percy's book sheds new light on those pastoral encounters when service members do. Of particular interest for chaplains will be her chapter that examines the close etymological relationship between descriptions of mystical experiences of the force God's love (rapture) and violent force (rape). The challenge for chaplains as they care for survivors of sexual assault is to bring to bear the former in ways that don't resonate with, re-enact, or recapitulate the latter. Perhaps the best way to do that is to listen carefully to the stories of women in their own words. Percy capably shows us how.

Published: May 15, 2026 EDT.



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