

Remarks by
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at Jessica Stern's Book Talk on *Denial*
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Denial is the moving, important story of Jessica Stern's decision to investigate her own rape and the impact it had on her life.

I will leave it to others to analyze the literary value of this beautifully written, extraordinary book. I would like to discuss its enormous value as a memoir of a crime victim.

Yes, Stern weaves in parallels to the trauma experienced by rape victims and those suffered by soldiers at war. Both kinds of trauma often lead to PTSD.

But, we are here at John Jay College of Criminal Justice discussing a book about an individual crime victim, and the trauma of rape and its aftermath, and I would like to focus on the value of that.

Jessica Stern's story will ring true for anyone who has been traumatized by crime, and that's many of us.

You will recognize the feelings of shame and powerlessness, you will understand the confusion about seemingly inexplicable sensitivities or mood swings. You will know about powerful associations with smells or sounds. And you will recognize the difficulties with intimacy, the numbness, and the range of coping mechanisms that come to infuse a personality.

Denial will also ring true for anyone who interacts with victims of crime—and that's really all of us.

You will recognize all the ways we all deny the experience of victims, by not listening to them, by trivializing their experience, by wanting them to move on with their lives before they have. You will agree with all the reasons for this denial Jessica Stern presents— that the impact of crime is too painful to face, that denial is a way to exercise control, that victimization makes people feel vulnerable, or afraid or disgusted. You will understand what she means when she says we like to feel superior to victims, to know we're smarter or stronger or even just more aware than people who supposedly "allowed" themselves to be victims-- so that we're sure what happened to them wouldn't happen to us.

But, clearly there have been lots of books written by victims of crime. Why is this one particularly important? I'd like to offer two reasons.

First, if we are ever to respond better to victims of crime, if we are ever to move beyond denial, we must begin to recognize the terrible consequences of crime for individuals, and ultimately for society at large.

This book offers a very significant contribution to what is now only a minimal national conversation about victims—not so much because it breaks new ground—although it is a deeper and more penetrating book than most-- but because it will be read. Unlike so many other victims of crime, Jessica Stern's voice will be heard, and it will be respected.

I've been in and around the victim's field for 30 years, and trust me, talking about victims of crime to the general public is often perceived as a downer, almost a conversation stopper. In America, we don't like victims. They are seen as weak and whiney. We don't like focusing on the terrible problems so often left in crime's wake. Most people prefer to focus on the hunt for the perpetrator, and later his punishment. And when we do pay attention to victims, we like upbeat stories of "survivors", people who have faced something terrible, but are present or future-focused, rather than "victims" who may ask us to look at their awful past. We like to hear that someone is over it, that they've conquered their past, and even better, that they are stronger, better, as a result of the crime.

Jessica Stern's voice cannot be ignored. She is likeable. She is a well respected, serious intellectual. She's written two other highly acclaimed books, worked for the National Security Council, advised presidents—she's functioning pretty well in the world. So, listening to her will not make people feel as afraid. It's also not so easy, to trivialize her experience, to dismiss her trauma. This woman knows what she's talking about. She comes—at least at this point in her life-- already stamped credible. It's not so easy to look away when she tells us about the ways in which her life is limited, circumscribed by the trauma. The rape may have made her stronger, but it also hampers her. And for that reason alone, this is a breakthrough book.

Denial is likely to reach thousands--if not millions--of people who, but for Jessica Stern's professional stature, would otherwise never read a book so full of insight about a rape victim, never spend so much time trying to understand her journey. Because of this book, I believe many more people will face the trauma of rape—and maybe even other crimes, as well. More people will explore their own experiences, and listen harder to others.

The second reason I think this is such an important book has to do with my own professional interests. I'm a victim advocate. I've spent 30 years trying to break through both individual and societal denial about the reality of crime and the long-lasting impact it can have on our lives. To break through denial, you first have to recognize it. Certainly, this book offers a very detailed, clear picture of what denial looks like--from family members to the police, clergy, doctors and many members of the community--who can't face either the horror or the consequences of rape.

But you can't read *Denial* without also asking lots of "what if" questions. What if Jessica's father had come home after she was raped? What if the police had taken the allegations more

seriously? What if the many rapes that occurred so close in time had been linked to the same rapist? What if more people understood the impact of trauma? What if helping rape victims were more of a national priority, what would change?

I believe that these—and many other-- “what if” questions readers will ask—can ultimately lead to a much more humane and effective response to rape victims because most readers will begin to imagine the answers to these questions.

I believe that reading this book will help many people break through the denial in their own lives. It will also help readers see that we can all play more of a role in helping victims rebuild their lives.

If you haven't done so before, Jessica Stern will make you care about these victims, and make you feel certain that responding better is absolutely possible.