

## Desire Decoded at Some Cost to Sources

### *Three Women*

by Lisa Taddeo. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Hardback, 307 pp., USD\$15.99.

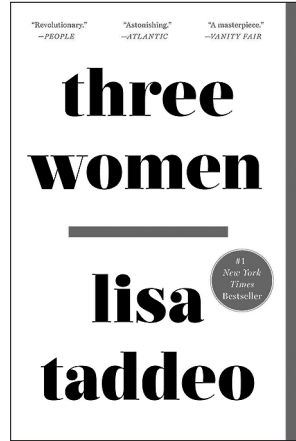
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Author Elizabeth Gilbert has heartily endorsed Lisa Taddeo's unexpected best-seller, *Three Women*, which chronicles the complex sex lives of its subjects, describing it as "a masterpiece at the same level as *In Cold Blood*." It is an intriguing parallel since this immersive work, composed entirely of interviews that Taddeo conducted over eight years, adheres to many conventions of literary journalism. Her immersive reporting has produced astonishingly detailed accounts as the women tease out questions about longing, about their struggle to express their desires and the powerful social opprobrium they face over their choices.

The stories are told in parallel narratives as each woman describes the arc of a conflict. For Sloane, who runs an up-market restaurant in New England with her husband, the drama focuses on the sex they enjoy with other couples. Sometimes Sloane meets men and records the experience for Richard; sometimes they involve another woman, sometimes a man. There are rules and codes of practice which are breached when Sloane begins an affair, outside of Richard's control or approval, with Wayne, a married chef.

Months after the affair has ended, Wayne's wife confronts Sloane when they meet in a local supermarket. This finely etched description of their painful conversation dwells on their respective power over men, and about how women do "terrible things to one another" (279). But in Taddeo's rendering, and because we, the readers, feel we possess such intimate knowledge of Sloane, we understand that by allowing Richard to dictate the terms of her sexual experiences, she has violated an unspoken contract of sisterhood. As Taddeo writes, "'You're the woman,' Jenny repeated. 'Don't you know you're supposed to have the power?'" (283). Sloane is aware of her power but regards it as "a prescription, there is an exact way to get dressed to get what you want. It's not about being sexy. It's about being everything before the man thinks of what he wants" (280).

Lina, mother of two small children and married to the dullard Ed, yearns to be everything for Aidan, a high-school boyfriend with whom she reconnects on social media. Aidan works in construction, is also married with two children, but when Lina meets him in cheap motel rooms and riverside parking lots, she feels, finally, deeply satisfied. She shares with Sloane the realization that her seductive power lies in



her ability to generate, and perform, a fantasy. As Lina tells her girlfriends, “I roped him in . . . like a cowgirl. I roped him in using Facebook” (171).

Lina’s disclosure of sexual pleasure to her girlfriends is telling since because Taddeo’s subjects all come under harsh scrutiny from disapproving friends and colleagues. After Lina endures a gang rape in high school, her small Indiana town reads her trauma as promiscuity, and it wrecks a budding relationship. Maggie—who at age seventeen was groomed and seduced by Aaron Knodel, her English teacher—suffers a similar fate. When Mrs. Knodel reads a text message from Maggie to her husband, Aaron’s steady stream of affection abruptly ends, leaving his student bewildered, shamed, and deeply hurt. Only years later, when Maggie hears in the local news that Mr. Knodel has won a prestigious “teacher of the year” award, does she decide to press criminal charges in a case that is dismissed as a mistrial. The high school reinstates Knodel, with back pay, and he suffers no consequence of his actions. Maggie, meanwhile, is described in the press as “troubled” and is shunned (201).

A half-century earlier, Taddeo’s Italian mother understood that as a girl with “only a fifth-grade education and a dowry of medium-grade linen dish towels,” no one cared about her welfare (1). As a young woman in Bologna in the 1960s, she was followed through the streets every day by a masturbating man. For Taddeo, the North Dakota court’s failure to give Maggie justice reveals how little has changed: writing in the wake of the Me Too Movement, Taddeo argues, “Even when women are being heard, it is often the right types of women who are actively heard. White ones. Rich ones. Pretty Ones” (299). At the local high school in Fargo where Knodel taught, his female students, in t-shirts and cut-offs, lined up in the street to support him during the trial.

Taddeo bravely probes this forbidden and complex aspect of women’s desire. Although the theme of sexual jealousy runs throughout the women’s stories, it is a conversation with her mother, dying from cancer, that drives home its bitter potency. As the mother whispers to her daughter from her hospital bed, “Don’t let them see you happy,” and when Taddeo asks, “Who?” she replies, “Everyone . . . Other women, mostly. . . If they see you are happy, they will try to destroy you” (297). On girls’ nights when Lina spills over with happiness after a visit with Aidan, “those were the nights when the other women drummed their fingers and tried to drown out her glee” (300).

This is undoubtedly a vivid and illuminating work of narrative nonfiction. But the comparison with Capote, perhaps unintended by Gilbert, points to its ethical entanglements. Just as Capote became involved, even dangerously so, with his subjects, one wonders about the impact of Taddeo’s interviews, which spanned nearly a decade, on Maggie, Sloane, and Lina. In some cases, she even moved into her subject’s town or city to gain better access. The intimacy that Taddeo creates by giving mundane and exquisite details about their lives, also creates disquiet at hearing their inner thoughts.

Taddeo describes her criteria for selecting her subjects, of whom only three agreed to have their names and details published: “What I perceived as these women’s ability to be honest with themselves and their willingness to communicate their sto-

ries in ways that laid bare their desire” (x). The book aims to “convey vital truths about women and desire . . . it is these three specific women who are in charge of their narratives” (x).

But are they? Does Maggie, perhaps through the book’s publication, finally find a platform from which she can claim justice against an exploitative teacher and bind the wounds of her teenage self? And what of the third parties damaged in Sloane’s story—did they also have a say in the exposure of their sex lives? Even Lina, despite her outward brightness, reveals that even in a “perfect moment” Adrian “is terrible to her. It’s not that he’s outwardly cruel but he never considers her heart” (268). The public airing of such painful realizations makes for gripping reading but perhaps at the subjects’ expense.