



## Nightmare Dystopian Present (Why Lionel Shriver Is Wrong About Rape)

It pains me to have to write this. I'm going to criticise Lionel Shriver, the author of *We need to talk about Kevin*, which is possibly my favourite book. It is brilliant. It is a literary tour de force. And yet Shriver, whose skills of perception and analysis of human emotion, dysfunction and motivation, verge on the preternatural in that book, has churned out a real duff on the subject of rape and the new scientific findings that suggest that the close male relatives of sex offenders share genetic markers for a tendency to rape, in [today's CIF](#). It is a lazy, clichéd, predictable piece of hyperbole, replacing any depth of thought with sensationalist ignorance, rape apologism, and futuristic fantasies of clearly internalised misogyny. I am highly disappointed at the Guardian for giving it a platform, although not surprised. There is a growing and deeply worrying trend on the Left in the UK currently, to repackage really quite vicious misogyny as equality, right-on-ness, and free speech, and I say this as a lifelong Socialist and Graun reader.

Perhaps the clues were there all along, and we have expected too much from a woman who gave herself a man's name and who sees motherhood as the greatest horror to befall a woman. The article certainly reads like the whinging of an embittered middle-aged man, who thinks too much fuss is made about sex crimes, and that the problem lies with feminists pushing a man-hating agenda (feminists here represented by the bogey(wo)man figure of a social worker), making men the real victims.

"Imagine being the son or brother of a man imprisoned for sexual assault – traumatic in itself. A social worker rings the doorbell. She offers therapy, anger management or gender-sensitivity training – when you've done nothing wrong. Wouldn't you slam the door in her face, after telling the busybody from PreCrime where she can shove her "prevention strategies"?"

It's challenging to conjure any intervention that would not be stigmatising and insulting. One could even risk planting a seed of fatalism about the inevitability of giving into a base nature"

One could also argue that patriarchy demands not just "giving into a base nature", but the artificial creation and enforcement of a bad nature to give into, for all men, in order to define their masculinity and not be alienated and at threat from the rest of their sex. We're living that reality now, and have done throughout history, not in a possible future.

She then employs the tired rape apologism triumvirate of minimisation, trying to shift the reader's sympathy onto the perpetrators, and undermining the issue by offering up a case which superficially appears to be 'grey area'.

"That vision is only preposterous to an extent. Because we already treat sex offenders as if they're genetically marked. There's no other crime on the books that you never live down and for which you never finish paying your debt. Released sex offenders must lodge their whereabouts with the police, whether their offence was violent rape or mere voyeurism, and may be electronically tagged.



They're required to inform police if they leave home for a week or more, and to ask permission to holiday abroad (sometimes denied). Police are licensed to identify sex offenders to members of the public. Those given sentences of more than 30 months are put permanently on the sex offenders register, like Santa Claus's list of who's been naughty and nice. We don't treat these people as folk who've done wrong, but as folk who are wrong – hopelessly and irredeemably dangerous because of what they are.

In this sense, the Swedish study's results are unwelcome. If anything, we need to dial down the hysteria over sex crimes, increasingly regarded as more horrific than murder, and allow for the possibility that some people make a mistake and don't repeat it, even if that mistake is of a sexual sort.

We could also allow for the possibility that a conviction was itself a mistake. Take the case I heard of anecdotally recently of a man whose secondary-school girlfriend was in his class, and barely below the age of consent, which he was barely above. Her angry father had him arrested. With a sex offence on his record, the poor guy's life is ruined. Does he really belong on that register? Perhaps in future we could have his DNA tested for whether he's one of those "monsters" after all"

There is so much wrong with this that is difficult to articulate it adequately (without resorting to incoherent bellowing in the back garden). There's no other crime which you must never live down, because you shouldn't live down being a rapist. You have violated another human being and damaged their life forever through your choices. Too right people should know who you are and be alert to your whereabouts; you've proven yourself to be a danger to decent society. The phrase 'mere voyeurism' is incredibly offensive, disingenuous and misleading, as she is presumably referring to men who seek out images of child sexual abuse. Real children suffer unimaginable horrors for the sick pleasure of those men; there is never anything 'mere' about that. It's also a well-known fact that rape has an incredibly high recidivism rate (it's far more unusual for a rapist to have only raped one woman once, than any other scenario), hence the need for monitoring. The idea that the Sex Offenders Register is like Santa's List is one of the most offensive things I've read in a long time. The brutalisation of a woman's body is NOT akin to Little Billy refusing to share his sweets with his sister. Finally, sex crimes are NOT a \*mistake\*, one of the more insulting notions on the Rape Clichés Bingo Card. Forcing your penis, other body parts, or foreign objects, repeatedly into the unwilling or unconscious body of another human being is not a mistake. It is an entirely deliberate act. We left the supermarket yesterday only to discover that our son was holding a small chocolate bar we'd not paid for. That is a mistake: rape is not.

The use of the term 'hysterical' is a classic technique of silencing of women's voices, and whilst she claims that worrying about sex crimes is hysterical, Shriver sees no irony in then painting a nightmarish dystopian future when innocent men can expect a knock on the door to be whisked off for re-education or worse, purely because they are genetically related to rapists and paedophiles. Have you ever noticed that the cliché of the Nightmare Dystopian Future is always horrific because of how it affects men? It's always about how men suffer and have their rights, freedoms and sense of self threatened and curtailed. Our empathy is not only shaped to be for them, but we are influenced to believe that anything bad that befalls men has to be the most



outrageous, egregious, etc.

And yet... Women and children are living in a nightmare present, with their rights, freedom and sense of self constantly and consistently threatened and curtailed. Annihilated. Women and children are always living in a nightmare present because of men's sense of sexual entitlement, the normalisation and excusing, even sometimes enshrining, in law and culture, of rape, abuse and violence (even murder, in some cultures), and the global pandemic of rape and child abuse.

Far from needing to "dial down the hysteria" over sex crimes, people are not nearly hysterical enough. Forget a future where the nephew of a rapist might have to attend "gender-sensitivity training" (oh, the horror of a man learning to not treat women like his inferiors!) - right now, women and children live their lives at permanent risk from men. A world where we can not only be raped at any time, in any place, by any man, known or stranger, but also not have it believed, taken seriously, punished or blamed on us. A world, where, in the UK alone, official statistics[1] show that:

approximately 85,000 women are raped on average in England and Wales every year

Over 400,000 women are sexually assaulted each year

1 in 5 women (aged 16 - 59) has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 16.

A world where, in America, a 3-yr old girl can be blamed for being sodomised by a friend of the family purely because [she entered the same space as him](#)

A world where a [9 year old girl held captive](#) by ISIS militants is made pregnant one of the many men who repeatedly rape her

A world where Jhoti Singh can get on a bus (with a male friend!) in India and be gang-raped and penetrated so violently by grotesque foreign objects that she dies of disembowelment through her vagina. If this is not living in a nightmare world, I don't know what is!

Of course, I don't need to offer up these horrific cases. All day, every day, everywhere, women and children are quietly living ordinary lives of pain, degradation, fear and danger, at the hands of men. Silenced and made ordinary by the same patriarchal system which will excuse any behaviour in men, and allow the suffering of women and children to be part of society only as entertainment, offered up as titillation for consumption. The abuse, rape and murder of women and children are mere plot lines in not just the stories of films, TV, and books, but the lives of men. Shriver should know this, having made her literary mark on the world by writing about the killing of children at the hands of a young man.

Yet here, in Shriver's article, as so often in our media, all the concern is for men. Not even real men, but imaginary men in a hypothetical future. We see the act of being offended at the idea of potential rapists being held to account mirroring the offence frequently taken at all-too-real rapists being held to account. As a novelist, she should understand how a narrative is shaped and driven, and yet she seems wilfully unconscious as to how the narrative of rape is shaped



and driven in our society. The outrage is always about men having to confront unacceptable, disgusting and even deadly aspects of masculinity; a smokescreen to stop us all looking at the actual fact of what so many men get away with, day in, day out, in every nation on Earth.

Of course I have sympathy for the families of convicted criminals, being tarred, as they are, by association. But my main focus of concern is always for the victims. Not men. If it is offensive for men to be labelled as potential rapists (which I'm sure it is), then the fault lies entirely at the feet of men themselves. Not science, not law, not victims, not feminists - men. Not just the men who rape, abuse, beat, mentally and emotionally torture, control, pimp, traffic, brutalise and kill, who give other men a bad name, but the men who choose to maintain their own entitlement and status in society by actively or passively colluding with those other men. Excusing rape, victim-blaming, making rape jokes. Going through preposterous mental gymnastics to avoid looking at the hideous dark side of their patriarchal privilege. Men who do not stand up to other men, speak out about other men, stick up for women and children (in a non-White Knight fashion), or analyse, critique and reject their membership to the deadliest club on the planet are all tacitly complicit.

All these reasons are precisely why the Nightmare Dystopian Future that Shriver and others love to get themselves worked up over, will never come to pass. In a patriarchal world, with global male dominance in every aspect of life - government, law, sovereignty, business, religion, society, culture, media, and the home - there is simply no chance that men proven to have a genetic propensity for raping will ever find themselves facing draconian curative measures (if a gene was discovered for, say, a propensity for Radical Feminism in women, that would be another matter!).

Besides, we do not need science or new laws to prevent rape. All that is required is for men to stop Choosing. To. Rape.

Shriver talks about the importance of free will and agency, particularly in shaping desirable behaviour - yet men already have both, far more than women and children are permitted in our world, and so many of them use them precisely to give themselves permission to rape. Preventing rape is simple, yet seemingly impossible.

I don't like the concept of a future where people are stigmatised or penalised for just possessing negative genetic potential anymore than Shriver does, but instead of handwringing about all those theoretical Poor Men in an imaginary future, how about we concentrate on the billions of very real women and children suffering at the very real hands of very real men, right this very second... ? - EP

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[1] Statistics from the first ever joint Official Statistics bulletin on sexual violence, released in January 2013, by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Home Office, entitled An Overview of Sexual Offending in England and Wales, as available on the Rape Crisis website: [www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk)