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## GUY "SECRETS" REVEALED? MIXED MESSAGES FOR TEENAGERS IN *FOR YOUNG WOMEN ONLY*

By Megan Greulich

Imagine yourself a teenage girl, strolling through your local Christian book store, when a small book that sounds too good to be true catches your eye. Someone actually wrote a book that claims to expose the workings of teenage guys? "It's the inside scoop you've been waiting for! You'll come to not only understand him, but also know what he might really be thinking about you," the back cover reads.



Why would this book *For Young Women Only* (Multnomah, 2006) be so appealing to you? It turns out it is a compilation of a survey administered to 404 guys, ages 15-20. The authors, Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa A. Rice, have asked these guys the questions that you have always wanted to ask, and have now published their answers in a convenient "how-to-understand-him" manual. They write, "By letting you in on the guys' secrets, we hope you will take it as an opportunity not just to learn fascinating new things, but also to practice new ways of relating" (p. 17). But is this book really such an easy answer to the complex and developing thoughts, feelings, and relationships of teenagers?

In actuality, a closer reading of *For Young Women Only* reveals a "how-to" manual steeped in mixed-messages for our teenagers and interpretations of survey results clouded by the authors' previously-held assumptions of polarized gender differences and roles. The conclusions they reach regarding teenage guys (and girls) are lacking and limiting in many ways. Yet the most troubling aspect of the book is the serious negative implications for the young women readers.

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These "guy secrets," packaged and presented with the authors' reflections and a few cultural examples from movies, send a young woman conflicting messages about her identity. Overall, Feldhahn and Rice fail to provide any real guidance to critically examine what may be wrong with the way these young men perceive the world. What is worse, they ask a young girl to modify her social interactions, her understanding of her purpose, and even her body in light of these "secrets," without assessing whether such compromise is biblical. But why would she modify herself in these ways? If she is willing to learn from the book and change, the authors write, then she can become a "much better girlfriend or a much more attractive prospect" (p. 17).

## A Few Ground Rules

*For Young Women Only* begins with an explanation of six insights Feldhahn and Rice have interpreted from the results of their survey, as well as a few ground rules or words of caution. The authors reassure readers that they are only reporting “what is *normal* inside guys, not necessarily what is right or wrong about their outward behavior” (p. 16). One might read this and be encouraged that Feldhahn and Rice are providing teenage girls an opportunity to critically assess their results and resist the temptation to assume the book outlines God’s intentions for male and female interactions. And yet, the book’s overwhelming message to our teenage girls is summed up in the authors’ comment just a few paragraphs later: “...the point of learning this new information is not to change the guys in our lives, but to change and improve ourselves” (p. 17).

Self-improvement and learning to better understand others’ perspectives are, of course, a part of becoming mature Christians. However, the authors’ tendency toward understanding men and women as opposites promotes an understanding of gender inequality and an overall devaluing of a woman’s identity, role, and body. Because of this, Feldhahn and Rice’s “changing and improving of ourselves” may too easily translate into a manipulation and modification of a teenage girl’s self without asking if this is what God intends. We will look at this more closely later through examples from two chapters on respect and beauty. But first, let’s examine how Feldhahn and Rice influence their results with their own commitment to a theory of polarized genders.

## A Biased Approach?

In a chapter titled, “Keeper of the Photo Files: What ‘Guys are Visual’ Really Means...and What it Means for You,” Feldhahn and Rice insist on such ideas as “A Guy Can’t Not Want to Look [at a good-looking girl’s body in a sexual way].” Let’s look at one of the survey questions, found in the book under the heading “A Guy is Automatically Tempted to Sexually Fantasize About the Good Body He’s Seen”:

Now imagine that the same hot girl goes to the front row of class to give a report. She’s all business, but is wearing clothes that accentuate her figure. If you’re not careful, would there be a possibility that you would picture her naked—either now or later?

Yes, almost definitely (and even this survey question risks raising images in my mind).....	39%
Yes, possibly.....	46%
No. That would never occur to me (p. 96).....	15%

Feldhahn and Rice then go on to interpret the results: “In total, 85 percent of guys admit to the possibility of picturing a good-looking girl naked” (p. 96). They also say that even 77 percent of church-going guys reported one of the yes answers (p. 97).

Placing aside the question of whether or not this is hitting on an *actual* gender difference, the authors’ belief on the subject in both the question and the interpretation is obvious. The question allows for two overall “yes” answers and only one overall “no” answer. While Feldhahn and Rice say that 85 percent of guys report at least a possibility of picturing the girl naked, it could just as easily be said that 61 percent say that no, it is not an *automatic* response. (And while one might wonder the breakdown of the three answers in percentage of the church-going guys, this information is not available in either the book or on the website.) Even after the authors mention that 25 percent of girls report that they are “visual” (p. 97),

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the chapter still presents this “guys are visual” idea as if it were a shocking revelation as to the *opposite* natures of guys and girls. This happens several times throughout the book. Here are a few more examples:

- The authors claim that guys’ need for respect only increases as they get older, based on their survey of adult men (published in Feldhahn’s 2004 *For Women Only*). This is an incorrect assumption, as finding a difference among adult men today does not mean that the younger men will express this same difference when they are adults (see p. 22).
- In another “love and respect” survey question, only 57% of the overall survey responders chose the “respect” answer, but the authors present only a portion of the data that reflects their assumption that men need respect. They leave the “57%” findings to fine print (see p. 26).
- In a similar method to the “visual nature” question above, Feldhahn and Rice combine the percentage results of two answer options (“86% of guys either always or sometimes...”) to better support their chapter thesis. This question could just as easily be interpreted as “72% of guys either sometimes or never...” (p 68-9).
- Another question in the “visual nature” chapter allows for three “yes” options and only one “no” option. The authors then point out how few guys answered “no” (see p. 90-1). The same problem also occurs in the question on page 148.

### **A God-Ordained Approach to Gender?**

While reporting results in this way is indeed unsettling, parents and youth workers should also be aware that Feldhahn and Rice do not just claim to offer a sociological assessment of gender differences. “Would it matter if you understood the unique way guys are wired?” they ask (p. 9). This “unique way guys are wired,” really means that the authors take their interpretations one step further by claiming that many of their results reflect how God has created guys to be. Here are a few of their conclusions:

- The Bible teaches that women must respect their husbands unconditionally (p. 39).
- God ordained that men have a desire to be “completed” by a woman (p. 55).
- God designed women with a unique power to build up the guys in their lives (p. 83).
- God created guys to be visual and to have a more assertive sex drive (p. 98).
- Because God designed men to be visually-natured, guys cannot be attracted solely to a girl’s heart (p. 118).
- “God designed guys to be attracted to inner *and* outer beauty” (p. 129).

Feldham and Rice offer nothing to substantiate these statements biblically. What is more, making such strong theological statements to teenage girls, who are still developing emotionally and cognitively, may too easily encourage unhealthy communication and relationships between the genders, as well as encourage girls to set aside their own identities, desires, and gifts in an effort to be the kind of woman that they are now told men want. Let’s look at this more closely by turning to examples from two chapters titled, “Your Love is Not Enough: You Mean He Wants My Respect More Than My Love?” and “Seeing the Inner and Outer Beauty: Why Guys Care That Girls Take Care of Themselves...Even Though They Are Looking for the Real You.”

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## Love or Respect?

In “Your Love is Not Enough,” Feldhahn and Rice explore the popular theory among some evangelical Christians that men prefer respect over love. When asked to pick the better of two negative situations, Feldhahn and Rice report that two out of three guys would choose to be unloved rather than disrespected (p. 22). This, they point out, is also supported in Ephesians 5 which “...never tells the wife to love her husband, and it never tells the husband to respect his wife. That’s probably because we each already tend to give what we want to receive” (p. 28).

The authors then compare unconditional love with unconditional respect. You (as a teenage girl) want unconditional love, right? they ask. Well guys need unconditional respect (p. 27). They quote Emerson Eggerichs, the founder of Love and Respect Ministries: “What men need is unconditional respect—to be respected for who they are, apart from how they do” (p. 27). And while later on the authors caution that unconditionally respecting a guy you are dating is different than a man you are married to, it is difficult to ignore a college guy’s quote a few pages earlier: “When a girl respects you, it makes you wake up and say, ‘I can do better than this other girl I’m dating, who doesn’t seem to feel the same way’” (p. 24).

Feldhahn and Rice fail to clearly distinguish the true difference between love and respect. When they quote Eggerichs’ insistence that men need to be respected for who they are, apart from how they do, one wonders why the word love could not be substituted for respect. Truly, a healthy relationship must incorporate this ideal, regardless if one chooses to label it respect or love. Here again we see the authors’ bias towards gender polarization—they take two similar concepts, so similar in fact, Eggerichs himself finds them difficult to distinguish, and present them as shocking revelations about gender.

This fuzzy concept of unconditional respect only increases in its perplexity as Feldhahn and Rice send young women mixed messages about the implications of the idea for either gender. On one hand, they encourage young women to be discerning—that unconditional respect is really only for marriage and that they are not suggesting that young women should unconditionally respect guys who are untrustworthy. And yet they highlight survey quotes from guys who insist that if they don’t feel respect from their girlfriends, they will look for another one. They also include other quotes that encourage girls to give unconditional respect, even to car mechanics who are ready to cheat them if they have the wrong attitude:

“In the man world if you want to get something done—repaired, printed, built—if you will respect the man and be polite, everything will open up for you. If a woman says to a mechanic, ‘I have a few questions, but I trust your judgment; you’re the best and that’s why I brought you my car,’ her chances of being cheated drop dramatically. But, if she comes in with a ‘princess-diva-I expect bad things’ attitude and makes a bunch of demands, everything will suddenly get very expensive and go in slow motion.”

In the above situation, I’m guessing the ‘diva’ was just trying to be assertive about what she wanted so she didn’t get taken. However, because she was dealing with guys, she didn’t realize that she needed to intentionally express her confidence in the man while making her requests. The guy took it as a disrespectful demand—and no doubt, he took his sweet time on her car (p. 33).

These mixed messages may leave a teenage girl wondering what exactly is trustworthy in a guy, and how much she should “just respect him and not question.” In a section about how to determine when girls are

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disrespecting guys, Feldhahn and Rice even advise young women that strong anger in a guy may not only be acceptable, it might even be a result of feeling disrespected by you, the girl:

Consider this: If you are in an emotional fight with the most important guy in your life, do you think it is okay for you to cry? Most of us would probably answer yes. Now consider this: In that same conflict, do you think it's okay for the guy to get really angry? Most of us have a problem with that—we think he's out of line...In a relationship conflict, crying is often a woman's response to feeling unloved, and anger is often a man's response to feeling disrespected (p. 25-6).

Statements like this may very well create in a teenage girl a confusing mess of guilt, blame, and disempowerment as she attempts to sort out these mixed messages about his nature and her role.

### A Few Words on Beauty

Finally, let's turn to perhaps the most disturbing chapter in *For Young Women Only*, "Seeing the Inner and Outer Beauty." Here Feldhahn and Rice assert that "God designed men to be attracted to both inner *and* outer beauty" and that to expect them to ignore this is to expect them to deny their five senses (p. 128). This "outward beauty" translates into several very specific cultural definitions of beauty, including "dressing neatly" (p. 129), "keeping hair brushed" (p. 129), putting on makeup (p. 130), in general "just trying a little harder" (p. 130), and most importantly, not being "fat" (p. 127). They write:

**The fact that Feldhahn and Rice write to teenage girls about the importance of beauty (and define it in a way that is specific to a small subgroup of 21st century America) is not only unwise, it is unbiblical.**

So many guys told us that they knew many girls—great, funny, terrific girls—who never seem to get a boyfriend, and don't see a connection between that and the fact that they are twenty or thirty pounds over a healthy weight (p. 131).

Feldhahn and Rice both caution teenage girls against developing eating disorders *and* stress that guys are designed by God to not be attracted to girls with extra weight. They again assert the dangers of bulimia and anorexia and then offer dieting advice that has worked for them personally (Feldhahn on page 133, for example, suggests *The South Beach Diet*). And while they assure girls that guys want them to be themselves, they later state that "our outward appearance can be a reflection of what's inside" and that weight is either a turn-on or a turn-off to guys (p. 136).

Feldhahn and Rice do recognize that this chapter is difficult to read, and that many women will be upset by it. Yet in justification, they offer the following:

While the general culture emphasizes physical appeal too much, somehow the church seems to have gone too far in the other direction. Among Christians it has become a bit taboo to speak frankly about the importance of physical attraction. 'God looks not on the outward appearance, but on the heart,' we say, and expect our guys to do the same.

Or because we know that "it's what's on the inside that counts," we can easily migrate to the idea that what's on the outside doesn't matter.

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But what's on the outside *does* matter. And when we seem to be willfully ignoring that truth, guys assume that we are doing so because we just don't think very highly of ourselves. And that is just not attractive to them (p. 128-9).

To a teenage girl struggling with weight, this is indeed depressing. And to the "boyfriendless" teenage girl, could it not also encourage her to unhealthily believe that she should look into a diet? The fact that Feldhahn and Rice write to teenage girls about the importance of beauty (and define it in a way that is specific to a small subgroup of 21st century America) is not only unwise, it is unbiblical. Consider Proverbs 31:30-1, which praises a woman for her good works and rightly cautions that beauty is fleeting. Furthermore, Feldhahn and Rice's comments are unhealthy for our teenage guys, by allowing them to theologically justify falling into the cultural temptation to objectify women.

### **"Be Yourself"**

Better understanding and communication between different groups of people, including between women and men, is a good idea. Yet in our ongoing search for quick answers to complex issues, *For Young Women Only* unwisely offers teenage girls a quick fix formula to "improving" themselves to get what so many high school girls want—a boyfriend and true love. The mixed messages the book presents about a girl's body, her identity, and her responsibilities to guys in her life may create an ultimately confusing, discouraging, and, in some cases, even hopeless world through which to navigate.

The final chapter of *For Young Women Only* includes guys' advice to girls reading the book. It seems that many of these guys desire to express what Feldhahn and Rice have such a difficult time conveying throughout the rest of their book. Overwhelmingly, these teenagers refreshingly and surprisingly assert, "*Be yourself.*" As we encourage and grow with our teenage girls, may this be true. And may God challenge us to look beyond stereotypes and cultural assumptions to discover God's true purposes for our lives and the lives of those we mentor.



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