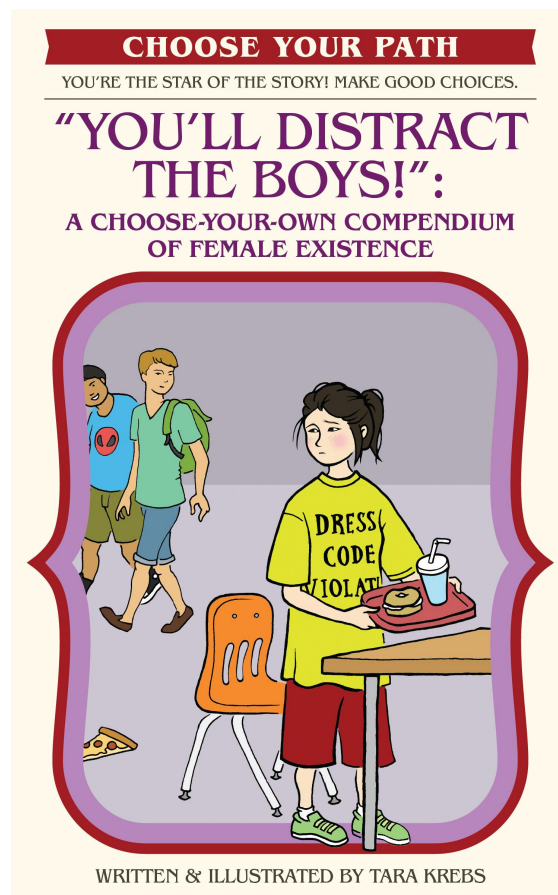


# “You’ll Distract the Boys!”: A Choose-Your-Own Compendium of Female Existence



By Tara Krebs

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in Interdisciplinary Master's of Art Media and Design

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## **Abstract**

*“You’ll Distract the Boys!”* is an illustrated gamebook in which readers assume the lives of several North American women and girls and navigate the typical experiences they face. Presented with issues such as body censorship, gender construct, and sexual harassment, readers must traverse a maze of objectionable scenarios as a diverse and inclusive cast of characters.

The goal of this project is to utilize interactive narrative as a pedagogical tool that evokes a response of compassion and empathy for women. To illustrate the potential of this medium, the following research document explores a selection of theory and case studies that support the value of interactive storytelling, as well as the methodologies behind the project’s creation.

**Key words:** feminism, women, interactive narrative, empathy, empathy games, #MeToo, gamebook, role-play, patriarchy, Choose-Your-Own Adventure

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## **Prologue: Boys Will be Boys**

When I was a little girl and a boy pushed me down, I was told it was because he liked me. I was meant to brush it off, or perhaps take it as a compliment that I was the object of male attention. Being too young to realize what this indicated about my role in society, I trusted the wisdom of my elders and settled in to the prescribed notion that this was just the way things were.

Over the years this acceptance grew within me like a virus. Through increasingly arduous trials, I learned to avoid the dangers inherent to my prescribed station as a female without questioning why the onus was on *me* to do so. I learned that it was my responsibility to either avoid or laugh off these experiences, and then carry on. I was on my own when it came to the whims of my male counterparts, as it was my job to keep them at bay for my own safety and reputation. After all, as I was reminded time and again; “boys will be boys” and I was meant to exist among them as safely as possible. I accepted my mission, because that was just the way things were.

I was on a washroom break from music class when I got my period for the first time. Despite having a mother and five older sisters, I was completely unprepared. Perhaps it was too uncomfortable for them to advise me on the subject, and I was certainly too embarrassed to ask.

Realizing what was happening that day at school, I desperately tried to clean myself, and wadded what I hoped would be a sufficient amount of toilet paper to absorb whatever was going to leak out of me until I got home. Upon returning to the classroom, my teacher berated me in front of my peers and demanded to know what had kept me so long. Mortified by the prospect of my classmates knowing the truth, I accepted his punishment and held back my tears.

For months, I hid any trace of my menarche from my family and peers. A woman's reproductive parts seemed so shrouded in taboo that the thought of mentioning my own to anyone embarrassed me deeply. I snuck pads from the cupboard when no one was around. Close female friends taught me tricks of discretion, such as pre-opening hygiene products at home so that the crinkling of the wrapper would be less audible in public - because the secret required careful guarding, even in the company of other girls. Coupled with my community's treatment of menstruation as a topic of embarrassment and shame, the media promoted this mindset further with ads for discreetly packaged pads and tampons, soaked in tidy lines of blue liquid that more closely resembled window cleaner than menstrual blood.

Upon later attempts to mention my period more openly, boys cringed and plugged their ears. I learned that the natural functions of my body were disgusting, and found ways to spare others from being reminded of them. My female friends and I used code words for our menses. When a visit from "Aunt Flo," was too obvious, we simply told people we were ill.

We began diverting attention from the things we knew scared the boys, by enhancing the things we knew they liked. We shaved the soft baby hair from our legs, prayed for breasts, and tried to be *better*. By attempting to quell the discomfort of others, we poured a proverbial blue liquid all over our identities. That was just the way things were.

Boys learned to insult us with words like "ugly" and "fat" because they knew as instinctively as we did that these allegations against our beauty were a threat to our worth. To taunt them back, we called them girly; as if to be a girl - to be *us* - was the ultimate burn. The divide between male and female, life had taught me, was so much more vast and unwavering than pink and blue, that to insinuate any semblance of crossover was pure scandal. But that was just the way things were.



When arriving one day to my grade 9 phys-ed class, I found the school's gymnasium split in half by a physical barrier. The girls were directed to one side of the gym where a visiting troupe coached us on techniques for self-defence. The boys were sent to the other side to learn how to fight. As we practiced maneuvers to free ourselves from imagined would-be rapists, our male counterparts learned to overcome opponents physically, pin them to the floor, and hold them in place. At the end of the class, I and the other girls were rounded into a circle to sing *I Will Survive*. The concert of our embarrassed giggling voices barely masked the sounds of physical force that grunted, smacked, and thumped from behind the divider. This experience left me with a strange feeling that I couldn't define. I knew there was something off about the dichotomy of our divided education, but I brushed it aside and moved on, because that was just the way things were.

Though the dress code at my high school was not as strictly enforced as at some other institutions, there was still an ambient pretext that female bodies were a hindering distraction when it came to the scholastic success of our male peers. The responsibility was on us to be mindful of the way we took up space around the boys, both in our academic and social realms. When contesting male transgressions toward us, we were often deemed at least partially at fault for attracting their attention in the first place. Having never heard words like "rape culture" and "toxic masculinity," I was assured that this was just the way things were.

In my early 20's, I loved to dance. But entering a bar or nightclub came with the inherent risk (and high probability) of sexual harassment. Before heading out for the night, my female friends and I would create safe words or hand signs to signal the need to be "saved" from intrusive men. These rescue missions usually involved a friend subtly dancing you away from the aggressor, pulling you by the hand, or pretending to be your lover - because just as with

dating, saying “no” never proved the most viable option. A “no” often led to danger, or had you labelled a bitch or tease. Being so deeply indoctrinated into our duty as females, our responses spared the egos of our invaders as gently and conflict-free as possible, without addressing their culpability. *I’m pulling away from you because my friend needs me. Your unwelcome groping is wrong because I’m taken. It’s not your fault. It’s not you. It’s me.*

Despite our strategies, I was often touched inappropriately by men who believed these settings gave them permission to do so. These interactions were so prevalent that I even came to assign terms to different types of encounters. For example, a “drive-by” was when someone would grab my private parts in a crowded place, but when I’d turn to confront my assailant, the room would be too packed to know who the culprit was. My friends and I often *laughed* about these stories when recounting them later; a subconscious coping strategy, perhaps, that made us feel less like victims. The power I knew these men felt over me was infuriating and humiliating. But I wanted to dance. When expressing my disdain for these experiences later on, some of my male friends would respond by saying that “not all men” were like that, and how hard it was that “girls just want to dance with each other” - as if simply existing in a public space meant that we owed them something they weren’t receiving. Despite my experiences, I continued to frequent these venues. If I wanted to dance, I told myself, I would just have to accept the inevitable violations. I hated it of course, but that’s just the way things were.

In my mid 20’s, the pressure increased for me to start a family. Although I was happy with my life’s direction, many in my inner circle insisted I’d deeply regret it if I didn’t have kids soon. “You’ll never love anything as much as your child,” they assured me. “Motherhood is the hardest thing you’ll ever do, but the most rewarding.”

As the years went by, I was regularly warned that I was running out of time. I was told that my peers would eventually all have babies of their own, and getting left behind would result in a lonely, regretful, and wasted life. Still content with my trajectory, I wasn't sure that child-rearing was the right path for me. And yet, the voices chipped away at my mind. I began to question whether I was somehow overlooking my destiny by neglecting this rite of passage, and never experiencing the full potential of my body. This became a frequent topic of discussion amongst myself and other childless female friends. Common patterns emerged from these dialogues. We shared many of the same reservations and fears. We worried that the societal pressure to conceive would cause us to end up committing our bodies and lives to the creation of another human without being ready or certain it was the right decision. We were terrified that we'd hate our appearance after, and that our partners would no longer desire us. We were, after all, living in a world that constantly invents new ways to conceal and correct women's "flaws" - a world where our size dictates what we "can" wear, and mothers are celebrated for getting their bodies "back." Those friends who were more firmly against procreation were self-deprecating in their reasoning. "I guess I'm just selfish" they often said - because the choice to care for one's self seemed somehow to betray what we'd been taught was our sacred duty as females. The fear of this failure was too potent for me, and I grappled with it regularly. For every doubt, the voices had an explanation to counter it. "No one's ever *ready*," they explained. "You just have to do it." That seemed risky to me, but maybe that's just the way things were?

Years later, I was walking home with my partner late one night when he suddenly chuckled and asked why I kept glancing behind us.

"Um...I'm trying to avoid getting murdered?" I question-answered in a light tone. "You don't constantly look behind *you*?" This was when I learned that he didn't - or at least not with

the same urgency as my life experiences had trained *me* to do. A flame ignited within me, and its light began to burn bright as we strolled further into the darkness of our building's courtyard, until my whole life was illuminated before me. I was instantly aware of my role in society, and could feel the collective weight of every troubling experience I had endured as a female throughout my life. But more specifically, I realized how dramatically beyond understanding my experiences must have been to my male partner. He couldn't be completely aware of the subtle aggressions I faced each day. He couldn't know about the program perpetually running scenarios at the back of my mind, committed to the task of self-preservation. My casual hypersensitivity to the threat of male-induced dangers were unfamiliar to him. But I wanted him to understand, and so did he. So, I began to talk about it.

I launched a concerted effort to share my experiences with him as often as they happened, in order to provide a fuller understanding of my reality. At first this was difficult because of how embarrassing some of these anecdotes were to disclose aloud. And as I was somewhat accustomed to the frequency of these incidents, I would often forget to mention them until days after they occurred. But the sharing became easier over time, and the picture was becoming clearer even to me - like watching a polaroid of my life slowly materialize. Somewhere along the way I'd realized that by revealing these experiences to him, I was also admitting them to myself.

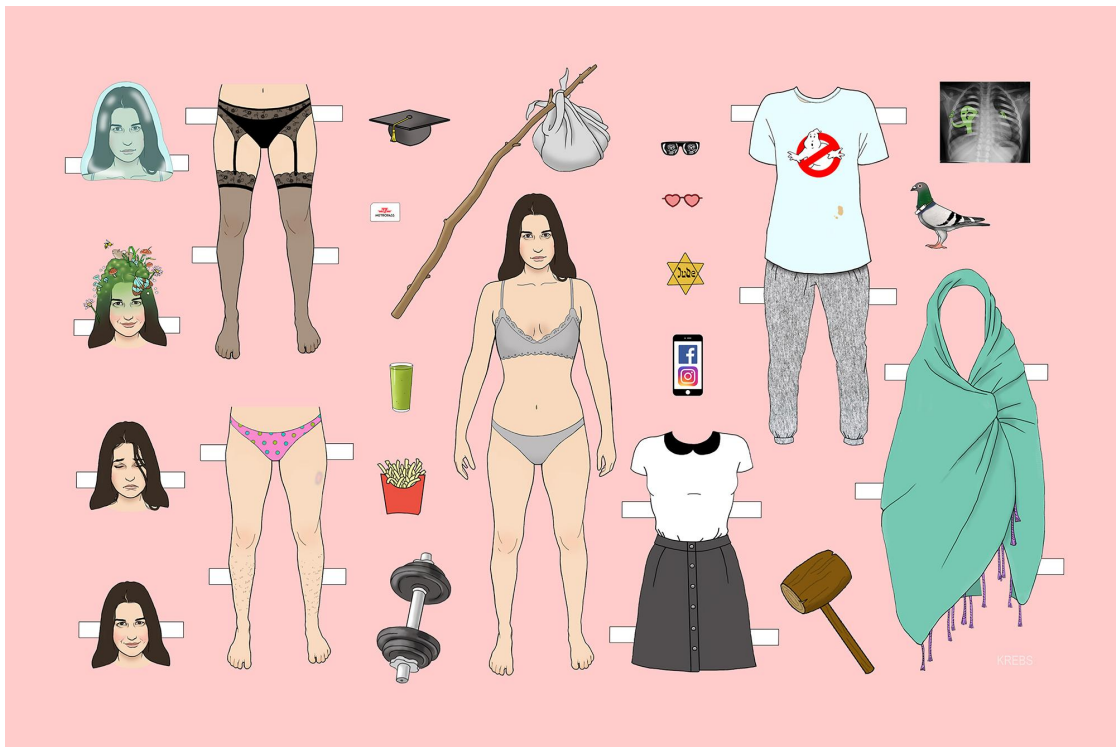
I was hooked on the empowerment I felt from acknowledging this truth. I continuously filled him in on daily occurrences, but also on notable ones from my past. Some stories were still too painful to share, and might always be. But for every narrative I did divulge, I felt a piece of my vulnerability chip away. I would tell him when my body was complimented and criticized. The sexual jokes my co-worker made about me in private. The double standards, and underestimations. The drunk guys who grabbed me. The sober guys who did too. The times I

was followed or trapped in bus shelters. The incessant pressures to smile, to fuck. The harsh reactions to my refusals, and the shame I felt when I complied. The handshakes that wouldn't let me go. The passing hoots. The angry hollers. The doctors who didn't believe me. And all the other moments that made me question my own strength, value, and feminism.

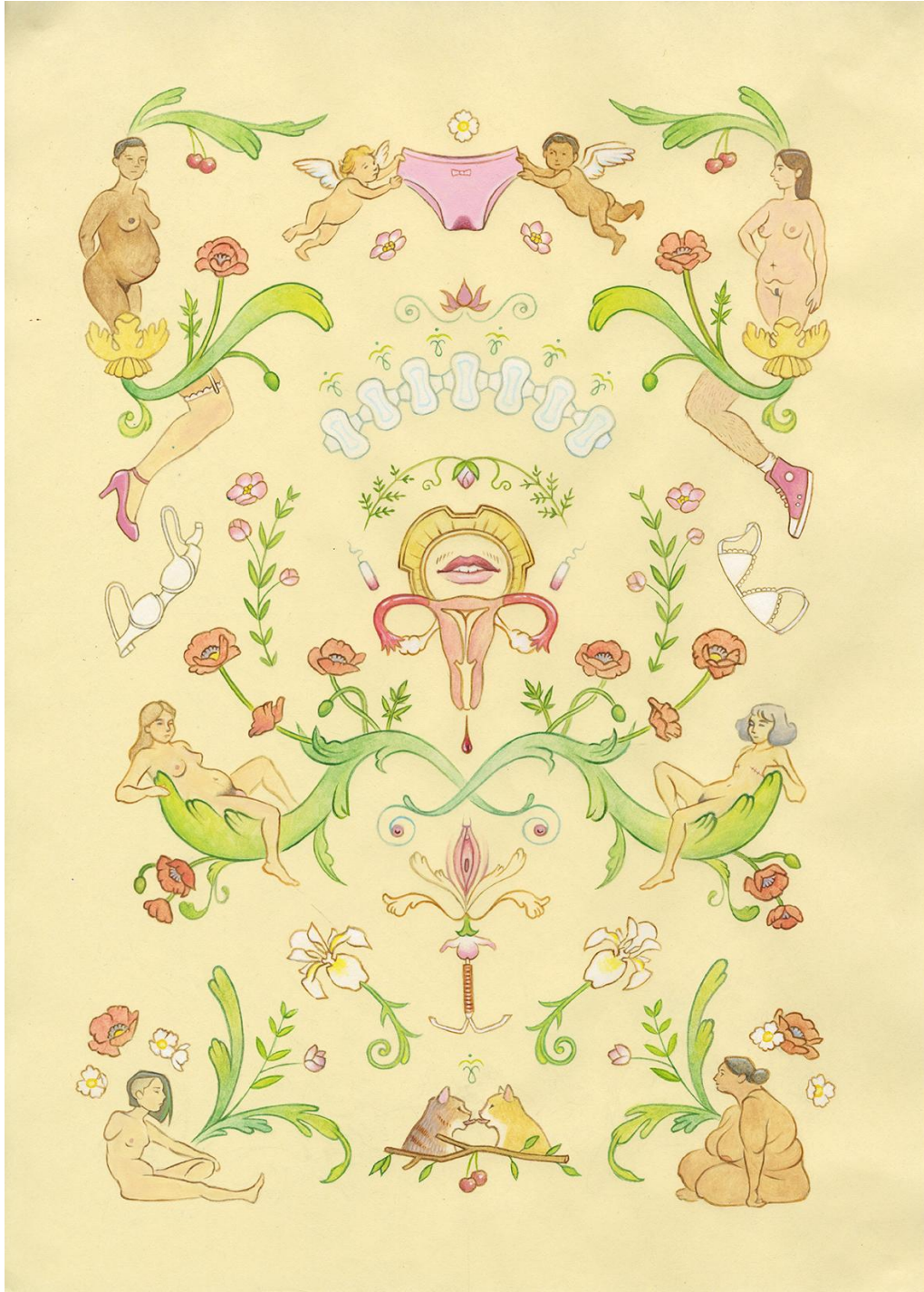
A single "smile for me" isn't just that one demand. It's all the others that came before it. It's every ass-grab, every coercion, and every walk home. It's every sexist comment, every parked van, and every "girls can't." These experiences build up inside a woman, and are carried with her as she carries on toward her next encounter. Being a woman is like walking into the ocean and trying to keep balance as you anticipate the force of each wave about to crash into you. It's the ability to visualize a hundred different outcomes to a potentially dangerous interaction, in a fraction of the time it would take to remember what you had for breakfast. It's living with the knowledge that your opinions, choices, and violations will be questioned, scrutinized, and discredited, before you even speak out. It's the unimaginable strength to bear all this weight - and yet somehow, women are considered the weaker sex.

The more I communicated my accounts to my partner - and increasingly to others as well - the more I saw my life from the outside. I felt sad for this woman I was viewing, and ashamed for her complicity to a system that belittled her. It sounds silly to say that I hadn't come to this realization earlier on, because in a way, I'd always known. For years I'd felt something smoldering inside me - like embers that would neither flare up nor die. It just needed a bit of oxygen to get the fire started. But as a female, I was trained early on to accept things the way they are. And so, in order to survive, I largely had. The irony of having arrived at this awakening through my need to clarify my experience to a man was emblematic of my situation.

In my 30's, I found myself in graduate school investigating the potential of interactive narratives. Though my studio explorations varied in medium and scope, the theme of female identity grew increasingly integrated. I wanted not only to express the emotional and bodily experience of being female, but to somehow simulate it for others. At first, my projects were largely auto-ethnographic, but expanded to incorporate perspectives beyond my own. Though I didn't realize the significance of these early explorations at the time, they now signify to me a warm-up to what would later become my thesis.



**Figure 1:** *Paper Dolls*. 24" x 36." Digital on paper. 2017. The paper dolls represent dualities of my being; more increasingly in friction with one another due to a deep questioning of my identity, and direction. The interactive nature of the piece allows others to insert themselves into the narrative, and take on the burden of decision-making.



**Figure 2:** *La Grottesque* 8.25" x 12." Acrylic paint on found paper. This small piece was created during my spring Florence residency in 2017. It was inspired by the many grotesques that adorn the walls and ceilings of historic structures around Italy. The way female forms and organic shapes were depicted as both objects of beauty and horror in these paintings spoke to me, as my thesis addresses censorship and shame culture as it pertains to female bodies.

## Introduction

As I narrowed in on my final thesis project, I knew that I wanted to create something that honoured a diverse and inclusive group of females. During my colloquium, I presented a proposal for a project called *Sinful Nature* that began to investigate the policing and censorship of women's bodies, behaviours, and voices in North America, and the culture of shame this pattern produces. To support my thesis, I'd begun examining the suppressive discourse around female bodies (as it pertains to our sizes, state of undress, menstrual blood, reproductive organs and/or lack thereof, etc.), and the profound effects this dialogue has on our lives. The research would be reflected through an interdisciplinary body of work combining sculpture and botany. The sculptures were going to incorporate the use of live flowering plants, which would grow from areas of the body typically associated with censorship and shame. As flowers are traditionally emblematic of femininity, fertility, and beauty, they naturally became my symbol for female censorship. The flora was to act as a symbolic marker to illustrate how and where women's bodies, voices, and actions are meant to adhere to a level of beauty and discreteness, as dictated by the pressures of a patriarchal system. Although I was very inspired by the imagery and symbolism of this project, I struggled with how to represent an inclusive spectrum of female experience in just the few sculptures that my remaining time in graduate studies would allow.

Alongside my preliminary thesis work, I was also completing an independent study with professor Fiona Smyth where I was developing a "*Choose-Your-Own Adventure*" style gamebook around feminist subject matter. Rather than presenting itself as a comprehensive guide, my book, titled "*You'll Distract the Boys!*": *A Choose-Your-Own Compendium of Female*



*Existence* is a collection of common scenarios that amass throughout female lives, shape who we are, and affect our quality of life.

As someone who loves storytelling, I've always been drawn to books with pictures for their potential for powerful narratives. Although graphic novels, comics, and zines haven't always garnered mainstream acceptance, today they are more widely respected as storytelling mediums and objects of art for all ages. Female graphic novelists such as Marjane Satrapi, Vanessa Davis, Alison Bechdel, and Mariko and Jillian Tamaki are all highly revered in their field for poignant, illustrated narratives that address themes of gender and self. These authors' abilities to articulate their stories through strategic ratios of illustration and text has influenced me greatly. Common subjects in their work relate to growing up, sexual identity, and the experience of being female. Literary works such as these contribute de-stigmatizing messages about women's bodies and other issues by sharing relatable truths (Chrisler 2011, 209). These perspectives add valuable documentation to the subject of female life, as they leave behind physical records of experience. And without such records of human artifact, people have a tendency to forget (Arendt 1958, 204).

As I delved deeper into the development of my gamebook, I soon found that I was much more passionate about this independent study than my sculptural works, and decided to focus my attention on the book as my thesis instead. Although I was still interested in actualizing my 3D works (and will hopefully complete them one day beyond my graduate studies), I had come to realize that my book was communicating more effectively what I'd been trying to convey through my sculptures. One of my original research questions was how to represent a diverse group of females through my body of work. More specifically, how *I*, a white, heterosexual cis-woman, would attempt to accomplish this in a way that honoured many voices, without

appropriating the stories of others that weren't mine to tell. I struggled with this question in my 3D figurative work, until I realized that my book had quietly been working this problem out in the background. Through the medium of a gamebook, I was able to tackle a number of common issues faced by women and girls, and change the characters from one scenario to the next. This format allowed me not only to express the feelings that can arise from the situations described, but to explain what types of interactions - however seemingly subtle - can lead to them.

Gamebooks are engaging, and intriguing. The interactivity adds a level of entertainment that is usually simply written and easily digestible. Gamebooks challenge their readers to make choices they may later regret, which creates a more personal reading experience than one might have with a regular linear narrative. I wanted my thesis to have an impact on people, and although symbolic works such as *Sinful Nature* have the potential to do this through emotional connection, I believe that for the purpose of this project, there is more pedagogical value in the simplicity and immediacy of illustrated text.

Although this body of work still cannot possibly encompass the entirety of all women's experiences, this iteration of my thesis allows for much greater variety of female representation than my previous project could have. Through carefully considered writing and purposeful imagery, I hope that I have achieved a balance that will be beneficial to a wide audience.

My research draws heavily on Hannah Arendt's theories and writings. However, neither mine nor Arendt's work exists in a vacuum. This project stands on the shoulders of feminist artists, authors, and intellectuals, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, Judith Butler, Betty Friedan, Sara Ahmed, Kate Millet, Teresa de Lauretis, and so many others.

## Research Objectives

Though humanity has evolved in our social and scholarly engagements with gender, patriarchy continues to subjugate the experience of female life. It often feels futile for women to communicate how our seemingly intrinsic realities shape who we are and how we navigate the world. Even just finding a safe space to express our concerns can be an arduous task. When sharing our experiences, we are sometimes called irrational, bitchy, or hysterical, and inundated with male opinions, disavowed accountability, and reactionary movements such as #NotAllMen. There are even many women who share these patriarchal perspectives. Inversely, numerous people of all genders are attuned to the inequalities women face, and are interested in educating themselves to be stronger allies. My work aims to appeal to all of these audiences.

But how can you understand another person's outlook when you haven't lived the accumulation of events that shaped them?

The goal of my project is to positively affect the discourse around female identity by applying literary role-playing as a pedagogical tool. Though I see my project largely as a cultural artifact/record of experience, I do believe that it has the potential to elicit compassion, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the realities faced by women and girls.

In *"You'll Distract the Boys!"*, readers navigate a number of scenarios that females commonly come up

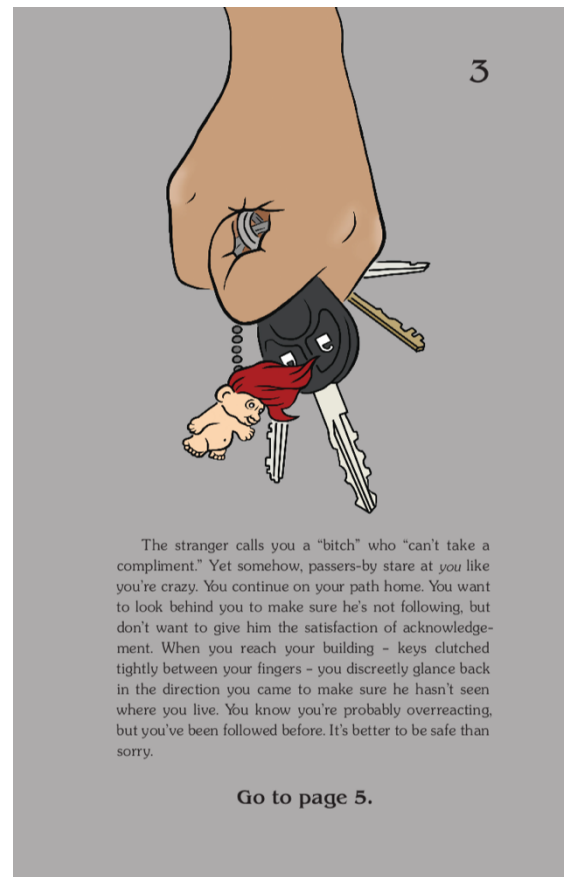


Figure 3: A page from *"You'll Distract the Boys!"*

against. The types of situations included vary from one event to the next, from hurtful comments to acts of sexual violence. After reading the description of each scenario, readers are then tasked with choosing how to respond from one of two options. Their selection then leads them to the corresponding outcome, which directs them to the next scenario.

By adapting the model of an illustrated gamebook, I have strived to articulate the subject of female reality in a way that people will *want* to engage with. I believe that the accessibility and novelty of this medium provides a beguiling and personal experience for the reader, which can lead to positive change.

This influence could materialize in many ways, such as an increased interest in female quality of life, a shift of behaviour patterns and future actions, and/or the reader's discovery of a personal truth, regardless of their gender. I hope that this project might also provide female readers with a sense of solidarity through shared recognition and acknowledgement of their realities.

In both my studio and literary research, I've aimed to create an inclusive project that acknowledges the experience of demographics outside my own without patronizing or appropriating. Women are not one-size-fits-all. Though there are numerous realities that many of us share, there are also countless subcategories of experience that pertain to specific groups of women, deriving from details such as their sexual, racial, and economic backgrounds. Feminism is crucial for a departure from patriarchy, yet the philosophy continuously struggles to create an inclusive arena for all females. As white, privileged feminism still holds the most prominent platform, women who are of colour, queer, Indigenous, transgender, disabled, and/or of other marginalized positions, struggle to have their intersectionality recognized.

As every woman's reality is uniquely her own, I believe it is impossible for me to create something that fully encompasses the experience of each individual female, and it is not my intention or right to attempt to do so. There are countless other scenarios I could have included in this project. However, to endeavor to incorporate each one is not only futile, but misses the point. The book is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to female experience, but a compendium of something much too expansive to contain in one place. The scenarios included are merely introductions to a myriad of related experience, and are written deliberately so that the reader can insert themselves into the characters' roles more convincingly.

The length of the book is also intentionally designed for its potential to impact readers. In order for the project to convey the prevalence of the experiences portrayed, there had to be enough scenarios included so that through the reader's journey, the relentlessness of these events would begin to weigh on them. On the other hand, the book also had to be brief enough that readers would be compelled to finish it, without getting discouraged and giving up along the way. My aim was to strike a balance between these considerations, and represent a specific sampling of experiences, in order to motivate further reflection from participants.

*"You'll Distract the Boys!"* is not a passive-aggressive letter to men. It is not a manual for responding to gender-specific transgressions. It *is*, however, an expression of some of the recurring events that shape female minds, habits, rituals, and well-being. Though the public discourse around women has evolved over time, we still have a long way to go before reaching equality. As we move forward in some aspects of gender politics, we falter on many others. It is not my goal that this book speaks for all women, but that it honours a diverse spectrum of female identities, and encourages some level of positive change for us all.

## **Chapter 1: Choose-Your-Own-Adventure** **(Literature Review)**

There is great pedagogical value in storytelling. Though it's essential to be a good listener and be open to the narratives of others, some of the most surprising lessons we can learn come from our very own stories. Much of the work of the late philosopher Hannah Arendt was predicated on the idea that people need to tell the stories of their lives in order to gain better understanding of themselves. A regular storyteller herself, Arendt believed in the power of storytelling to influence how humans create and recreate our world, both as we tell and listen to stories (Jackson, 246). I learned so much about myself by exhuming my own deeply-buried experiences, and hearing myself speak these truths out loud. I hope that a similar flame can be ignited for those who read my book, and see themselves reflected in it, no matter their gender identity.

When a group of people have had their narrative misappropriated for so long, it can be a laborious process to regain control of it. The patriarchy-imposed discourse of North American women has relied heavily on shame, subservience, and stigma in order to maintain its perpetuity. In an article for *Psychology of Women Quarterly* titled *Leaks, Lumps, and Lines: Stigma and Women's Bodies*, author Joan C. Chrisler addresses how women have long since surrendered to the prescribed abjection of our bodies, causing us to hide evidence of our natural features and functions, even from each other. This mindset of horror toward female bodies sustains the notion that women must censor themselves, or be held accountable for posing a threat to culture and society. (Chrisler 2011, 203). The stigmatization of women's bodies is so severe and unrelenting that areas of shame often contradict one another. For example, women are told to wear more

makeup to cover up their “flaws,” but chastised for wearing too much. Mothers are criticized for going back to work, but also for staying at home with their children. The bodies of females of all ages are constantly analyzed and evaluated for being too tall, short, thin and fat (207).

One way that women can take action to reclaim and alter the narrative discourse of their lives is to share stories. When women come together in mutual acknowledgment of these stigmas, the shame that’s typically associated with that stigma begins to “disappear” (Chrisler 2011, 209). Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication. It allows us to impart valuable cultural knowledge, and is performed through words, bodies, actions, and other tools. As Hannah Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, storytelling processes the private uncertainties of intimate life, and transforms and de-privatizes them so that they’re fit for public appearance (Arendt 1958, 51).

Although sharing our experiences increases public awareness of our realities, women’s painful narratives are regularly met with suspicion and accusation. These negative reactions increase when female storytellers are perceived to be part of marginalized communities, and/or their sexual and mental health histories are brought to light. It can be a terrifying endeavour to set out to tell your story when you know that your truth will likely be challenged and rebuked. There is usually a martyrdom that takes place among the first people to speak out on controversial issues. For example, when women began to disclose the sexual violence allegedly enacted by revered men such as Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein, these initial outcries were met with harsh criticism. It wasn’t until several more women began accusing these perpetrators that the public began to soften in its skepticism. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt speaks about the level of bravery it takes to share one’s story. Although the storyteller may not be consciously willing to suffer the consequences of their admission, Arendt explains that the courage begins in

the boldness of that person stepping out from the security of their anonymity in the first place. “Courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self,” she says. “The extent of this courage, without which action and speech and therefore, according to the Greeks, freedom, would not be possible at all, is not less great and may even be greater if the “hero” happens to be a coward” (Arendt 1958, 186-187).

Freedom can only occur when truths are shared and acknowledged. Because women are often blamed for the crimes and judgments enacted on them, these truths tend to affect public discourse rather slowly.

Mythologies passed through time strongly affect public opinion and discourse. For example, there are many myths around the world surrounding the stigma of menstruation. One of the best-known of these can be found in the Judeo-Christian bible, where a woman’s menses is described as impure, and anyone or anything she may come into contact with during her period becomes unclean as well (Leviticus 15:19 - 33). Many other cultures share their own myths around menstruation, from urban legends and scientific misinformation, to the purely fantastical. Although menstruation is not emblematic of all women - as not all women menstruate - I think it is a good example of how stories that are intertwined with a society’s belief systems can perpetuate something like the stigmatization of women’s bodies.

Women and their allies have recently been opening up more publicly about their experiences to a much greater extent. This increase in disclosures has expanded the visibility of their issues on a number of information-sharing platforms, where discussions around the treatment of women are being expressed through online and offline social communications, media, and the arts.



Fictional storytelling can also be an effective tool for addressing a topic based in reality. My thesis project, for example, portrays amalgamations of common occurrences faced by females in order to convey a general idea of what a woman or girl might experience during one of these events. The fact that it is based on many women, rather than just one, further serves to illustrate how prevalent these experiences are, and points to the urgency of a need for positive change.

In December of 2017 (a few months before this essay was produced) a writer named Kristen Roupenian wrote a piece of fiction titled *Cat Person* for *The New Yorker*. The short story follows Margot, a young college student who strikes up a relationship with an older man named Robert. The piece spans the duration of their brief courtship, detailing Margot's feelings in response to their interactions along the way. Throughout the story, the narrator describes a number of emotions Margot has toward Robert, such as fear, desire, and disgust - at times all at once. At one point in the story, Margot finds herself at Robert's home for the first time, beginning a sexual encounter that she isn't sure that she wants, but feels that she can't get out of:

*"Looking at him like that, so awkwardly bent, his belly thick and soft and covered with hair, Margot recoiled. But the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon. It wasn't that she was scared he would try to force her to do something against her will but that insisting that they stop now, after everything she'd done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious, as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back"* (Roupenian, 2017).

The encounters described in *Cat Person* deeply resonated with a wide female audience, causing it to quickly go viral. In fact, the piece was enthusiastically recommended to me by several women I know, who all recognized a mirroring of their own lives, and anticipated that I would as well. Although the story is a fictional representation of one girl's experience with dating, it is ultimately more than that; a symbolic expression of the realities women face while in the company of men. As Olga Khazan described in her article *A Viral Short Story for the #MeToo Moment* for *The Atlantic*, *Cat Person* “explores how badly people can misread each other, but also how frightening and difficult sexual encounters can be for women, in particular...The story went unexpectedly viral. Or, perhaps, in this #MeToo moment, it went expectedly viral, by revealing the lengths women go to in order to manage men's feelings, and the shaming they often suffer nonetheless...Much like the recent wave of sexual-assault scandals has served as an introduction for men, to women's heretofore private hell, *Cat Person* captured and explained the low-level dread that often accompanies romance for women—even the consensual kind” (Khazan, 2017).

While I agree with Khazan's analysis of why *Cat Person* resonated with so many women, it's how she worded her explanation that stands out to me the most. The use of the words “introduction” and “private hell” might suggest that the oppression of women is a topic we've been hiding until now. In some ways, one could argue that this is partially true. As *Cat Person* illustrates, women often suppress our own needs and emotions to prioritize the comfort of men, even so far as enduring unwanted sex and other interactions in order to spare their egos. However, women *have* long been fighting for their voices to be heard. I don't think that Khazan's intention is to deny this, but to indicate that people have finally chosen to pay closer attention.

After reading the piece myself, I too saw my reflection in Margot. This recognition was met by a feeling of elation in having my realities acknowledged, but also a deep sadness for how much I identified with the character. *Cat Person* conveys a realm of experience that can be hard for a woman to express - especially to the men in her life. As Roupenian explains in an interview with *The New York Times*, “Women try to talk about these experiences with their partners, and they find themselves failing. It’s an isolating feeling for both people involved” (Bromwich, 2017). Stories like *Cat Person* are important in that they provide an accessible vehicle to deliver these messages. The piece is well-written. It is accessible in its language and tone, and paints a clear, emotive picture to its readers. It’s also available in audio format, which makes it that much easier to engage with. The excitement around *Cat Person* demonstrates a demand for the type of stories that provide women a sense of relief and solidarity in having their experiences acknowledged. This is an outcome I strive for with “*You’ll Distract the Boys!*” that I hope will be further enhanced by the more personal and interactive nature of the gamebook format.

Gamebooks are non-linear stories that are typically written in the second-person, with “you” as the main character. At different points in the book, readers are presented with specific interjection points that represent a narrative fork-in-the road. When arriving at one of these transition points, the reader is asked to choose one of the options, which affects the trajectory of the story and its outcome.

Since embarking on this project, I was surprised and delighted to learn that the gamebooks of my childhood have made quite a comeback. So much so, that while looking for second-hand copies as reference for my studio research, several shopkeepers told me I’d be unlikely to find one because their usual re-sellers had started keeping them for themselves.

The first official *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* book was printed in 1976. It was one of the most popular children’s series until 1998, when the publisher, Bantam Books, allowed the trademark to lapse. In 2003, the brand was revived by Chooseco, and has since re-claimed its title as one of the top best-selling children’s book series (cyoa.com). Described by Chooseco’s founder as a “stealth reading program,” the books garnered praise for appealing to reluctant readers, and have proven an effective tool for boosting literacy (cyoa.com). A 2016 study through Miami University revealed that students who read gamebooks gained an average reading fluency

of 3 more words per minute, compared to those reading only traditional linear narratives (Adelman, 2016). As a distracted reader myself, I recognize the potential for the gamebook format to sustain the focus and interest of those who require more stimulation.

Since its inception, gamebooks have inspired countless other titles by unaffiliated authors. These homages range in subject matter and targeted age range, and go by many different descriptors such as “Pick Your Path,” “U-Ventures,” and even “Choose Your Erotic Destiny.”

Gamebook-type models are often used in academic plans, as well as tools for professional development (cyoa.com). The format has also branched off into the digital realm, where user-led

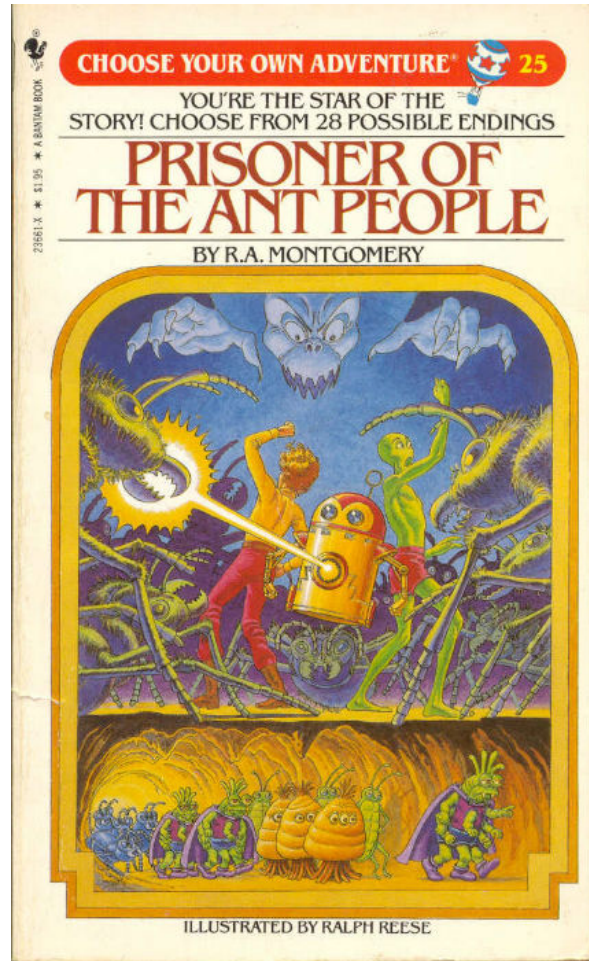


Figure 4: One of the original *Choose-Your-Own Adventure* books.

video games and other simulations offer not only the escape of fantasy and adventure, but a deeper consideration of outside perspectives. Empathy games are a modern strategy used by professionals in psychology and education to affect responsiveness to the experiences of others. For example, the game *Reallives* was created to enable people to sample the lives of others around the world, and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. A 2012 study into the potential of this game enlisted 301 Northern California high school students as participants, and monitored their reactions to the medium. The research concluded that the students' interactions with *Reallives* induced a sense of empathy for the characters they channeled, as well as a heightened interest in the geographical locations their hosts were from (Bachen et al. 2012. 452). The personal experience offered by the non-linear narrative resulted in a deeper identification with their characters, and allowed for stronger affective learning outcomes (452).

Many iterations of empathy-objective games are free to the public online, including do-it-yourself platforms, where anyone can create a gamebook story of their own. One such website is Twine, which promotes itself as “an open-source tool for telling interactive, non-linear stories” (twinery.org). Easy-to-use resources like these have gathered their own subculture, where creators can share and play user-led stories, both fictional and otherwise. Many of these narratives express themes of human experience, such as sexuality, depression, and discrimination.

Although these narratives can allow for a deeper understanding of outside perspectives, there are also potential downsides to the medium. *Kill Screen* is an online publication dedicated to discussion around the intersection of play and interactivity. In 2016, they published an article titled *The Problem With Empathy Games*, which suggested some drawbacks to the medium:

*“Clinical psychologist and Intel research scientist Margaret Morris studies how technology can cultivate interpersonal connectedness. She described two types of empathetic responses: the first is physically feeling what someone else feels and the second is seeing from that other person’s perspective...Many applaud empathy games for the stories they bring attention to, but the long-term impact of such brief mediated experiences in terms of changing player behavior still proves questionable...Morris notes that ultimately it is important that games motivate supportive action, not just empathy. “Real world” actions are the most important outcome measures” (Solberg, 2016).*

Though empathy games are designed with the intention to open people’s minds, they can also have quite the opposite effect. In 2014, a game developer named Zoe Quinn was severely harassed and threatened after her empathy game *Depression Quest* received high acclaim (Dewey 2014). The perceived success of Quinn’s project led to an extensive smear campaign toward her that was started by her ex-boyfriend, and quickly spread throughout the gamer community. Soon, additional female gaming professionals, and unaffiliated feminists, were targeted, and branded “social justice warriors” for their interest in equality. The women and those who supported them were “doxxed” (personal information including phone numbers and home addresses posted online) and threatened with rape, murder, and other bodily harm. Though the reaction against the victims of “Gamergate” was meant to repress them, it inadvertently brought attention to the issue of sexism and patriarchy in the gaming industry, and beyond (Dewey 2014).

Despite the hateful responses that can result from story-sharing - and indeed *because* there is such a prevalence of these negative reactions - there is still great merit and urgency for

the pursuit. Through my research for this thesis I've discovered a number of compelling projects which employed interactive elements as mechanisms to express social and political narratives. One of these was *Kill Joy's Kastle*; a performer-animated installation and lesbian feminist "haunted house" created by Canadian artists Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell.

*Kastle's* design drew from the tradition of Evangelical Christian "Hell Houses;" which are haunted houses aimed at scaring visitors toward God, salvation, and the church by depicting subjects deemed sinful, such as abortion, drinking, and homosexuality (Flavelle, 2017).

First exhibited in Toronto in 2013, and again in Los Angeles in 2015, the project combined elements of a formal art exhibition with interactive performance to provide a campy, immersive experience for visitors. Upon arriving at the Kastle, visitors were met by actors playing the role of "demented women's studies professors," who guided them through shifting spaces, such as the feminist hall of shame, and a crypt of defunct queer organizations, in order to share a satirical record of lesbian stereotypes (Miranda 2015).

At the end of their journey, visitors were asked in front of their tour group to describe their experience in one word, adding an increased vulnerability and perhaps accountability to their experience. Advertised as a "sex positive, trans inclusive, queer lesbian-feminist-fear-fighting celebration," the *Kastle* exposed the way dominant culture actively oppresses the otherness of lesbian feminism, through satirical, self-mocking, and self-reflexive critique (Flavelle, 2017).

Logue and Mitchell's L.A Co-ordinator, David Evans Frantz, spoke about potency of this interactive format, saying, "What I think is so powerful about a project like *Kill Joy's Kastle* is that it creates an experiential social space for humour, play, reflection, and dialogue on histories of feminist and lesbian feminist and feminism in the present moment. We don't really have many

places to do this. Mostly it happens online and I don't think this is really adequate. Bodies in a room together in dialogue is, at the heart, the processing that concludes the Kastle" (Yamato, 2015). As Logue explained, "This project is about action...It's about creating an affective space where people can't *not* talk about the issues that are raised" (Miranda, 2015).

*Kill Joy's Kastle* used satire to address the history, reality, and misconceptions around female queer culture by both exposing and embracing the stereotypes associated with their community. *Kastle* uses the metaphor of feminist stereotypes mixed with undead characters as a commentary on how the past haunts the present (Flavelle, 2017) and their self-mocking humour creates a more accessible experience for visitors.

As an arena of queer feminism, the Kastle created an immersive space that welcomed everyone through humour. Similarly, "*You'll Distract the Boys!*" utilizes the novelty and nostalgia attached to gamebooks and other role-play mediums to guide guests through a realm of female intersectionality. By riffing on this style of narrative, I've expropriated something typically fantastical, entertaining, and safe, and adapted it into something uncomfortably real.

The irony of using these outlets to express sensitive subject matter enhances the experience for users who have opened their minds to the messages contained.

Another art project centred around the sharing of human experience is Empathy Museum. Co-founded in 2015 by



Figure 5: *Kill Joy's Kastle* (Lisa Kannakko / ONE Archives Foundation)



artist Clare Patey and philosopher Roman Krznaric, the traveling initiative consists of different art exhibits with a focus on providing visitors a look through other people's eyes. Their mission is described as an exploration of "how empathy can not only transform our personal relationships, but also help tackle global challenges such as prejudice, conflict and inequality" (empathymuseum.org).

Much of Krznaric's work is centred around empathy, and its power to affect social change. He explains that because recent decades have focused on self-centred consumerism, our world has become critically hyper-individualistic and lacking in empathy (Morris, 2015). In response to this crisis, Empathy Museum aims to create a revolution of human relationships where people are provided opportunities to learn about someone they might not otherwise meet, and hopefully experience something impactful from their encounter.

Their events utilize a variety of interactive methods to encourage positive change. *A Thousand and One Books* offers the chance to choose a stranger's favourite book, which includes a note by the person who donated it, explaining why they love it. The person who chooses that book can then add notes of their own, and pass it on to someone else, furthering the chain of human connection and community (Gardner 2016).

*Human Library* – another project by Empathy Museum - steps it up even further by allowing visitors to "borrow" a real person for meaningful conversation, in order to learn from that person's unique life experience.

At their installation *A Mile in My Shoes*, visitors enter a giant shoe box, where a "salesperson" fits them for a pair of footwear belonging to a stranger, which the visitor then walks a mile in, while listening to an audio recording of the shoe owner's story (empathymuseum.org). The multisensory experience hopes to change the way people see the

world, as participants focus intimately on the tale of a stranger, who's life narrative will likely be vastly different than their own.

“It's not a passive experience. It's about radical listening,” Patey says. And with the rise of social media, people have a



Figure 6: *A Mile in My Shoes* by The Empathy Museum (Photograph by Kate Raworth)

tendency to build protective bubbles around themselves where they only communicate with people who look, sound, and think similarly to them” (Gardner, 2016). But when people really begin to listen to one another, we have the potential to break down what Krznaric and Patey refer to as a serious and ever-growing “empathy deficit.” In fact, studies in neuroscience and MRI scanning have discovered that when someone is telling a story and their listener is fully engaged, the neural patterns of the speaker and listener begin to mirror one another, indicating an empathetic reaction (Gardner, 2016).

Of course, the outcome of initiatives like Empathy Museum is hard to gauge because every participant will respond differently, due to a number of variables. However, Patey asserts that projects like these really do have the power to change people, reporting that her own exposure to the project and all of its diverse perspectives led her to confront her own prejudices and judgements about other people (Gardner, 2016).

Both *Kill Joy's Kastle* and Empathy Museum utilize interactive arts as an impactful device for knowledge-sharing. By immersing themselves in the narrative, visitors to these experiential art projects were offered a personal interaction with the subject matter and many left with newly acquired insights that they hadn't possessed before. By employing interactivity as a

tool for both my book and the corresponding exhibition, I hope to generate a similarly contemplative response. Ultimately, my main objective is to acknowledge and reveal the burden of female oppression by creating an accessible and experiential record of it. The user's response will derive from their individual comprehension and openness to the content.

## **Chapter 2: #MeToo**

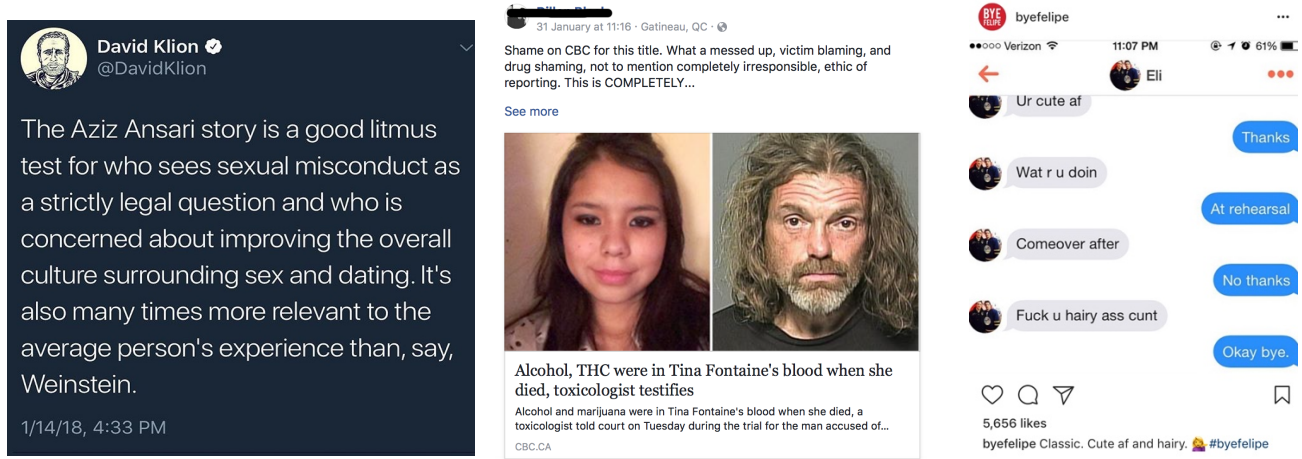
Developing my thesis has been a deeply personal and emotional experience as it covers a subject that is very important to me. The patriarchy is present in every aspect of my life. I feel it in the double standards that dictate how I should dress and behave, when I'm blamed for other people's actions against me, and when my body, mind, and behaviour is shamed. I felt it in my fear and hesitation to embark on this project, and the anticipation of the criticism I know that I'll receive. And I especially feel the patriarchy's presence when women join together to share their stories, and take a stand against it.

Arendt believed that the ideal space for action, or "polis," as she called it emerges when people come together to act and speak out. The polis does not need to be an actual physical location, but a group of people sharing their voices "almost anywhere and anytime." (Kristeva, 2001). Since beginning my thesis, the world has witnessed an emphatic shift toward the audibility of female voices. Through the joining together of women and our allies, campaigns such as #MeToo, #WomensMarch, and #TimesUp have garnered an influx of attention on the universality of women's struggle with harassment, inequality, and general oppression. The connectivity of online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have been instrumental in the quick and wide-spread mobilization of this movement. As such, the topic is presently receiving a surge of attention, with what feels like more women being believed and listened to than ever. Nonetheless, there are still many who are against this movement's directive, and/or simply don't recognize the issue. Toward the growing assembly of assertive female voices, many say "finally," while others say "witch hunt."

Because the internet plays such a vital role in the conversation around equality, the critical discourse of social media has offered an important methodology for my research. By examining online interactions, viral trends, and other concerted efforts for and against feminist content, I'm provided an unparalleled window into a diverse realm of unfiltered thoughts, opinions, and emotions.

In order to narrow in on relevant material, I searched popular hashtags and perused the contrasting ways in which they were referenced by both friends and strangers. I read news stories from various sources - from mainstream media to blog posts to status updates. I paid careful attention to their imagery and wording, and found that many used language that blamed and shamed victims. I even viewed the dreaded comments section attached to many of these sources. There, I examined the tone, slang, and behaviour applied by commenters, as I believe these details are all important indicators of patriarchal influence.

Social media handles such as @Byefelipe and @tindernightmares expose the toxic masculinity that is rampant in online dating. By posting daily screenshots of conversation threads from apps like Tinder and OkCupid, these accounts reveal how female users are inundated with harassment. It is common in these settings for women to receive unsolicited photos of genitals, lewd and/or venomous messages, or have conversations turn hostile when women show their disinterest or don't respond quickly enough. I believe these accounts are so impactful because of their simplicity and relatability, something I have tried to achieve in "*You'll Distract the Boys!*"



**Figure 7:** Screenshots from my social media. (Above Left): A Twitter user challenges toxic masculinity. (Above middle): An example of victim-shaming/blaming in the wording this news article. (Above right): A post from Instagram user @byefelipe, which shows one of many examples of the harassment women face in online dating and beyond.

My project can only be as effective as it is comprehensible to its audience. I wish to share a message, and in order for that message to be received, it needs to be accessible. Speaking from experience, academic writing, though necessary and functional in the right context, is not approachable and/or readily available to everyone. My art practice is driven by the desire to make work that viewers can connect with, and doesn't rely on the translation of dense artist statements and analyses. In recent years, my experiments with interactive narratives have created a portal through which I've had greater connection with my audience.

For example, my painting series *A Perilous Journey* (first exhibited at San Francisco's Modern Eden Gallery in 2014, and again at The Gladstone Hotel's *Come Up to My Room* event in 2017) is an interactive "storybook" about a young girl navigating her way through a magical realm. Presented with a collection of paintings, chaptered 1-10, visitors were instructed to view the pieces in sequence and ascribe their own narrative to them. With no written chronicle as reference, and only the most crucial and climactic moments of the story to draw from, viewers had to rely on their own imaginations to "write" a fantastical tale. Though prompted with the

same visuals, each visitor would ultimately ascribe their own unique narrative to the artwork, derived from their particular life experience. As I monitored the responses of gallery visitors, I observed many of them comparing their interpretations with one another, encouraging children to play along, and putting considerable thought into the process. At *Come Up to My Room*, two additional panels were inserted between the chapters, and little pieces of paper, markers, and other writing utensils were provided so that guests could add their own passages to the story. Although I initially worried that few people would actually participate, by the end of the show, the previously empty panels had amassed so many contributions that they were several inches thick. Many of the pinned-up papers contained beautiful, moving, and poetic words and hand-drawn imagery from people of all ages.

My motive for *A Perilous Journey* was to create a space in which visitors were encouraged to rediscover their sense of wonder, embrace their imagination, and author thoughtful responses to their own questions. Because of humanity's increasing dependence on the immediacy



Figure 8: Documentation of *A Perilous Journey* at The Gladstone Hotel's *Come Up to My Room* event, 2017.

of technology, our queries are often answered with such promptness that we haven't taken the time to think for ourselves. The addictive draw of the stimulation promised by the internet means that people are constantly inundated by the thoughts, ideas, and opinions of others. This becomes especially problematic when we build online social bubbles and surround ourselves

predominantly with viewpoints that closely resemble our own. As our imaginations reside in the place between questions and answers, the loss of society's moments of quiet reflection poses a threat to creative thought. Presented with an ambiguous narrative, and without the assistance of Google, visitors to *A Perilous Journey* were forced to look within themselves to complete a magical tale. This project showed me that people were interested in being part of the story by engaging more personally through interactive intervention. Provided with agency on the direction of the narrative, visitors came away with a much more meaningful relationship to the work than they might have if a singular story had been defined for everyone.

My thesis project uses similar techniques in order to impose a personal relationship with the audience. When faced with a gamebook format, readers must take matters into their own hands in order for the "adventure" to unfold. In "*You'll Distract the Boys!*," readers are not required to produce the narrative content, but rather to make frequent interjections throughout a provided text. Each interaction with the book continuously affects the trajectory of the story, giving more weight to the user's choices.

The creation of my book involved careful consideration into its content, tone, and overall design. At first, my dominant methodology was auto-ethnographic, narrative research. I began by writing a personal list of commonly imposed experiences that seemed uniquely female. From the conversations I'd had with other girls and women throughout my life, I knew that many (if not all) of these experiences, were familiar to them as well. I then broadened my focus to literature and other written content by women referring to their own, diverse experiences.

Next, I narrowed this list to a selection of scenarios I would use in my book. I wrote character descriptions, assigning each one to a different storyline. This cataloguing was done



with careful consideration for an inclusive representation of both the principal characters and their instigators.



**Figure 9:** My narrative mapping wall in my studio. Planning out the flow of the narratives required delicate planning and organization. As the scope of my project grew, the storylines had to be swapped and re-worked very deliberately to maintain continuity and impact. An important method for managing this intricate process was to have representations all of my pages in front of me while I worked. The little squares at the top of the photograph represent page layouts in my book. The big paper along the bottom is the “map” I designed that defines the different paths within my gamebook (see zoomed-in photo of the map on the next page).

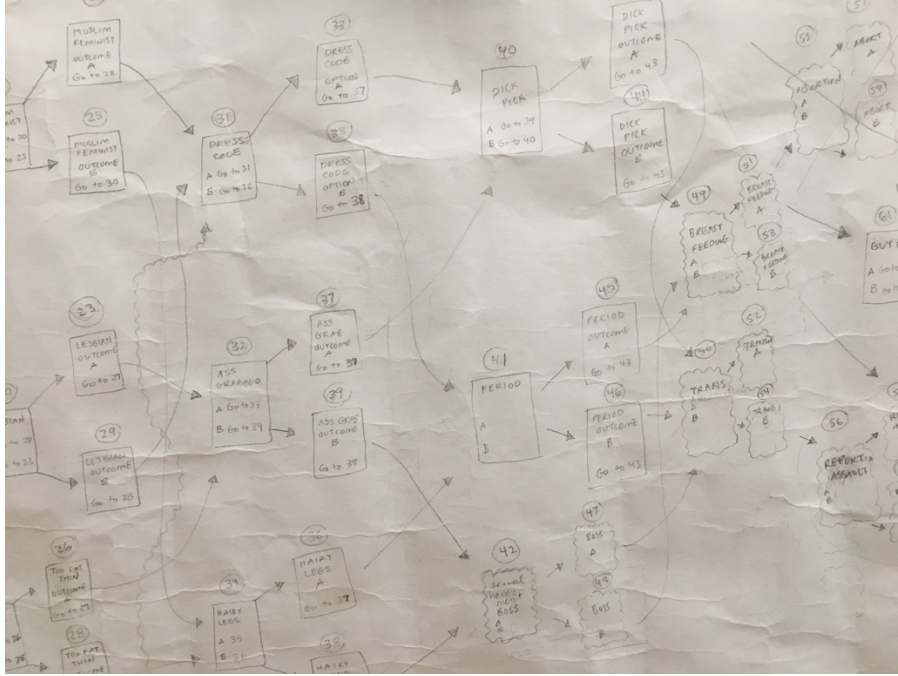


Figure 10: Close-up view of the narrative map for my gamebook.

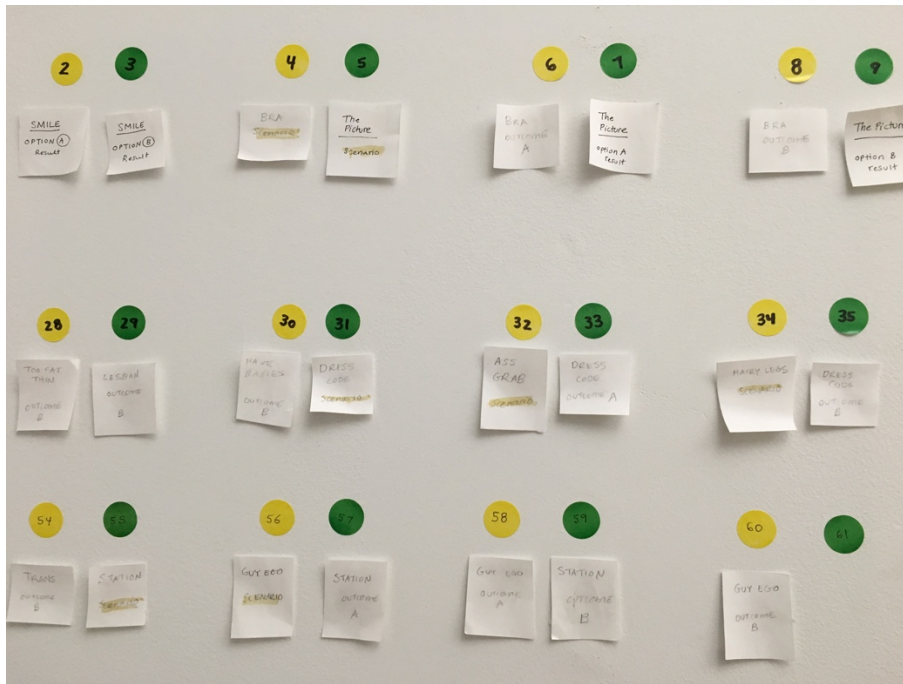


Figure 11: Pictured above are the page layouts for my book. Squares with a yellow sticker represent left-hand pages, and squares with green stickers represent right-hand pages. While planning out my book, I would always have both this layout as well as the narrative map in front of me at the same time to get an idea of how to story was progressing, in order to make sure that outcomes for the same scenario didn't end up next to each other, etc.

The geographical scope of these narratives is focused on North America. This focus means that the book excludes an enormous expanse of female experience that is uncommon for North American girls and women (such as female circumcision, physical punishment for rape victims, etc.). As the readership of my book will likely be localized to this same region, I believe that this focus will actually make the content much more relatable to the reader.

Informally speaking with women about our realities is something I do quite regularly, due to a significant intrigue and sometimes crippling empathy that I have for the life experience of others, especially as they compare to my own. Many of the accounts described by women in my literary research so closely reflect the events and emotions described by myself and my peers that they might as well have been authored by the same people. This discovery caused me to feel an overwhelming sense of camaraderie with other women, and it's my wish that some readers might experience this sensation while reading my book as well.

The interactive gamebook format allows the reader to assume the lives of various women and girls, and navigate a sample of common experiences. Presented with issues such as body censorship, gender construct, and sexual harassment, the reader must traverse a maze of objectionable scenarios as a diverse and inclusive cast of female characters. Following each synopsis, the reader is asked to choose their response from one of two options. Their choice of how to respond will guide them to additional scenarios and results, leading them down one of many possible intertwining paths. As the reader attempts to make selections that will generate favourable solutions, they quickly come to realize that making the "right" choice is impossible. The futility of the reader's attempt to escape consequences imposed by these scenarios is a reflection of the inescapable inflictions women experience through patriarchy.

The option pairings provided are not the only possible choices a women might make in those scenarios, but represent examples that can lead to typical outcomes. The outcomes, as well, are not finite. They are meant to illustrate common after-effects that can result from such encounters. The reader might think to themselves that the provided responses are not how *they'd* react in that given circumstance, because of course, there are incalculable variables that affect how one might respond to something.

When you ask a woman why she didn't "just leave," or "ignore" that thing that happened, or kick him in the balls (because that's what *you'd* do), you are failing to consider the accumulation of knowledge and experience that has educated that particular female into anticipating the possible outcomes of *her* specific options. In a fraction of the time it would take you to decide what you would have done differently, that woman has already scanned through a mental rolodex of potential consequences pertaining to her reputation, safety, job, family, friends, self-esteem, or even just the quality of her day.

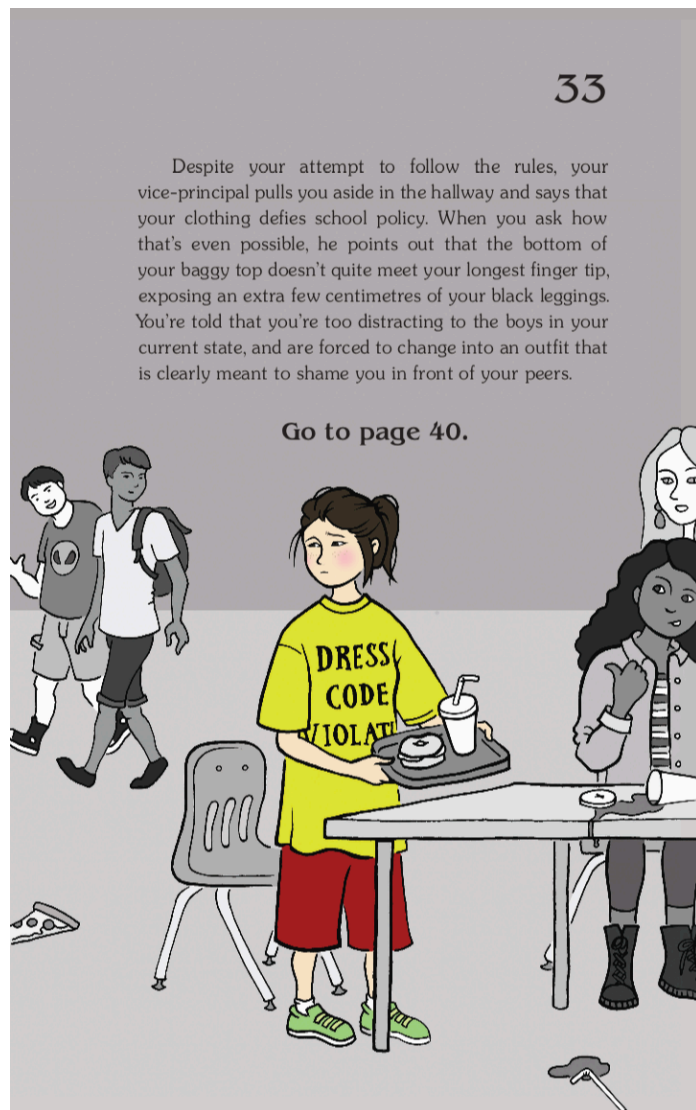


Figure 12: A page from "You'll Distract the Boys!"

The point I'm trying to make is that the types of unfavourable outcomes addressed in my book result from the women being unjustly thrust into these scenarios in the first place. Some of these incidents may seem trivial in comparison to more shocking examples of physical violence and sexual abuse (i.e. "What's the big deal? It's not like he *raped* her"). In fact, there are many instances in life where women exit a situation feeling proud and empowered about their responses. But this doesn't negate the impact of these scenarios being imposed on them to begin with.

After studying traditional formats of choose-your-own narratives, I plotted my collected scenarios into a map of my design. One of the benefits of using the gamebook format for this project is that it creates a simple breakdown of cause and effect. By testing out multiple outcomes for each scenario, it becomes easier for the reader to consider what their character might be trying to avoid by responding the way they do - as ill-fated as either option may be.

Though clarity of writing is important to the reader's experience, I consider the accompanying imagery to be just as crucial. This notion led to extensive experimentations in my studio, testing out a variety of different mediums and rendering styles. Eventually, I landed on my process; Each illustration begins with a number of preliminary sketches - leading to a final, hand-drawn image, which is then scanned and coloured digitally. In order to enhance the impact of each scenario, I have chosen a style that is clean, and simple. The main subject of each page is depicted in full colour, while the background is black and white. This colour scheme allows the reader to focus on the issue at hand. The aesthetic used in this book is in stark contrast to my usual art practice, where my work is typically quite intricate.

Unlike a traditional gamebook with a multiple-outcome anatomy, the final pages of "*You'll Distract the Boys!*" loops the reader back to the beginning, where the cycle starts over

again. This choice was made as a symbolic statement on the repetitive nature of these experiences. This unsatisfying, circuitous architecture reflects the redundancy and frustration of these daily occurrences in a way that is simple, poignant, and darkly humorous.

There is an intimacy to the way one reads a book. The closeness and tactility of this interaction creates a personal relationship between the object and beholder. In order to unlock what's contained in "*You'll Distract the Boys!*" the reader must physically hold a representation of the experiences in their hands. Once they begin reading, the role-player might follow their path as directed, or flip back and forth to uncover alternate outcomes to the scenarios presented. Either way, by simply holding the object in their hands, the reader now carries a physical record of these bound-together synopses, emblematic of the way women carry our amassed experiences with us through our lives.

My culminating thesis show will serve as both an exhibition and soft launch for my book. Hard copies of "*You'll Distract the Boys!*" will be available for visitors to read on site, and additional copies will be made available for sale. Similar to the layout of my aforementioned *A Perilous Journey* project, pages of the book will be installed sequentially throughout the gallery so that guests can traverse the narrative on foot. Without the privacy of a handheld book, their choices will be visible to other visitors, who might assign to them their own opinions. By interacting with the story in this way, the publicity of the role-player's movements add a level of exposure and accountability that is more consonant to what their host character might experience. I imagine that when the gallery is heavily populated, this physical navigation will cause a sense of chaos and disruption of personal space, as different players criss-cross through the venue in pursuit of alternate paths.

During my opening reception, I will perform an interactive book reading, where audience members are invited to create a path through the book together. There will also be a station set up where visitors can contribute an anonymous story of their own as a form of release, and/or addition to the narrative. This area will include communal wall space to post contributions.

*"You'll Distract the Boys!"* aims to increase awareness to the current discourse surrounding women in North America - including a mindful self-recognition and exploration of my own complicity in the system. This interactive project utilizes an interdisciplinary merger of illustration, writing, and curation, to create a personal experience for the viewer. Though I position the book itself largely in the realm of art object, I believe that it has value as a tool for feminist scholarship, psychology, and sexual education, as well as general public interest in the subject. I hope that this project might also provide solidarity and empowerment to other women, and create a better understanding of female experience to anyone wishing to increase their awareness.



## **Conclusion**

The results of this project are not yet conclusive, as they largely depend on responses that will take place after the book is launched. These conclusions depend on a methodology of narrative inquiry, in which the book will be navigated by multiple role-players. The feedback of these readers is imperative to determine the success of my project, and I hope to hear back from a diverse audience. As such, I envision the book as a first edition, with the potential to make addenda later on.

Although much of this assessment will depend on the project's completion, there have been signs along the way that have indicated the value of this undertaking. Throughout the process of creating my project, I periodically shared snippets of my progress on social media. These posts consisted of illustrations from the book, either alone or accompanied by the corresponding text. Because my project exposes elements of female identity that are considered shameful and taboo - and because I am a woman myself - these public confessions were both nerve-wracking, and empowering. The most emotional page that I shared was "outcome B" to the period-themed scenario, which depicts a bird's eye view of a bloodied menstrual pad. I'd felt ok as I prepared my image for posting, but after I'd clicked the "share" button, an unanticipated wave of anxiety washed over me. This sensation taught me something about myself that I hadn't realized: that although I'd assumed I'd conquered much of my own learned shame toward my menstrual cycle, the roots of this stigma were deeply embedded in me still. I had simply represented one of the most basic functions of human anatomy, and yet this terrified me. This is the patriarchy's power.



The public sharing of these female experiences were not only emotional for me, but for many of those who observed them. Following each of my posts, I would typically receive a number of responses, from followers of different genders. Women were the most vocal commenters, sending me feedback through both public and private messages. I received communication from women who were excited about the book. Some of them privately disclosed how much the project meant to them, that they personally struggled with the subject matter depicted, and that the posts were inspiring strength of their own. A few of these correspondents specified that they chose to message me privately rather than to comment on the public post, out of fear of exposing themselves in connection to the subject matter.

Not every response was positive. Some of them garnered outright confusion, or commentary accusing feminism to be an attack on all men. These responses were important as well, as they represent a variety of belief systems that illustrate the position that women are in.

During the more developed stages of writing my manuscript, I arranged read-throughs with friends and colleagues in order to get feedback on the content, tone, and language being used. This narrative inquiry provided valuable insights and outside perspectives on my project. I was especially inspired by the reactions of some of the male users, who exhibited what appeared to be genuine empathy and interest in the subject matter. After reading through many of the

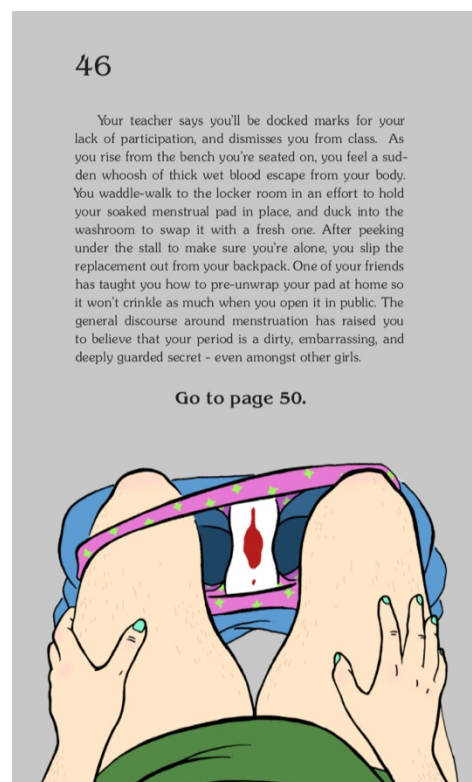


Figure 13: A Page from "You'll Distract the Boys!"

scenarios, they often expressed surprise and sadness, and posed questions on how to be better allies. These responses were very motivating to me. They showed that my work has the potential to affect some level of positive impact, and really made the project feel like a worthy endeavour.

Creating this project was a cathartic experience as my engagement with my research provided me with a stronger connection to a larger realm of female experience, which I was then able to vent into the pages of my book. I hope that I can offer this feeling of release to women who read my book, and that it might cause an emotional reaction for readers of all genders that will lead to reflection on their role in the patriarchal system.

This thesis was created for women who continuously struggle for ownership of their bodies. It was created because female shame is continuously exploited and commodified to the benefit of the patriarchy. It was created because women still fight for safety and respect. It was created because despite the empowerment this project has given me, I still freeze up when facing many of the scenarios mentioned in my prologue.

I believe in the potential of my project to contribute to positive change, because it provides an accessible portal into the realities women endure throughout their lives. But more than that, it sends a message that although this might be the way things are, it isn't the way they should be.

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