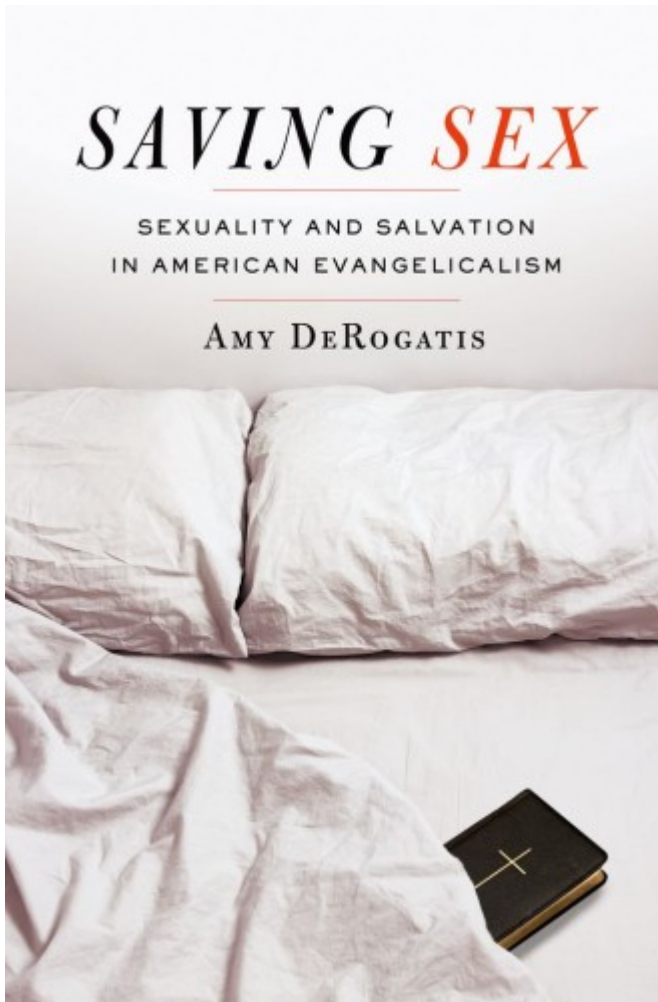


Saving Sex, by Amy DeRogatis

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 12, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Saving Sex

By Amy DeRogatis

Oxford University Press

In their 1972 sex manual for Christians, Tim and Beverly LaHaye wrote that sex is “the most thrilling, exciting, and fulfilling experience in the world (if done properly).” Their very popular *The Act of Marriage*—still in print—is just one in a long tradition of

books of sexual advice for Christians.

Contrary to the stereotype that they are unable or unwilling to talk about sex, evangelicals of every stripe are handing out advice on sexuality for every moment of a (heterosexual) person's life. In *Saving Sex*, Amy DeRogatis explores the world of evangelical sex manuals, from purity books for teens to childbearing books for young mothers, by authors from the LaHayes to T. D. Jakes.

"Anyone who has observed American evangelical culture over the past few decades knows that . . . evangelicals can't stop talking about sex," DeRogatis writes. They talk about how sex is a blessing from God, how God created sex for the purposes of human pleasure, how important female sexual pleasure is, and so on. This is not the sex-shaming culture of the past.

The difficulty, however, comes in the LaHayes' phrase, "if done properly." DeRogatis writes, "With regard to sexuality, like so many other things in evangelical culture, there is a gap between the ideal and the real." Christian sex advice manuals focus on the ideal: how to behave sexually in accordance with God's most ideal plan, whose life is the most exemplary, and what happens when things deviate from that most ideal plan—sin, evil, perhaps even demon possession. Evangelical rhetoric generally places a high premium on the ideal and raises the stakes, tying proper sexual behavior to salvation itself.

DeRogatis reveals the variety of discourse within evangelical subcultures. The message about sexuality is not consistent across demographics, and many details are up for debate. I found myself wondering what would happen if the young girls reading *Before You Meet Prince Charming: A Guide to Radiant Purity* were given the helpmeet literature intended for women who are already married. There they would learn what to do if Prince Charming turns out to be a less-than-desirable husband. The answer: sexual submission. "Many writers," DeRogatis writes, "highlight episodes of betrayal and disappointment in their own marriages as examples of opportunities for women to submit to unlikeable husbands as a demonstration of submission to God." What effect would reading this have on the fantasies of young Christian women about their future spouses?

One particularly illuminating moment in *Saving Sex* comes when DeRogatis points out that a great deal of evangelical sexual advice literature, especially of the most idealistic kind, is written by and for white people, with a distinct racial subtext. This

subtext comes in the form of “images, language, examples, and textual cues.” When DeRogatis turns to examples from nonwhite evangelical sex advice, we immediately perceive a distinctive change in voice and content. In the works of Juanita Bynum and T. D. Jakes, the subject changes from purity to healing and from rigidity to openness, and the voice from that of the expert to one of a co-traveler.

Granted, as DeRogatis points out, much of African-American evangelical sex advice is just as rule-governed as that written by white people, and the authors seem just as eager to keep people out of the wrong beds. But at the very least, they gently acknowledge a shared humanness. The dynamic between the ideal and the real shifts considerably.

This brings us back to DeRogatis’s thesis: that Christian evangelical sex literature sends a fundamentally positive message about sex even if within tight boundaries. I don’t think that assessment is quite right, at least not for white evangelical sex literature. I would argue that the distance between the ideal and the real is so great that the ultimate message is shame. Are you a young girl who kissed a boy? Shame. Are you a young woman struggling to get pregnant? Sin. Are you a young couple who is not finding sex to be the “most thrilling, exciting, and fulfilling experience” ever? Shame. Are you a woman too tired to “minister” to your husband’s sexual needs? Sin.

We could multiply exponentially the number of human sexual experiences that deviate from the ideal, and I am not sure that totals up to a “sex-positive” message. What remains mysterious to me is why so many people would buy so many books that tell them that they are doing it wrong.