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Behind the Mask: Destruction and Creativity in Women's Aggression

Dana Crowley Jack
Harvard University Press (Nov 15, 1999)
Unknown $26.50 (332pp)
978-0-674-06485-0

Most people know the classic schoolyard rhyme about how to differentiate the sexes—boys possess the odd combination of snips, snails and puppy dog tails, but girls are made of kinder stuff, with sugar and spice and everything nice. Jack, author of Silencing the Self and a professor at Western Washington University's interdisciplinary college, Fairhaven, draws on extensive interviews with sixty women to find that little girls don't always grow up dripping in sugar and cloaked in spice. Actually, Jack finds they often possess rumblings of aggression and anger that are improperly vented and poorly handled.

An adept and sympathetic interviewer as well as a perceptive and talented writer, Jack relates the stories of women who span the range of age, class and ethnic background to give a full picture of how women perceive aggression in our culture. The interviewees presented here speak honestly about difficult issues surrounding their aggression, such as power, vengeance, despair and relationship losses. Also represented are those for whom aggression is channeled positively to take control of their lives or produce creative works. She writes, "Exploring the territory of aggression with these women, I found a land inhabited by our worst fears but also by possibilities for powerful action and change."

Jack argues that, like the nursery school rhyme, women are expected to be supportive and empathetic while burying deep any darker emotions. In our society, she writes, the myth is that men are naturally aggressive and women are naturally and innately unaggressive, which leaves women to seek outlets for their anger in "sneaky" ways. It is hoped that this illuminating and very intelligent work will help dismantle that mythology, so that women can be seen, and heard, as they are.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (November / December 1999)

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