

Dick, Kirby (Director), & Ziering, Amy (Producer). The Hunting Ground.

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BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Dick, Kirby (Director), & Ziering, Amy (Producer). *The Hunting Ground*. United States: Chain Camera Pictures, 2015. \$395 (University and Public Viewing Edition).

Oscar-nominated feature documentary *The Hunting Ground* exposes U.S. college campuses as “hunting grounds” for sexual predators. According to the film’s companion text, *The Hunting Ground: The Inside Story of Sexual Assault on American College Campuses* (Dick & Ziering, 2016), perpetrators assault more than 20% of women and 5% of men on college campuses “because they can” (p. viii). Featuring interviews with survivors, campus anti-rape activists, students, parents, faculty, administrators, and a former campus police officer, the film humanizes grave cultural statistics. Survivors, campus stakeholders, and newcomers to conversations about sexual violence can utilize *The Hunting Ground* to confront and discuss rape culture. This film documents more than 50 sexually violent incidents at prestigious institutions, including the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Notre Dame; and Harvard University. By depicting campus rape from coast to coast, the film situates sexual violence as a national epidemic that stems from institutionalized ideologies, policies, and practices that normalize sexual violence. Fearing how reported assaults may impact their reputations, enrollment numbers, and alumni donations, higher education institutions typically fail to protect students from victimization, educate (potential) perpetrators about consent, and protect anti-rape activists from retaliation.

Annie Clark, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student survivor, discloses on camera that, when she reported being assaulted, an unidentified female administrator responded: “Rape is like a football game, Annie, and if you look back on the game, what would you have done differently?” An explicit example of victim blaming, the administrator’s question erroneously holds Clark, not the perpetrator, responsible for preventing rape. Moreover, her football metaphor reinscribes what former National Football League (NFL) quarterback Don McPherson refers to in the film as a “culture of entitlement” in collegiate athletics that shields young men from prosecution for violent behavior and valorizes the ritualized activity of objectifying women. As a case in point, *The Hunting Ground* spotlights former Florida State University (FSU) student Erica Kinsman, who was raped by FSU star football player Jameis Winston. When Kinsman reported the assault to city police, they warned her to reconsider pressing charges because Tallahassee “is a big football town.” FSU refused to charge Winston and settled Kinsman’s Title IX lawsuit for \$950,000. One year after the assault, in 2013, Winston won the Heisman Trophy, which recognizes college football stars for excellence with integrity, and he now plays in the NFL (Wagner, 2016). As this trajectory suggests, higher education administrators, law enforcement, and collegiate sports prioritize athletic prowess over students’ rights to freedom from sexual violence. Furthermore, they often drop or acquit reported cases because institutions blame victims and reward perpetrators, which is why most campus rapes are unreported.

The Hunting Ground denounces high rates of unreported rapes and reveals that most perpetrators are not one-time offenders who binge drink and lose control at a party.


Perpetrators often plan their assaults, use alcohol to render their targets vulnerable, and victimize multiple students. In a review, *Atlantic* journalist Emily Yoffe (2015) claims that the film “blurs the truth”; statistically, “8% of men in college commit more than 90% of sexual assaults.” Failing to punish perpetrators enables repeat offenders, endangers the entire campus, and—as recent settlements and verdicts indicate—represents a severe liability. Using Stanford as an example, between 1996 and 2013, only 1 in 259 reported sexual assaults resulted in expulsion. While the film does not say how many reported incidents were investigated or how many investigations resulted in punishments besides expulsion, Stanford (2016) announced that its 2017 budget allots \$2.7 million for fighting campus rape. In need of every penny, Stanford requires considerable improvements given its limited definition of sexual assault: “penetration or oral sex but *not* sexual touching” (Hart, 2016).

Although *The Hunting Ground* successfully upends rape myths that condemn victims and absolve perpetrators, it problematically reproduces White heteronormativity. The companion text acknowledges that students of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students experience sexual violence more frequently than their White and/or heterosexual peers, yet the film foregrounds White, heterosexual, middle-class, cisgender women. Apart from cursory inclusion of female survivors of color and several White male survivors, the film features little diversity. For example, we never hear from survivors with disabilities or from international, openly queer, or staff or faculty survivors. The film’s dearth of intersectional narratives and analysis should elicit discussions of how mainstream antiviolence movements impede systemic change (INCITE!, 2016). In addition, the film’s commercial success undermines its message of challenging authority. Pop icon Lady Gaga produced the film’s theme song, “Til It Happens to You,” and performed it at the 2016 Oscars. Producer Amy Ziering and writer/director Kirby Dick, a decorated Hollywood filmmaker, are credited as *The Hunting Ground* creators, although survivor insight drives the film. For example, by gathering survivor testimonies and mapping the national scope of assaults, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student-survivor activists Andrea Pino and Annie Clark created a national model for filing Title IX complaints. It is their activism that frames the film’s narrative arc and compels further action. Therefore, institutions using the film to spark conversations about rape should emphasize that it relies largely on the survivors who came forward and bravely prioritized rape on our national agenda. Screening editions can be purchased through Ro*co Films and include discussion guides and action kits.

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