

Sex with Shakespeare

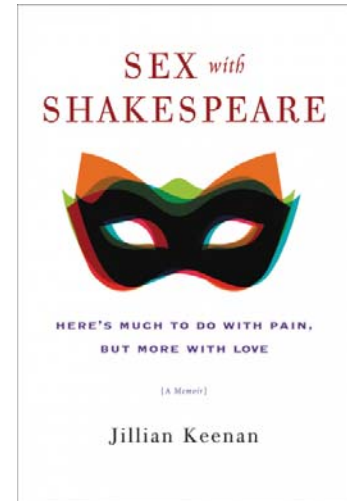
William Morrow

By Jillian Keenan

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Introduction

When it came to understanding love, a teenage Jillian Keenan had nothing to guide her—until a production of *The Tempest* sent Shakespeare’s language flowing through her blood for the first time. In *Sex with Shakespeare*, she tells the story of how the Bard’s plays helped her embrace her unusual sexual identity and find a love story of her own.



Four hundred years after Shakespeare’s death, Keenan’s smart and passionate memoir brings new life to his work. With fourteen of his plays as a springboard, she explores the many facets of love and sexuality—from desire and communication to fetish and fantasy. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Keenan unmaskes Helena as a sexual masochist—like Jillian herself. In *Macbeth*, she examines criminalized sexual identities and the dark side of “privacy.” *The Taming of the Shrew* goes inside the secret world of bondage, domination, and sadomasochism, while *King Lear* exposes the ill-fated king as a possible sexual predator. Moving through the canon, Keenan makes it abundantly clear that literature is a conversation. In *Sex with Shakespeare*, words are love.

As Keenan wanders the world in search of connection, from desert dictatorships to urban islands to disputed territories, Shakespeare goes with her—and provokes complex, surprising, and wildly important conversations about sexuality, consent, and the secrets that simmer beneath our surfaces.

Questions for Discussion

1. In *Sex with Shakespeare*, Jillian weaves Shakespeare’s plays with her own personal and romantic experiences. Which authors or works of literature have had the biggest effect on your life? How would your life have been different without them?
2. In the first chapter, Jillian argues that “books are walkie-talkies, not radios” and that “the reader has as much responsibility for the creation of great literature as the author, since literature is nothing without reader response.” Do you agree? Do you think the experience of reading a book should be a mutual exchange? Or do you prefer to let books exist on their own, without interfering?
3. At fifteen years old, why did Jillian have such a strong reaction to the character of Caliban? Do you think she would have reacted differently if some details of her

childhood had been different? How do you think Jillian's relationship with her mother influenced her response to *The Tempest*?

4. What relationship does Jillian's multiple sclerosis have with her spanking fetish? How do the two contrast with each other? Do you think Jillian's disease influenced her path toward sexual self-acceptance?
5. Water is mentioned many times throughout *Sex with Shakespeare*. What does the water symbolize to you? Do you think it's even possible for something as literary as "symbolism" to exist in a memoir?
6. In *Twelfth Night*, Keenan worries that talking about Shakespeare with women in Oman might have culturally problematic, or even colonialist, implications. What do you think? Should she have chosen an Omani or Middle Eastern poet to discuss instead? Why or why not?
7. *Sex with Shakespeare* mixes memoir with sequences of magical realism, such as when Shakespeare's characters speak to or interact with the author. Why do you think Jillian chose to employ this device? Is magical realism a truthful depiction of reality? Considering those sequences, do you think it's fair to call this book non-fiction? Why or why not?
8. Jillian writes: "Fetishists can and do lose jobs, security clearances, or child custody battles because of our consensual orientations; in some countries, consensual kink is explicitly illegal." Should fetishists be protected by anti-discrimination laws? If so, what should be the limits of such a law?
9. In *King Lear*, Jillian makes impassioned arguments about children and physical consent rights. Do you think kids should have some physical consent rights? In what contexts? Why or why not? Can spanking children be a sexual violation?
10. Most of the book is chronological, with two exceptions: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*. Why do you think these two chapters take place out of order? What is the significance of each? How did this time warp affect your reading experience?
11. Did Jillian cheat on David with Cyan? Does infidelity require physical or intimate contact, or is it possible to be unfaithful without crossing a physical line? What did Jillian do right—and wrong—in that situation? Was David right to forgive her?
12. Jillian's sex scene with Helena offers many different explanations for the metaphor: "it's a metaphor for your desire to master Shakespeare;" "it's a metaphor for your desire to take control of your sexuality;" and "you just want to punish yourself for what happened with Cyan." What do you think this scene really symbolizes? Is the literal meaning of this metaphor mentioned in the chapter, or is it something else entirely?
13. Near the end of the book, David admits that he finds the fantasy of Jillian getting a spanking from another man "incredibly hot." Did this moment strike you as sad or triumphant? Does it feel like a failure or a victory? How are contemporary ideas of monogamy and fidelity evolving—and is that a good thing?

14. Does *Sex with Shakespeare* have a happy ending? A bittersweet one? How do you think Jillian and David will be affected by this public sexual disclosure?
15. Which scene in *Sex with Shakespeare* disturbed you the most? Which scene felt the most romantic? Would it be fair to call this book a sex memoir, or is it something else? How would you categorize it?