



Blackout
Sarah Hepola

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Substance Misuse

Summary

A memoir of unblinking honesty and poignant, laugh-out-loud humor, *Blackout* is the story of a woman stumbling into a new kind of adventure – the sober life she never wanted. Shining a light into her blackouts, she discovers the person she buried, as well as the confidence, intimacy, and creativity she once believed came only from a bottle. Her tale will resonate with anyone who has been forced to reinvent or struggled in the face of necessary change. It's about giving up the thing you cherish most – but getting yourself back in return.

Questions

1. Hepola writes that while books about alcoholism often refer to the "hidden drinking" of women, there was little hidden about the way women around her drank. "It was a requirement for work events and formal festivities. Let's not even mention the word 'bachelorette,'" Has this been your experience as well? Do you think the role of alcohol at gatherings-of friends, of colleagues, and celebrations-has changed in your lifetime, particularly with women? Does society have different expectations for what constitutes appropriate drinking for men than for women?
2. *Blackout* explores the way drinking impacted Hepola's ability to give sexual consent. She writes, "In my life, alcohol often made the issue of consent very murky. More like an ink spill and nothing close to a clear line..." Sex was a complicated bargain to me. It was chase, and it was hunt. It was hide and seek, clash and surrender, and the pendulum could swing inside my brain all night: I will, no I won't; I should, no I can't. I drank to drown those voices because I wanted the bravado of a sexually liberated woman. I wanted the same freedom from internal conflict my male friends seemed to enjoy. So I drank myself to a place where I didn't care, but I woke up a person who cared enormously. Many yes's on Friday nights would have been no's on Saturday morning. My consent battle was in me." How do you feel about those words? Do you think someone who has had a lot to drink can give real sexual consent? Is it a murky issue for you, or one that is well-defined?
3. *Blackout* is infused with wit and humor. Did this approach make Hepola's story more accessible? Have you read other memoirs about the same subject that aren't funny? Discuss effectiveness of each.
4. Hepola's many girlfriends are alternately supportive, enabling, exasperated, confrontational, and present for her. Of course, Sarah revealed the truth of her life very carefully, dividing her "confessions among close friends but never leaving any one person doused with too much truth." She also notes that "some recovering alcoholics believe you need to distance yourself from yourself from old friends. They're triggers and bad influences. But what if your friends were the ones who saved you? What if your friends were the ones who noticed when you disappeared, who rummaged around their own issues until they could find a compassionate way to say: Enough. Was I supposed to cut them out now?" What did you think about Hepola's friendships? Have you ever had to confront a friend about a behavior you found worrisome? Have you ever had to deliberately end a friendship, or choose to sustain one through a difficult time?
5. Do you drink? Why or why not? Have you ever had troubling experiences with alcohol?
6. The second half of *Blackout* follows Hepola's journey through recovery, and through learning how to redefine her life without alcohol. Have you ever had to reinvent yourself? Was it painful, or exciting, or both? Discuss.

7. In trying to date sober, Hepola confronts a culture where so many boundaries have been torn down by alcohol and the Internet. Do you think modern technology has enabled too much false intimacy? If so, what can be done about it? How do single women navigate a dating landscape where sex is so readily available and yet meaningful relationships can be so hard to come by?
8. Hepola writes that she and her female friends drank alcohol, in part, to shut down “the jackhammers of our perfectionism.” Do you struggle with perfectionism? How does it manifest, and have you found ways (other than alcohol) to push through those issues?
9. About finding happiness, Hepola writes, “In the old days, a heroine in search of happiness lost weight and found a prince. But current wisdom dictates a heroine in search of happiness should ditch the prince, skip the diet-and gain acceptance. Stop changing yourself to please the world and start finding happiness within. That’s a good message, given all the ways women are knocked around by the beauty-industrial complex. But my problem wasn’t a deficit of acceptance. It was too much. I drank however I wanted, and I accepted the nights that slipped away from me. I ate however I wanted, and I accepted my body was a home I’d never want to claim as my own... I wondered if I could use a little less acceptance around here. Or to be more precise: Acceptance was only half the equation. The other half was determining what was unacceptable-and changing that.” Do you agree? If so, what areas in your own life would you like to better accept? Are there areas you are trying to change?

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