

# And the Bride Wore White

*Dannah Fresh*

This was the first purity culture book I read—as a senior in high school for a Sunday School class. In many ways this book set the stage for how deeply involved I became in the purity culture. As a 17 year old trying to figure out what I should do with the rest of my life—and feeling incredibly unstable about it (what 17 year old wouldn't?) I loved that this book seemed to offer an illusion of safety and stability. Essentially if I just thought, acted, dressed and felt the way that Dannah described in the book, it would guarantee me a specific outcome. And despite being at the top of my class and having many schools to choose from to continue my education, I was never allowed to pursue that (initially) because of the way that women are encouraged to live and modify their lives in order to attain some prescribed goals.

I think it's safe to say that I have read this book a dozen times. I created course curriculum to teach it to other young women, I led “And the Bride Wore White” classes every summer and, in many ways, became the poster child for purity. I went to Dannah's purity retreats and hung on her every word. Her teachings were the reason I made the decision to not even kiss someone before I was married—part of the bill of goods I was sold as one of the most romantic things I could do in preparation to get married and was promised that my future husband would be even more attracted to me because of it.

There have been many editions of this book; I read the second edition (I couldn't find a copy of the first edition!), published in the year 2004. The page numbers listed below are reflected of this second edition; if you have a different edition, the page numbers may be different.

Like I've said before, these purity culture reviews can be triggering—it can feel incredibly overwhelming to see in black and white not only what these teachings are but what the implications of these teachings are. It can feel quite disgusting to come face to face with specific teachings that have profoundly harmed you. Give yourself patience and compassion as you read these next slides. Use caution where necessary and feel free to come back to this, pause or skip these stories altogether.

## **Page 14**

Purity culture teaches that “worldly passions” like sexual desire, being turned on, desiring to engage in sexual activities, and even being attracted to someone is a sin. Worldly passions is a code word for sin and we were taught to pray that we wouldn't be tempted by worldly passions and especially that we wouldn't give in. What purity culture failed to recognize was the natural psychological and physiological processes that happen in our minds and bodies and equates these processes as sinful, evil, needing to be squelched and certainly not given into.

## Page 20

A common theme in purity culture is the double standard between men and women. Because men were sexual animals who could barely control themselves, “slipping up” sexually was nearly expected. Sometimes it wasn’t even “slipping up” that was expected—men being unable to control themselves sexually was expected BUT there was always a reason a man wouldn’t be able to control themselves sexually: women. IMO this one of the reasons it was easy to forgive a man for his past sexual sins...he wasn’t alone in the sinning. On the other hand, women who had engaged in sexual activity prior to marriage are viewed as dangerous, damaged and other people are to remain cautious of them. Though they still can be offered forgiveness too, it is less likely that their sexual sins will be dismissed or forgotten. Instead they will often plague them privately and publicly for the remainder of their life. Sexual sin is often THE reason that is used for why things may go awry in the marital relationship. Also, since purity culture teaches that women aren’t wired to desire sex, if they DO engage in sex, it’s because they have given over to their worldly passions/fleshly desires and subsequently drag the man down with them.

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Though not as overt (at times) as other purity books, Gresh also hinges her teachings on the idea that we, as humans, have no ability to choose anything good for ourselves and cannot trust ourselves. Women, especially, are reminded that their entire gender is to blame for sin being in the world and is therefore a reason that neither they nor anyone else can/should trust them. This is essentially a grooming process for further abuse and dynamics of power and control—both between a woman and her partner as well as from god/their version of god.

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The story of King David from the bible is often used to show the negative consequences of sex outside of marriage (spoiler alert: David has sex with a woman who is not his wife, gets her pregnant, has her husband killed and then his baby is stillborn). But the typical way this story is told is that both David and the woman he had sex with (Bathsheba) were guilty of committing sexual sin. What is grossly overlooked, however, is that this was not a mutually consensual sexual encounter. This was rape. David was the KING of the country—he was in a position of power and control. If he wanted to have sex with Bathsheba and she declined, she would have been killed. It doesn’t matter what she was wearing or not, it doesn’t matter that she was taking a bath on her roof. David made a choice about what he wanted to do and Bathsheba didn’t have a choice.

The reason this is important to point out is to recognize that in purity culture things like sexual abuse, rape, and other sexual violence are rarely called that. They are, instead, called sexual sin. With this is a recognition that both people participated and in many cases the woman is, again, blamed for putting herself in a position where she could be sexually violated (e.g. what was she wearing, where was she, did she drink, was she flirting, had she engaged in sexual activities before, was she by herself, was she lying down?)

## Page 44

The action of breaking up with your boyfriend/girlfriend because they were taking up too much space that god was supposed to have was a very real thing. And it was something you couldn't question—if you're in the purity culture and you are "convicted" that you need to break up with your boyfriend/girlfriend because god said so, that is it. End of discussion. Full transparency: I was totally guilty of this. It was a get out of jail free card. It meant I didn't have to answer any questions and the other person's feelings didn't matter. But I also had this done to me many times to and the pain of that is very real...not only from the loss of the relationship but feeling like you have to bury all of your feelings because who are you to be sad and upset about something that god doesn't want for you?

## Page 56

Though I've already established before that purity culture is much more than the "don't have sex before you are married" teaching/belief, this point here affirms it. That purity is a lifestyle and must be implemented in all areas of your life—even down to the TV shows that you watch. If a TV show makes you feel a certain way (whether that is sexual arousal or maybe even just feeling a bit sassy—which is how I always felt after watching the Gilmore Girls) it was likely that this show was not a good influence and would only lead you to sin (which is why I was reprimanded and forbidden from watching Gilmore Girls by my boss/pastor). On the flip side, I very much judged men on what movies they watched. If they watched something that was rated "R" (or sometimes even PG-13) unless it was some combat/war/sci-fi movie I harshly judged them for what they watched, what they found funny, etc., as I believed it revealed a lot about their own purity.

## Page 64

I'm glad I have no idea where my first "Shopping List for HIM" is...though I think I have a revised copy of one that I will try to find! This was always a big part of purity culture: dreaming—fantasizing—about the type of man that you would want to marry. Of course you still had to be open to whomever god would bring your way (even if he was nothing like what you thought—since god knew best despite your preferences). It was not uncommon for women to have a rather long list of characteristics of what she was looking for in a date. Certainly I am not saying that identifying the things that are important to you is a bad thing (in fact, I would very much encourage that!) Rather, this was a process of creating this godly man who may or may not realistically exist (since most of the time the list described a composite "picture" of your father, pastors, big-time religious leaders, authors, and maybe even a couple Hollywood actors—at least for the looks department). I cannot tell you how many men I wrote off because they were not, in their early or mid-20's, like the pastors from Desiring God Ministries or Sovereign Grace Ministries (two specific, fundamentalist ministries that were very influential in shaping the purity culture dynamics). Though I am, for many other reasons, very glad I never married one of those men, I also am sad about the many amazing relationships (of all levels of intimacy) that I missed out on because of the strict ideals I had for what a godly man for me should look/act like.

## Page 75

A lot of people talk about the analogies that were used in purity culture if you had premarital sex (like a hamburger that had a bite taken out of it, a piece of tape that had lost its stickiness, a flower with no petals left...yes, all of them were highly objectifying). These analogies were also a part of modesty as well—many quizzes were developed to compare you to an object that had a range of worth's attached to it—like a Styrofoam glass, a mug or a china tea cup. These analogies were also used in order to justify how someone was treated. If they dressed trashy—or like a trashable Styrofoam cup—then they shouldn't be surprised when they were treated like that. (And yes, there most certainly is research that correlates purity culture to rape culture).

## Page 77

The book/movie *Sense and Sensibility* was often used to depict two distinct types of relationships and offer a clear suggestion on which type of relationship we should desire. The crash and burn was driven by emotions and emotions were sinful. The pure, slow burn, however, was characterized by pain and suffering as both necessary and expected in relationships. The idea that we should patiently wait for a man to see us and want to marry us versus making ourselves known, engaging in any sort of a relationship, etc. was highly promoted. Pain and suffering was a sign of holiness and that you were doing it the right way.

**Personal Story:** I cannot tell you how many times I would tearfully beg god to “open up” a specific person's eyes. That somehow he would see me and see my purity, my submission and know that I was praying for him specifically. I also knew that with these prayers meant absolutely no action on my part. I couldn't create any situation in which I would make myself obvious to him. Also, I think it's important to note that because purity culture isn't actually based on biblical texts and instead people's interpretations of them (and their desire for power and control), teachers of purity culture often times reference movie characters with strikingly (stereotypical) masculine and feminine characteristics as a picture of how men and women are to act (there was an entire book written about how William Wallace—*Braveheart*—was the type of godly man all of us women not only wanted but NEEDED).

## Page 82

A running theme throughout purity culture is that if you actually, truly are trusting god with your love life and actually, truly wanting to remain pure then a man will magically appear in your life. Stories like this were very common—that the moment we finally said the right words in prayer to convince god that we weren't trusting ourselves at all but only in him, then god would drop the perfect spouse in front of you. Of course the implication of this, though not usually overtly said, is that if you are still single than you haven't actually surrendered fully to god and there are still areas of selfishness, sinfulness and yourself that you are living from.

## Page 85

Keeping with the theme that purity culture is a lifestyle and not just one rule about not having premarital sex, we see here that it also spreads over into the way you dress. Check out my full breakdown of Dannah Gresh's modesty rules in my "Purity Culture" highlight reel on my grid. It's important to note here that there is a strong through line that the way you dress is what causes other things to happen. There is a strong push to notice how you feel in your clothes and if you feel sexy or seductive that not only are you dressing in a way to get men's attention (which is a sin) but you are also suggesting what it is that you want a man to do with you (even if you never make eye contact, talk to him, etc.) The emphasis is continuously on the woman doing something (e.g. dressing sexy) that turns a man on, thereby making him completely out of conscious control and therefore must act on every sexual urge—even if it is sexually violent. And though he must take some responsibility, the responsibility is not fully on him because he never would have done what he did if she hadn't done what she did. In purity culture the man's actions are always in response to the woman's actions which means that she is just as much to blame for what happened (This is INCREDIBLY dangerous teaching).

## Page 90

This is purity culture's version of boundaries...a list of things that you can and cannot do and still remain sexually pure. But of course, purity culture takes it one step further as they teach that the goal is to stay as far away from the line as possible. With all of these activities listed here it's also important to note that the bible has nothing to say about any of this. While there are some verses about extramarital sex, it is in relation to being married and forbidding sex in the form of cheating or an affair (which has a host of other problematic teachings with it since women were viewed as property). The teaching here is that you were to stop all physical contact before you had even a desire to go a little bit further. Which often suggested that even holding hands was too much. I had a friend who's husband did not touch her—like literally did not touch her AT ALL prior to their wedding day because he believed that even an innocent thing like placing his hand on the small of her back would lead him to wanting more and sinning sexually.

## Page 96

Dannah and other purity culture teachers teach overtly and covertly that the way the body works is that once it is turned on sexually it is supposed to go from "A to Z" every time. They would teach that something like kissing and then stopping was thwarting god's natural plan for how the body is supposed to work. Not only is this just flat out incorrect, it's often incredibly physiologically harmful. This is why we hear so many stories of people's bodies having very aversive responses to sexual activity on their wedding night—they either have taught their body to repress all sexual desires, they are overcome with shame for feeling sexual desires (since just a few hours earlier it was wrong to have sexual desires) or they may experience significant pain in sexual activity. It also doesn't teach the body anticipation, moving slowly, getting used to someone's touch (and feeling safe!) and it can have a negative impact on relationships if the belief that once you start you're not supposed to stop there are expectations and obligation instead of consent, as well as a potential decrease in intimacy because it's either all or nothing.

## Page 98

In addition to other purity culture lifestyles were the rules around what you are allowed to talk about. Here we see that Dannah teaches that you aren't even supposed to talk about marriage until YOU'RE ALREADY ENGAGED (this is problematic for so many reasons!) Or how about "Foul Line #2" in which you will not discuss any sexual desires, physical contact or things about intimacy. This right here is dangerous in that there are no conversations about consent, boundaries, safety, etc. By not talking about these things and having open discussions about sex, sexuality, desires, consent, safety, etc. you are not only setting people up for a lot of confusion but the likelihood that negative outcomes occur (e.g. non-consensual sex, unwanted pregnancies, STD's/STI's) increases drastically—AND THIS IS BACKED UP BY SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH.

## Page 116

We see in this book too the strong recommendation that parents be involved in your love life... However, in this book, Dannah shares all sorts of not only empirically incorrect information (e.g. that "studies" show that girls who have good relationships with their dads are less likely to engage in premarital sex) but it also completely shames women who either don't have good relationships with their parents or who's parents are not living the same lifestyle they are. Once again, women are punished or rewarded for what the man/men in their life do in relation to her. This also promotes the idea that a woman cannot trust herself and must look to those outside of herself to tell her who she is and who she could be with.

## Page 132-133

I was shocked when I read this passage this last go-round. Dannah gives a history of how marriages came to be in biblical times... a man "selected" a woman, purchased her from her father, went away to build a house (that shared a wall with HIS parents, nonetheless) and then came and got her. And Dannah calls this ROMANTIC. She likens a woman waiting for her betrothed to come back as to how we should wait for Jesus to return to earth. Purity culture is overtly patriarchal and objectifies women every turn they can, but it's teachings like this that take it to an entirely different level and make it abusive. Teaching a woman that she is an object (that must be purchased), that she has no say in the matter who she marries (and is forced to have sex with) because it is her father's decision is not romantic love, it's power, control, slavery, sexual violence...it's a lot of things but it's not love. And yet we were taught that it was love. Just think about the ramifications that messages like this have.

## Page 138

Purity culture taught the counter cultural message of "you don't need to test drive the car before you drive it, because if you've never driven a car before, you'll never know the difference between a smooth or bumpy ride!" (Also, yes, again with the object lessons). This is how they sold the no sex and no kissing to critics who would ask the question "yeah, but what if they are bad in bed?" The idea was that even if the sex was lousy, since you would have nothing to compare it to, you wouldn't know that it was bad. That message just isn't true. At all. I

remember the first time I kissed someone and it truly was like movie—and it wasn't because I had nothing to compare it to. I knew it in every fiber of my being that we were good at making out. The first person I had PIV sex with...with literally nothing to compare it to...I knew 100% that it was awful. And not because I was sinning, my body just knew that this wasn't how sex was supposed to be. And I know I am not alone in these experiences. Purity culture completely dismisses the inherent wisdom and knowing that our bodies have in favor for rigid rules that shame us and keep us from feeling liberated.

## Page 154

Here we see the emphasis, again, of the necessity of looking to people outside of us to tell us if what we are doing is ok. In this scenario, Dannah outlines the qualifications for such a person and reiterates the point that you cannot trust yourself. All that is good or true is found outside you. You are completely dependent on ever changing external circumstances and relationships to tell you if you are doing ok. The only person you should not trust is yourself.

## Final Summary:

Alright folks, there we have it! Truly, I could have posted a whole bunch more about this book but these are the “high points” Dannah Gresh is someone who is still incredibly involved in the purity culture world—she has dozens of books (I can't bring myself to read the rest) and still puts on purity retreats and seminars. She still wholeheartedly believes in these messages and while she has gone on record and said that there are some things that are different that she teaches (in relation to sexual assault, specifically) she is still passionate about teaching these messages more than ever given the state of the world.

I'm glad to be done with this book...going back and reading this one, in particular, has been difficult because of the influence it had AND how much I used this book as I mentored other young women in their purity journeys. I know that the things I taught them were harmful and I do have sincere regrets and grief over that. These messages truly do so much harm. So now, I'm curious to know from you—what was your experience of flipping through the slides of this book review? What did you learn, see differently, recognize? I want to hear from you!