

Frith, Hannah. *Orgasmic Bodies: The Orgasm in Contemporary Western Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 192. US \$54.99 (paperback). ISBN 9781137304360.

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What is an orgasm? This is a question researchers have tried to identify and understand for the last seventy or so years. It has been subject to many medical, psychological, sociological, and feminist research projects. The subject is seductive and pulls interest from many different fields, but it is not just researchers that are interested; the topic of orgasms is something we see and discuss in popular culture. From movies (infamous diner scene from *When Harry Met Sally*), to romantic literature (not only one of the most profitable, but an area that is invested in exploring sexual pleasure and orgasms), and lifestyle magazines (*Cosmo* and *Men's Health*), orgasms keep making an appearance in our daily lives. Questions like, are you having them? Are you having enough of them? Can you have a better one? Orgasms matter to us. This is something that social psychologist Hannah Frith dived into. In her book, *Orgasmic Bodies: The Orgasm in Contemporary Western Culture* (2015), Frith leverages a neoliberal framework to analyze what orgasms mean in contemporary western culture and how they produce different expectations and obligations for men and women.

In *Orgasmic Bodies*, Frith focuses on four key themes throughout the text: (1) establishing the 'orgasmic imperative', (2) how certainty/uncertainty of men and women's orgasms affect the orgasmic imperative, (3) how postfeminist theorists and hegemonic masculinity creates different problems for men and women because of the orgasm imperative, and lastly (4) how "the body is a contested site for knowing the orgasmic body" (148). The text is structured to orient those who are new to research about orgasms, demonstrate the many ways orgasms have been subjected to the neoliberal notion of self-improvement, explore how orgasms have placed gendered expectations on both men and women in heterosexual relationships, and discuss how we should shift our thinking of orgasms into an embodied experience.

To do this, the first chapter “What is an Orgasm and Why Does it Matter?” establishes not only how the medical and psychological fields have studied and practiced their research, but what is different about the research Frith is contributing to the discourse. The chapter explores how the orgasm is “constructed, negotiated and managed in relation to a range of ‘modern’ phenomena” (3) and how it is informed by heteronormative standards that have gendered impacts and affect men and women differently. She catalogs the three different frameworks research has used (the biomedical, the behavioral, and the spiritual/experiential) and what they have said and their limitations. Because each of these frameworks focuses on orgasms in a specific light, none get to the crux of the issues Frith wants to explore: “the *meaning* of orgasm” (1, emphasis original).

After establishing her purpose, she posits that “heterosex is subject to the orgasmic imperative” (44). The orgasmic imperative, as she calls it, means that the presence or lack of orgasms during intercourse is seen societally as good/bad, influences self-perception, and is a signal of power in heterosexual gendered relationships. Frith leverages a wide variety of research and popular discourse to demonstrate how research and society are focused on the need to have an orgasm during intercourse. She further breaks down the chapter to build to her claim: orgasms mean good sex, meaning a good relationship. And this has consequences for both men and women. Postfeminist researchers have said there has been a clear shift in femininity towards sexual liberation for women, as a marker of Feminist enlightenment. However, this has placed pressure on women to not only know their bodies but to teach men to please them. And when men cannot perform this task, it means they are not performing their duties. A women’s orgasm reaffirms men’s masculine sensibilities. This affects the way we build and see our relationships.

These defining qualities of a relationship create and reinforce gender stereotypes for heterosexual couples. The chapter “Complicated Women, Straightforward Men” explores how research has manufactured the idea that women’s bodies are complicated, therefore have a hard time orgasming. Frith also notes that much of the research does not take women’s embodied experiences into account. Additionally, much of the research shows an “ambivalence” towards orgasming which has been ignored by researchers. And the focus is not why they are feeling this ambivalence, but how we can help them reach an orgasm. Building off this proclaimed complication, our culture finds great meaning in the ability to orgasm together. Frith’s chapter “Coming Together: The Timing of Orgasm” examines how orgasming together holds an exalted position in heterosexual sex. In order to examine this, Frith delves into how we culturally view the simultaneous orgasm and how men (asked to last longer) and women (asked to speed up) are working to time their sexual responses. Both of these chapters work to build her claim that Western society uses and applies a neoliberal framework to understand orgasms.

Not only must couples work towards timing their orgasms, but they must have the bodies to do so. In “Orgasmic Labor: Training the Body for Orgasmic Success,” Frith analyzes popular magazines (*Cosmo* and *Men’s Health*) and how the magazines posit the orgasm as something to be achieved and therefore to labor towards. She first does this by showcasing how in a post-feminist era, women are positioned as the experts of their bodies and how they must use this knowledge to orgasm often and teach men. Ironically, positioning women as experts and men as unknowledgeable places the onus on women to learn and take control of their health in order to be able to teach men. This further pushes her claim that Western culture uses orgasms as “the neoliberal drive towards sexual self-improvement” (83). The

view of what society believes is or isn't an orgasm has also put the focus on faking orgasms. In the chapter "Performing Orgasm: Blurring the 'Real' and the 'Fake,'" Frith explores the shifting idea of why women fake orgasms, and how this practice was thought of as being rooted in insecurity and has now shifted to a more political and autonomous mode. For this work, Frith leverages emotion work to discuss the prior research and some of the reasons women might fake an orgasm. She expands her argument that if an orgasm is an embodied practice, so is a fake one.

But really, what does it mean to have an embodied orgasm? Frith spends a lot of time discussing the research and the contemporary culture surrounding orgasms but focuses on the experience in one of her last chapters. In the chapter "Embodying Orgasmic Sensation," she problematizes this idea surrounding the ambiguous and embodied experience of an orgasm that is not taught in sex ed, but instead can be discussed and found online. First, Frith examines several different frameworks that have been used to discuss orgasms: social constructionism, phenomenology, and structuration. However, more contemporary research is calling for researchers to pull from all three frameworks because each does not exactly capture an embodied experience. She also introduces Jackson and Scott's (2007) term symbolic interactionism to think about how a "body is more than a physical, corporeal object, it is a social object which is imbued with symbolic meaning (133). In order to investigate this, Frith leverages online forums and women's magazines that offer personal testimonies from women that describe orgasms, something research lacks.

In the conclusion of the text, "The Climax: Conclusions and Reflections," Frith clearly states where the research is lacking and the limitations caused by current societal focus and lack of exploration in said field. Her research is admittedly gendered, and there is a lack of research on lesbian, gay, and queer relationship to orgasms from all fields. Additionally, another context that appears to be missing from the research around orgasms is how social class affects women's orgasms. She brings up few studies that have examined how class affects a person's ability to orgasm, but research on the topic as a whole is meager. Lastly, men's orgasms in almost all of the research have been posited as certain, and this certainty has led to a lack of research into the relationship between ejaculation and orgasm. Frith leaves audiences with a question on when an orgasm can be deemed as pleasurable under these specific power structures.

Orgasmic Bodies: The Orgasm in Contemporary Western Culture by Hannah Frith attempts at something new, trying to understand what orgasms mean for our society and how they are constructed. This text synthesizes decades of research, while accessibly written to bring in audiences from outside the medical, psychological, and sociological lenses. Bringing these various discourses together, Frith asks her audience to see orgasms in complex and meaningful ways. With an eye towards Popular Romance Studies, this text lays the groundwork for researchers, educators, scholars, and students to think deeply about how orgasms are discussed, experienced, represented, and embodied in our popular media.