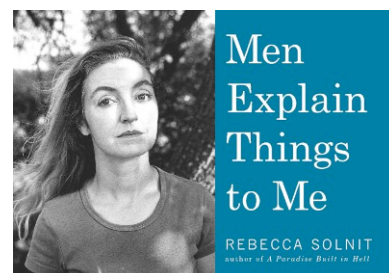


The Rebecca Solnit Pack for Advanced EFL Learners
Reading & Speaking + Follow-up Listening/Reading/Speaking
 by MF for C1. Term 2

Men Explain Things to Me (2014) by Rebecca Solnit

In our School Feminist Library you can borrow this book in English, Spanish and German.
For the grandmothers, the levelers, the dreamers, the men who get it, the young women who keep going, the older ones who opened the way, the conversations that don't end, and a world that will let Ella Nachimovitz (born January 2014) bloom to her fullest



- **yellow**: Useful Language for practicing your own narratives, or for Oral Drilling considering your LoMs
- **teal/turquoise**: lexicon, wordformation, useful phrases (*sintagmas*)
- **C1 Language Items**: can you guess why?
- **LoMs** for under-the-level mistakes to avoid
- In **Bold**: quotes, or ideas for discussion

Beginning of essay: excerpt from page 1 to 7

I still don't know why Sallie and I bothered to go to that party in the forest slope above Aspen. The people were all older than us and dull in a distinguished way, old enough that we, at forty-ish, passed as the occasion's young ladies. The house was great—if you like Ralph Lauren-style chalets—a rugged luxury cabin at 9,000 feet complete with elk antlers, lots of kilims, and a wood-burning stove. We were preparing to leave, when our host said, “No, stay a little longer so I can talk to you.” He was an imposing man who'd made a lot of money.

He kept us waiting while the other guests drifted out into the summer night, and then sat us down at his authentically grainy wood table and said to me, “So? I hear you've written a couple of books.”

I replied, “Several, actually.”

He said, in the way you encourage your friend's seven-year-old to describe flute practice, “And what are they about?”

They were actually about quite a few different things, the six or seven out by then, but I began to speak only of the most recent on that summer day in 2003, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*, my book on the annihilation of time and space and the industrialization of everyday life.

He cut me off soon after I mentioned Muybridge. “And have you heard about the very important Muybridge book that came out this year?”

So caught up was I in my assigned role as ingénue that I was perfectly willing to entertain the possibility that another book on the same subject had come out simultaneously and I'd somehow missed it. He was already telling me about the very important book—with that smug look I know so well in a man holding forth, eyes fixed on the fuzzy far horizon of his own authority.

Here, let me just say that my life is well-sprinkled with lovely men, with a long succession of editors who have, since I was young, listened and encouraged and published me, with my infinitely generous younger brother, with splendid friends of whom it could be said—like the Clerk in *The Canterbury Tales* I still remember from Mr. Pelen's class on Chaucer—“gladly would he learn and gladly teach.” Still, there are these other men, too. So, Mr. Very Important was going on smugly about this book I should have known when Sallie interrupted him to say, “That's her book.” Or tried to interrupt him anyway.

But he just continued on his way. She had to say, “That's her book” three or four times before he finally took it in. And then, as if in a nineteenth-century novel, he went ashen. That I was indeed the author of the very important book it turned out he hadn't read, just read about in the

New York Times Book Review a few months earlier, **so confused** [something in his mind] the neat categories into which his world was sorted **that** [result] **he was stunned speechless**—for a moment, before he began holding forth again [!]. **Being women, we were politely out of earshot before we started laughing**, and we've never really stopped.

I like incidents **of that sort**, when forces that are usually **so sneaky and hard to point out** slither out of the grass and are as obvious as, say, an anaconda that's eaten a cow, or an elephant turd on the carpet.

The Slippery Slope of Silencings

Yes, guys like this pick on other men's books too, and people of both genders pop up at events to hold forth on irrelevant things and conspiracy theories, **but the out-and-out confrontational confidence of the totally ignorant is, in my experience, gendered. Men explain things to me, and other women, whether or not they know what they're talking about. Some men.**

Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that **keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare**; **that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does**, that this is not their world. **It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence.**

...

Arrogance **might have had something to do** [with the war, 2012], but **this syndrome is a war that nearly every woman faces every day, a war within herself too, a belief in her superfluity, an invitation to silence**, one from which a fairly nice career as a writer (with **a lot of research and facts correctly deployed**) **has not entirely freed me. After all, there was a moment there when I was willing to let Mr. Important and his overweening confidence bowl over my more shaky certainty.**

Don't forget that I've had a lot more confirmation of my right to think and speak than most women, and I've learned that a **certain amount of self-doubt is a good tool for correcting, understanding, listening, and progressing—though too much is paralyzing and total self-confidence produces arrogant idiots**, like the ones who have governed us since 2001. **There's a happy medium between these poles to which the genders have been pushed**, a warm equatorial belt of give and take **where we should all meet.**

More extreme versions of our situation exist in, for example, those Middle Eastern countries where **women's testimony has no legal standing**; so that a woman can't testify that she was raped without a male witness to counter the male rapist. Which there rarely **is.**

Credibility is a basic survival tool. When I was very young and just beginning to get what feminism was about and why it was necessary, I had a boyfriend whose uncle was a nuclear physicist. One Christmas, he was telling—as though it were a light and amusing subject—how a neighbor's wife in his suburban bomb-making community had come running out of her house naked in the middle of the night screaming that her husband was trying to kill her. **How, I asked, did you know that he wasn't trying to kill her?** He explained, patiently, that they were **respectable middle-class people**. Therefore, **her-husband-trying-to-kill-her was simply not a credible explanation** for her fleeing the house yelling that her husband was trying to kill her. That **she was crazy** [1], on the other hand....

Even getting **a restraining order—a fairly new legal tool—requires acquiring the credibility to convince the courts that some guy is a menace and then getting the cops to enforce it. Restraining orders often don't work anyway. Violence is one way to silence people, to deny their voice and their credibility, to assert your right to control over their right to exist.** About three women a day are murdered by **spouses** or ex-spouses in this country. It's one of the main causes of death in pregnant women in the U.S. **At the heart of the struggle** of feminism **to give** rape, date rape,

marital rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment **legal standing as crimes has been the necessity of making women credible and audible.**

I tend to believe that women acquired the status of human beings when these kinds of acts started to be taken seriously, when the big things that stop us and kill us were addressed legally from the mid-1970s on; well after, that is, my birth. And for anyone about to argue that workplace sexual intimidation isn't a life or death issue, remember that Marine Lance Corporal Maria Lauterbach, age 20, was apparently killed by her higher-ranking colleague last winter while she was waiting to testify that he raped her. The burned remains of her pregnant body were found in the fire pit in his backyard [in December, 2012].

Being told that, categorically, he knows what he's talking about and she doesn't, however minor a part of any given conversation, **perpetuates the ugliness of this world and holds back its light** [metaphorical language]. After my book *Wanderlust* came out in 2000, **I found myself better able to resist being bullied out of my own perceptions and interpretations.** **On two occasions around that time, I objected to the behavior of a man, only to be told** that the incidents hadn't happened at all as I said, that I was **subjective, delusional,** overwrought, dishonest—in a nutshell, female [2].

Most of my life, I would have doubted myself and backed down. **Having public standing as a writer of history helped me stand my ground,** but few women get that boost, and billions of women must be out there on this six-billion-person planet **being told that they are not reliable witnesses to their own lives,** that the truth is not their property, now or ever. This goes way beyond Men Explaining Things, but it's part of the same **archipelago of arrogance** [metaphoric language].

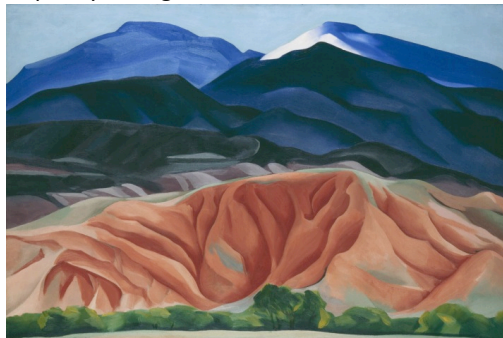
Men explain things to me, **still.** And **no man has ever apologized for explaining, wrongly, things that I know and they don't.** Not yet, but according to the actuarial tables, **I may have another forty-something years to live,** more or less, so it could happen. Though I'm not holding my breath.

Listening Follow-up Work

- Listen to the excerpt on the Talking People Podcast (category/segment: Books)
- 8-minute Radio Review of another of Solnit's works: *The Faraway Nearby*
<http://netnebraska.org/interactive-multimedia/radio/all-about-books-faraway-nearby-rebecca-solnit>

Sociocultural note related to the title: **Georgia O'Keefe** was one of the most impressive US American artists who moved out to the desert to paint.

The Lawrence Tree and Black Mesa Landscape, by Georgia O'Keefe



Further Reading

for more information and useful language for Oral Practice at home & oral exercise in class: review, summary + personal opinion or experience. Work on language like we did above.

New Introduction

Source: <https://www.guernicamag.com/rebecca-solnit-men-explain-things-to-me/>

One evening over dinner, I began to joke, as I often had before, about writing an essay called “Men Explain Things to Me.” Every writer has a stable of ideas that never make it to the racetrack, and I’d been trotting this pony out recreationally every once in a while. My houseguest, the brilliant theorist and activist Marina Sitrin, insisted that I had to write it down because people like her younger sister Sam needed to read it. Young women needed to know that being belittled wasn’t the result of their own secret failings; it was the boring old gender wars. So lovely, immeasurably valuable Sam, this one always was for you in particular. It wanted to be written; it was restless for the racetrack; it galloped along once I sat down at the computer; and since Marina slept in later than me in those days, I served it for breakfast and sent it to Tom later that day.

That was April 2008 and it struck a chord. It still seems to get reposted more than just about anything I’ve written at TomDispatch.com, and prompted some very funny letters to this site. None was more astonishing than the one from the Indianapolis man who wrote in to tell me that he had “never personally or professionally shortchanged a woman” and went on to berate me for not hanging out with “more regular guys or at least do a little homework first,” gave me some advice about how to run my life, and then commented on my “feelings of inferiority.” He thought that being patronized was an experience a woman chooses to, or could choose not to have—and so the fault was all mine. Life is short; I didn’t write back.

Young women subsequently added the word “mansplaining” to the lexicon. Though I hasten to add that the essay makes it clear mansplaining is not a universal flaw of the gender, just the intersection between overconfidence and cluelessness where some portion of that gender gets stuck.

The battle for women to be treated like human beings with rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of involvement in cultural and political arenas continues, and it is sometimes a pretty grim battle. When I wrote the essay below, I surprised myself in seeing that what starts out as minor social misery can expand into violent silencing and even violent death. Last year’s Nobel Peace Prize went to women, two Liberians and a Yemeni, “for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.” Which is to say, that safety and full participation is only a goal.

This is a struggle that takes place in war-torn nations, but also in the bedroom, the dining room, the classroom, the workplace, and the streets. And in newspapers, magazines, and television, where women are dramatically underrepresented. Even in the online gaming arena women face furious harassment and threats of assault simply for daring to participate. That’s mostly symbolic violence. Real violence, the most extreme form of silencing and destroying rights, takes a far more dire toll in this country where domestic violence accounts for 30 percent of all homicides of women, annually creates about two million injuries, and prompts 18.5 million mental health care visits. It’s in Cairo’s Tahrir Square too, brutal gender violence where freedom and democracy had been claimed.

Having the right to show up and speak are basic to survival, to dignity, and to liberty. I’m grateful that, after an early life of being silenced, sometimes violently, I grew up to have a voice, circumstances that will always bind me to the rights of the voiceless.