Laura Sessions Stepp has presented a fascinating and important work in her new book Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both. Stepp is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist from the Washington Post, who has written a number of pieces on young people for her newspaper as well as other publications. In this work Stepp journeys with a handful of young women, ages sixteen to twenty-one, inviting them to share their own experiences of sex, dating and love. At the heart of the project is the desire to discover what “hooking up” actually means to young women, and how they are using it to find pleasure, love, and meaning.

The book was originally engendered from Stepp’s personal experience as a mother. She tells how when her son was in junior high the principal called a meeting of parents to explain that a number of girls were known to have repeatedly given a few boys oral sex. These acts had nothing to do with love or commitment and none of the participants were the girlfriends of these boys. Rather these seemingly normal suburban children were choosing to express their sexuality outside the normal practices of dating and courtship (not to mention marriage). To discover the extent of this new phenomenon of quick, commitment-less sexual expression, Stepp spent most of her time on the college campuses of Duke and George Washington. Visiting young women’s dorm rooms, sporting events, night clubs, and social activities, Stepp witnessed a culture so steeped in “hooking up” that many young women were now unhooked from love, commitment, and a monogamous future. The women that Stepp interviewed and observed were middle-class, from multiple racial backgrounds, and attending or planning to attended four-year colleges. Half were raised by both biological parents, but all were struggling to discover independence and commitment in a world of radical freedom and escalated competition.

The book is divided into four sections constructed from the narratives of these women. The setting for section one is Duke University and its major character is Jamie. Jamie is a senior with a serious boyfriend, which, as we discover throughout the text, is unusual in the hook-up culture. This abnormality is the very reason Stepp chooses to tell her story. Now on the other side of hooking-up Jamie can reflect on how it impacted her. Much of Jamie’s freshman year was spent going back and forth from the freshman
dorms to the upperclassman residence to have sex with Jake. Jake had no intention of dating Jamie, they never went out to dinner or to a movie, rather before and after sex they would watch TV or play video games at Jake's frat house. Every morning after Jamie stayed at Jake's she would return to her dorm door alone, leaving Jake asleep in his room. Stepp explains that the hook-up culture is different than the spirit of casual sex that flooded college campuses in the late 60s and after. Casual sex always means intercourse, but hooking-up is so multi-facetted that it can mean anything from a kiss on the dance floor, to making out, to intercourse. What is at the heart of hooking-up is the discouragement of feelings. Hooking-up rests on two commitments: hooking-up is for fun and either participant can walk away at any time and for any reason (once it is no longer fun or it becomes more fun with someone else). Stepp finishes this section with a short, but helpful discussion of courtship and dating. She explains how power has slowly shifted. It has gone from a courtship culture, where women in many ways held all the power as men had to meet a woman in her environment, to dating, where power shifted to man's environment but the woman was expected to control sexual expression, to hooking-up, where men no longer have to do anything for sexual experiences.

Section two begins in the high school as Stepp shares the stories of Sienna, Anna, and Mieka. While at the end of section one Stepp discussed how hooking-up gives more and more power over to men, she articulates here how these three high school girls are using hooking-up to dominate the boys in their school. All three said that they hooked-up with guys because they liked the feeling of being admired by their friends and wanted by the boys. The freedom and power it provided was intoxicating. Sienna was an especially interesting case. She came from a strong family was an excellent student and a top state athlete. In discussing her story Stepp wonders if the high performance culture for women is part of the reason for the desire for sexual expression. The fight for top grades and top athletic honors leads to a culture where women use their sexuality to be more desired than their friends and feel power over boys.

To test this hypothesis section two returns to college, this time to George Washington University, to examine the story of Nicole. Nicole often used hooking-up to gain the upper hand over men in her life, so much so that she hooked-up with one guy only to get him attached to her so she could hurt him. Nicole is a high-ranking student that has won at everything in her life. She admitted that she often uses hooking-up to have power over others. Stepp ends this section by discussing the emotional toll this puts on young people, even young people like Sienna and Nicole. The author worries that for