

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Everything Harder Than Everyone Else

AUTHOR: Jenny Valentish

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SUBJECT: Biography & Memoir

Book description

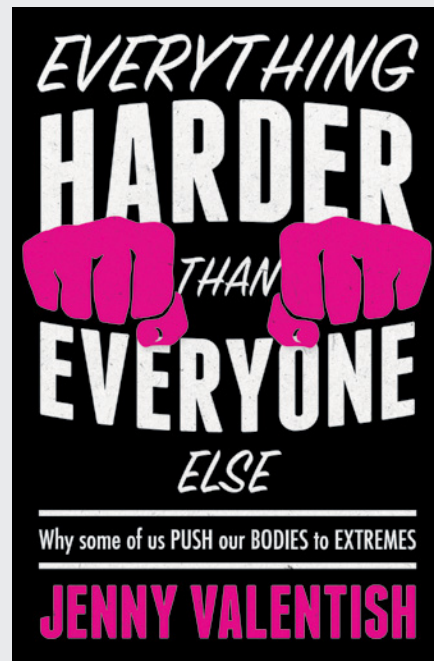
It's part of human nature to test our limits. But what happens when this part comes to define us?

When Jenny Valentish wrote a memoir about addiction, she noticed that people who treated drug-taking like an Olympic sport would often hurl themselves into a pursuit such as marathon running upon getting sober. What stayed constant was the need to push their boundaries.

Everything Harder Than Everyone Else follows people doing the things that most couldn't, wouldn't or shouldn't. Their insights lead Jenny on a compulsive, sometimes reckless journey through psychology, endurance and the power of obsession, revealing what we can learn about the human condition.

There's the neuroscientist violating his brain to override his disgust response. The athlete using childhood adversity as grist for the mill. The wrestler turning restlessness into curated ultraviolence. The designer who hangs from hooks in her flesh to get out of her head. The performance artist seeking erasure by manipulating his body. The BDSM dominant helping people flirt with death to feel more alive. The bare-knuckle boxer whose gnarliest opponent was once her ego. And the porn-star-turned-fighter for whom sex and violence are two sides of the same coin.

Darkly funny and vividly penetrating, *Everything Harder Than Everyone Else* explores our deeper selves and asks: what are your limits?



About the author

Jenny Valentish has been devoted to dancing around the void for many decades, first in the pub and then the boxing ring. She is the author of the acclaimed *Woman of Substances*, contributes to *The Guardian* and the ABC, and is the former editor of *Time Out Melbourne* and *Triple J's Jmag*.



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Praise for *Everything Harder Than Everyone Else*

‘Like a Louis Theroux documentary, *Everything Harder Than Everyone Else* is an eye-opening exploration of unconventional lifestyles and the people who live them. It is a rollicking and insightful read for both enthusiasts and the simply curious.’ —**BOOKS+PUBLISHING**

‘Valentish takes us into hidden worlds that fascinate, horrify, inspire and entertain. Valentish is your intrepid guide to fringe communities, where the members are hardcore and their wisdom is hard-won. The characters and stories will stay with you long after the last page.’

—**BRIGID DELANEY**

‘As a fan of wrestling and general out-there foolishness, I’ve often wondered – but couldn’t put into words – what drives people to such limits. An outstanding read.’

—**BRODEN KELLY, AUNTY DONNA**

Discussion Points

1. The theme of consent comes up throughout the book, from Dr Jack Alloca’s eating mission extending to human flesh, to BDSM sex worker Sir James fulfilling clients’ desires to be beaten, to deathmatch wrestler KrackerJak arranging to be hit repeatedly with a DVD player. Discuss how consent can be a grey area in these and other scenarios.
2. As the author, Jenny Valentish is visible throughout much of the narrative of the book. How does this deepen or affect her relationship with the interviewees and also the reader? How different would the book have been if she’d remained invisible?
3. Which of the people profiled in the book have found the most productive ways to reach catharsis from whatever pain point is driving them? Do any of the pursuits in the book seem less than a great idea to you?
4. The cult of suffering around cycling, triathlon and ultrarunning – as demonstrated by books such as *Into the Suffersphere* and apps such as *Sufferfest* – has a strange appeal to participants in those sports. Why do you think that is?
5. In the chapter ‘Bringing Order to Chaos’, we meet female bodybuilders determined to take up more space and create some power for themselves. What challenges do women in strength sports come up against, and how are they tackling them?
6. Jenny held the theory that porn stars were interested in pushing the limits of their bodies in the same way as athletes. Discuss this idea.
7. Many sports psychologists focus on the need to broaden an athlete’s sense of identity, to protect them from losing themselves if their career comes to a halt. How else does the book explore identity, and could you personally relate to the crisis of interviewees such as dancer Chloe Bayliss, when their lives changed beyond their control?
8. Jenny draws parallels between endurance racing and drug addiction, including alcohol use. Discuss the arguments for this idea – and any examples in the public eye that you can think of.
9. Many of us have experienced a loss of purpose during the pandemic. Professional athletes are a useful lens through which to contemplate our own reinvention. What did you learn from the final chapter around the idea of having purpose?
10. Also in the final chapter, athlete Camilla Fogagnolo made a comeback after being accused of cheating and concluded that she did not need external validation to know her worth. In what ways have some of the interviewees (and the author) of this book shown a reliance on external validation? Can you relate?
11. Pushing the body to its limits is an extreme way in which to really ‘meet yourself’. There is no room for artifice in the boxing ring or during the three-day race. What are some of the ways in which interviewees have described having profound moments?
12. The Ancient Greeks had the ultraviolent sport of pankration, the Ancient Romans had gladiators, and in medieval times, *calico storico* sometimes ended in death. Discuss the reasons that violent sports might be served to the masses, and what the appeal might be in watching them.