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You Can't Read Her

The evidence-graded
guide to attraction, dating,
and knowing she means it



Duncan Reeve

FIELDNOTE PRESS · 2026

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This sample contains the opening, Part One (Chapters 1 to 3), and the one-page Field Card. It is not the complete book.

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You Can't Read Her: The Evidence-Graded Guide to Attraction, Dating, and Knowing She Means It. First edition, 2026.

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The Pool

BEFORE WE BEGIN

There is a story, older than anything in this book's Sources section, about a man who falls in love with a face in a pool of water.

Narcissus finds the pool in the woods and bends to drink, and stops. The face looking up at him is extraordinary. He smiles, and it smiles. He leans closer, and it leans closer. Everything the face does is warm, immediate, responsive: an unbroken stream of yes. He has never received signals this clear in his life.

He has never received signals this clear because they are his own.

He stays at the pool for the rest of his life. He does not eat. He does not speak to anyone else. And there is someone else: a nymph named Echo, a real person standing in the same woods, who loves him and cannot get a word past his reflection. He never notices her. He is too busy reading the water.

The Greeks told this as a warning about vanity. It reads better as a warning about instruments. Everything Narcissus saw in the pool was real: the warmth was real, the responsiveness was real, the face genuinely moved when he moved. His error was not that the signals were false. It was that the source of the signals was him.

Every man carries a pool. You catch her looking at you and feel the spark, and some part of what you are seeing is her, and some part is your own interest looking back at you from the water. Until now, nobody has handed you a way to tell the difference.

Confidence is a poor instrument. In one lab study, women who said they had flirted were read as flirting by their male conversation partners in 5 of 14 cases, 36%. The study measured self-reported flirting, not romantic or sexual interest. Confidence is not calibration. The rest is the pool.

This book is about what happens when you finally look up.

Nine sentences

THE ENTIRE BOOK, IN CASE YOU NEVER FINISH IT

- **01** In one lab study, when women said they had flirted, their male conversation partners agreed 36% of the time; when women said they had not, the partners agreed 84% of the time. Those are rates against a self-report, not a score for any particular read. Treat confidence as a hypothesis, not a verdict.
- **02** So stop reading. Every common “tell” this book examines (tattoos, clothing, eye contact, reply speed, her face) is either a stereotype with little or no individual validity or a documented source of misreading.
- **03** In two undergraduate speed-dating samples, more than 100 pre-date traits and preferences predicted broad tendencies, but not who would especially desire whom. Reports completed after each four-minute date accounted for 16–29% of pair-specific desire variance, but they were measured alongside desire and did not show that contact created it. A profile is not proof that this particular person will want you.

- **04** The replacement for reading is one loop: **offer something small, read the response, match it or back off.** Nothing else in this book outranks that sentence.
- **05** A strongly evidenced move inside that loop is to prove you heard her, specifically with a follow-up question. It is unglamorous and it does more work than it looks.
- **06** On average, women score higher than men on the inhibition scales of the dual-control research and lower on excitation. Those studies did not compare tactics; the working inference in this book (the author's, flagged as such) is that removing pressure is the better first move than adding charm, because pressure is what the inhibition items describe.
- **07** Making it cheap for her to say no is what makes her yes worth having. Exit ramps are not politeness. They are measurement equipment.
- **08** Among the six traits the big meta-analysis tested, only strength and muscularity predicted consistently across mating and reproduction; voice pitch tied it on mating alone, all of it observational. The famous hacks this genre sells instead, red shirts and power poses, are dead on arrival.
- **09** Honesty is not presented here as the moral option. It is the book's working strategy, because it converts guessing into information.

Everything after this page is evidence, argument, mechanism, and things to do tonight. If you only read the nine sentences, you are still ahead of most of the market.

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Every claim wears its price tag

HOW TO READ THIS

Most books in this genre state everything in the same confident voice, whether it rests on a hundred thousand people or on one guy's Tuesday. This one labels the difference on the page, so you can argue with it.

- **Strong:** Meta-analysis, a large validated instrument, or a finding independently replicated by labs that don't share a coffee machine. Treat as a planning assumption.
- **Moderate:** Consistent evidence, usually from one research program or with thin replication. A good bet with boundary conditions.
- **Emerging:** Limited, context-dependent, or contested. A hypothesis you may test on yourself.
- **Speculative:** Theory, thin sourcing, or compromised data. Noise until shown otherwise.
- **Dead:** Retracted, failed a large preregistered replication, or never had evidence in the first place. Named in Chapter 3, by name.

Two numbers you need to be able to read

You will see d and r in this book. You do not need statistics. You need two intuitions.

d is a gap. It measures how far two groups sit apart in standard deviations. $d = 0.2$ is a gap you would never notice in one person. $d = 0.5$ you might notice across a room of people. $d = 0.9$ is a real, visible difference between the averages of two

groups. It still tells you nothing certain about the individual in front of you, because the two groups overlap enormously.

r is a link. r runs from -1 through 0 to $+1$. The sign gives the direction of the linear relationship; $|r|$ gives its magnitude. In human behaviour, $r = .10$ is faint, $r = .30$ is respectable, and $r = .50$ is unusually strong. Square it and you get the share of variance explained: $r = .35$ explains about 12% of what's going on. Which sounds much less impressive than "statistically significant," and should.

Keep both in mind, because the second half of this book's argument is arithmetic: **effects that are publishable are not the same as effects that are usable on a specific Tuesday with a specific person.** A lot of advice is sold in the gap between those two facts.

One convention: every bracketed evidence grade names the study or review it rests on, and the full citations sit in the Sources list. Where the book draws an inference the studies did not test, the text says so in plain words.

What this book refuses to be

It is not a system for getting sex out of people who don't want to have sex with you. Not because that would be rude, but because there is no such system in the literature and the men who go looking for one end up in a genre of anecdote, retraction and, occasionally, a courtroom. Casual sex between consenting adults is normal and morally unremarkable. So is wanting a relationship. The skill in this book is the same either way: finding out, accurately and quickly, whether the interest is mutual, and behaving well in both outcomes.

There are exactly six rules in this book that have no exceptions, and they live in Chapter 12. Everything else is calibration.

Part One: The Lie

Three chapters that take something away from you. The tell catalogue, the targeting fantasy, and about a decade of famous findings that turned out to be made of nothing. Read it in order. The replacement arrives in Part Two, and it is better than what you're losing.

"In one lab, most people who said they flirted were not read that way."

1. When Flirting Goes Unnoticed

Here is one result worth taking seriously without turning it into a rule.

Jeffrey Hall and colleagues paired 52 male and 52 female college students, all self-reported single, heterosexual strangers, for a recorded 10-to-12-minute conversation. Afterwards, each person privately answered two yes-or-no questions: did you flirt, and did your partner flirt? The researchers counted a judgment as accurate when it matched the partner's own answer.

Fourteen women said they had flirted. Their male partners agreed in 5 cases, 36%. Eleven men said they had flirted. Their female partners agreed in 2 cases, 18%. Across the full sample, partners matched 7 of 25 self-reports of flirting, 28%. When participants said they had not flirted, partners matched 66 of 79 reports, 84%.

Study 2 asked 261 outside observers to judge six one-minute clips each from the Study 1 conversations. Each clip showed only one member of a pair. Across 1,557 usable judgments, observers matched the target's self-report 38% of the time when the target had reported flirting and 66% when the target had reported no flirting. Agreement on reported flirting ranged from 22% to 51% across observer-target sex combinations. [Hall, Xing & Brooks, 2015: Moderate, context-limited]

Most self-reported flirting in Study 1 was not recognized as flirting by the person across the table. That should cut

confidence down to size. It should not become a new mind-reading rule.

One honesty note: Hall measured a single yes-or-no self-report of flirting. The study did not measure romantic or sexual interest, and it did not verify that any particular signal was sent or received. These are conditional agreement rates, not the probability that any particular positive or negative judgment is correct.

The narrow lesson is humility: a first read is a hypothesis, not a verdict.

Your errors are not random. They have a direction.

In 1982, Antonia Abbey ran an experiment that has been replicated so many times it is now furniture. She had men and women watch and participate in identical, friendly, mixed-sex conversations, then rate what they saw. The men rated the same behaviour as more sexual than the women did. Same room, same words, different readout. [Abbey, 1982: Strong] A survey of things that had actually happened to people confirmed it outside the lab. [Abbey, 1987]

In one undergraduate speed-meeting study, men overestimated women's sexual interest relative to women's self-reports ($d = .57$), while women underestimated men's sexual interest relative to men's self-reports ($d = .61$). [Perilloux, Easton & Buss, 2012: Moderate, single undergraduate study]

The famous explanation is Error Management Theory: under uncertainty, minds are tuned toward whichever mistake was historically cheaper, and for men a false alarm cost an

awkward evening while a miss cost a genuine opportunity. [Haselton & Buss, 2000] Martie Haselton confirmed the bias in surveys of real events. [Haselton, 2003] Mons Bendixen then replicated it in Norway, one of the most gender-equal societies on the planet, where the “it’s just culture” explanation should have had its best shot. He found male overperception intact, plus the predicted female underperception. [Bendixen, 2014: Strong] A follow-up found the bias flexes with context: present in ordinary encounters, muted during a period when everyone was overtly looking for sex. [Bendixen, Kennair, Biegler & Haselton, 2019]

I want to be careful here, because this is the one place where the popular version of the science oversimplifies in a way that flatters you. The *mechanism* is genuinely contested. A large study of 1,226 people across 3,850 interactions found that a big chunk of what looks like an evolved bias is more mundane: men project their own interest onto her, and misjudge how much she likes them. [Lee et al., 2020: Conflict zone] The phenomenon is rock solid. The story about *why* is not settled, and anyone selling you a tidy evolutionary just-so story is selling past the evidence.

The finding that removes your last excuse

If the only problem were over-reading, the fix would be simple: subtract. Assume you are seeing 30% more interest than exists, discount accordingly, done.

Coreen Farris and colleagues closed that escape hatch. Using signal-detection analysis, which separates *bias* (a tilted thumb on the scale) from *sensitivity* (the ability to tell two things apart at all), they found men’s errors are substantially a sensitivity

problem. Men misread friendliness as sexual interest *and* misread sexual interest as friendliness. [Farris, Treat, Viken & McFall, 2008: Strong]

You are not a detector with a tilted needle. You are a detector with a smudged lens. You see things that aren't there and you miss things that are.

Which means the popular corrective ("just be less thirsty and assume nothing") is only half a fix, and the half it drops is the one that has quietly cost you the most. Every man reading this has a woman in his history who was interested and gave up waiting.

You are bad at yes in both directions. Subtracting confidence does not fix a smudged lens. Only new information does.

Then somebody hands you a drink

Abbey went back and tested what alcohol does to this system. Intoxication *increases* men's ratings of sexual intent in friendly behaviour. [Abbey, Zawacki & McAuslan, 2000: Strong] Alcohol also narrows attention onto the most immediate, salient cue in the room and away from everything peripheral and inhibiting. The effect is known as alcohol myopia.

So the standard venue for meeting people in Western nightlife is a place engineered to degrade the one faculty you are relying on, in the exact direction it is already broken, while raising the stakes of getting it wrong. This is not a moral point. It is an instrumentation point. You would not calibrate a scale during an earthquake.

What about reading her from her face, or a photo?

Stillman and Maner studied a narrower question: whether strangers' ratings from silent interaction videos tracked women's self-reported sociosexual orientation. Twenty-four romantically unattached female undergraduates, deliberately sampled from the upper and lower ends of the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory, were recorded while completing a five-minute, no-talking, one-handed Rubik's Cube task in close proximity to a relatively attractive male research assistant.

In Study 1, 10 undergraduate raters watched the silent videos. Their average sociosexuality ratings correlated with the 24 women's self-reports at $r = .55$. In Study 2, 50 undergraduate raters, 21 men, 27 women, and two who did not report gender, watched the same three-minute soundless segment of each interaction. Average ratings correlated at $r = .49$. When split by rater sex, the correlation was $r = .51$ for female raters and $r = .35$ for male raters; the male-rater result was only marginally significant. Male raters also judged the targets as more unrestricted than female raters did. [Stillman & Maner, 2009: Moderate, small single-lab target sample]

These are correlations across 24 selected targets after ratings were aggregated across observers. They are not accuracy percentages, do not concern photographs, and do not show that one man could correctly rank or classify 100 women. The study supports a limited group-level association in a constrained lab task. It does not license an inference about the individual in front of you.

The receipts: Chapter 1

- Partner agreement when target said "I flirted", Study 1: **7/25 overall, 28%; male partners judging women 5/14, 36%; female partners judging men 2/11, 18%** · *Moderate, context-limited*
- Partner agreement when target said "I did not flirt", Study 1: **66/79 overall, 84%; male partners judging women 32/38, 84%; female partners judging men 34/41, 83%** · *Moderate, context-limited*
- Outside-observer agreement when target had reported flirting, Study 2: **38% overall; 22% to 51% across observer-target sex cells** · *Moderate, context-limited*
- Misperception of sexual interest, both directions: **men over by $d = .57$; women under by $d = .61$** · *Moderate, single undergraduate study*
- Men's errors are a sensitivity problem, not just bias: **medium effect** · *Strong*
- Alcohol raises men's sexual-intent ratings: *Strong*
- Sociosexuality judgments from silent interaction clips, Study 2: **$r = .49$ overall; $r = .51$ for female raters; $r = .35$ for male raters, marginal; 24 selected targets** · *Moderate, small single-lab target sample*

The Hypothesis Rule

Here is the first operational rule in this book, and it is free.

No positive read of yours is a verdict. Treat it as a hypothesis to be checked with a small, honest offer that is easy to decline. A clear no is an answer. Hesitation, withdrawal, ambiguity, or lack of reciprocity means stop or step back, not run another test.

Be precise about what Hall's numbers do and do not say. The researchers compared each participant's judgment with the partner's own yes-or-no report. In that lab sample, partners matched 7 of 25 reports of flirting and 66 of 79 reports of no flirting. Those are conditional agreement rates, not the probability that any particular positive or negative read is correct. They also say nothing directly about romantic or sexual interest.

What they license is humility, not a correction formula. In this setting, self-reported flirting was easier to miss than self-reported non-flirting was to contradict. That pattern cannot diagnose the interaction in front of you.

So the move is never to treat a positive feeling as a verdict. It is to make a small, honest offer that is easy to decline, then respect the response. You are not trying to become a mind reader. You are trying to stop needing to be one.

Tonight

Think of the last three times you were sure someone was interested and nothing came of it. Don't look for what she did. Look for what you did next: did you go and find out, or did you keep watching for more signal?

Whatever your answer, that is the habit this exercise asks you to notice.

2. Profiles Predicted Tendencies, Not the Pair

The most expensive belief in this genre is that enough information gathered before two people meet can tell you who will want whom. Joel, Eastwick and Finkel tested a serious version of that premise. Their models predicted broad tendencies. They did not reliably predict pair-specific initial desire.

The study used two samples of romantically unattached undergraduates: 163 participants in 2005 and 187 in 2007, with a mean age of 19.6 in each. Participants completed more than 100 self-report measures of traits and preferences, then had four-minute dates with roughly 12 opposite-sex participants.

The models predicted 4–18% of actor variance, how much someone tended to desire dates overall, and 7–27% of partner variance, how much someone tended to be desired overall. They did not reliably predict relationship variance, how much one participant especially desired one particular date beyond those general tendencies. A model trained on the first sample and tested on the second explained less than 0.1% of that pair-specific variance. [Joel, Eastwick & Finkel, 2017: Moderate]

Immediately after each date, participants rated that particular encounter, including perceived chemistry and intelligence. Models using those post-date perceptions accounted for 16–29% of pair-specific desire variance. Chemistry was the strongest predictor. The perceptions and romantic-desire outcome were recorded after the same date and on the same questionnaire. This is a correlational result. It does not show

that the meeting created desire or that chemistry caused it.
[Joel, Eastwick & Finkel, 2017: Moderate]

Both samples were young undergraduates in opposite-sex speed dates. The study measured initial desire after four minutes, not long-term compatibility. Its authors allowed that other measures, much larger samples, or more diverse samples might produce different results.

The profiles predicted tendencies, not the pair. Reports about the four-minute date carried some pair-specific information. That is not proof that the date created the desire.

This result undercuts a particular targeting fantasy, not every possible use of pre-meeting information. In these samples, a large battery of self-reported traits and preferences did not provide a reliable shortcut to pair-specific initial desire. The practical lesson is narrower: a profile is not evidence that this particular woman will want you. Find out from her responses, and take the answer as given.

"Yes, but tattoos"

Let's do the tell catalogue properly, because you have absorbed it whether you signed up or not, and vague scepticism will not dislodge it. Specific numbers will.

The trick to reading this table is one distinction the industry deliberately blurs: **perception** versus **validity**. Whether people *believe* a cue means something is a different question from whether it *does*. On several rows below, the perception effect is strong and well replicated (people really do stereotype) while

the validity is weak, confounded, or entirely absent. A stereotype that everyone shares is still wrong.

- Tattoos signal promiscuity: **Perception:** strong and replicated. Tattooed women are rated as more promiscuous, less attractive and heavier drinkers, worsening with size and visibility [Swami & Furnham, 2007; Hawkes, Senn & Thorn, 2004]. **Validity:** in a representative Australian sample of 8,656 adults, ever being tattooed was associated with slightly more lifetime partners, alongside smoking, cannabis use and depression, i.e. confounded with general risk propensity [Heywood et al., 2012]. Useless on an individual. · *Strong perception / weak validity*
- A piercing means she's open: **Cohort data show small associations with earlier sexual activity, largely riding on sensation-seeking** [Skegg et al., 2007; Nowosielski et al., 2012 (N=120)]. **No study validates any piercing as a cue to sexual openness.** · *Weak, confounded*
- Revealing clothing = availability: **Revealing dress raises attributed intent, especially in male observers** [Abbey et al., 1987]. In one club study, women who self-reported higher sexual motivation that night did show more skin [Grammer, Renninger & Fischer, 2004]. That is context-bound self-presentation, not a stable trait, and a documented driver of your worst misreads. · *Emerging, context-bound*
- Her sexy selfies tell you: **In one experiment, 58 adolescent girls and 60 young adult women rated a fictitious woman with a sexualised Facebook profile photo as less physically attractive, less socially attractive and less competent than the nonsexualised version** [Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016].

That is a finding about female viewers' judgments, not the profile owner's sexual disposition. · *Perception only*

- Heavy makeup signals intent: **Cosmetics reliably shift perceived attractiveness and trait judgments [Etcoff et al., 2011]. No validated link to sexual openness whatsoever.** · *Dead, for inference*
- Blondes / hair colour: **Preference research finds frequency-dependent aesthetic fashions, not behavioural differences [Janif, Brooks & Dixon, 2015]. Pure folklore.** · *Dead*
- Long eye contact means she's into you: **Gaze and proximity cues raise men's perceived sexual intent regardless of her actual intent [Abbey & Melby, 1986]. This is not a signal; it is one of the identified causes of the error in Chapter 1. (Mutual gaze does predict mate choice, and Chapter 9 covers it, but that is a two-way behaviour inside an interaction, not a tell you spot from across a bar.)** · *Dead as a cue*
- Fast replies = high interest: **No study validates reply speed as a readout of the sender's interest. One preregistered experiment shows timing changes how a message lands on the receiver [Teichmann et al., 2026]. That is not what it reveals about the sender. Declining responsiveness, however, is real information: Chapter 11.** · *Dead as a tell*
- How often she goes out: **A two-link chain: extraversion and sensation-seeking correlate modestly with short-term mating orientation [Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008; Hoyle, Fejfar & Miller, 2000], and going out is a leaky proxy for those. No study connects party frequency to sexual openness. Chain two weak correlations and you have noise.** · *Weak*

- She's different when ovulating: **Desire and self-perceived desirability rise modestly near ovulation.** That result held across about a thousand women and 26,000 diary entries [Arslan, Schilling, Gerlach & Penke, 2021]. But **sociosexuality and mate preferences do *not* shift in hormone-confirmed and preregistered tests** [Van Stein et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2018]. And you cannot see it anyway. · *Small desire effect only*

None of these surface cues is a reliable diagnostic of an individual woman's interest, preferences or sexual openness. Several mainly track observer stereotypes; others show small or context-bound group associations that do not support an individual inference.

Why even the good cue is useless

Openness to uncommitted sex is a real, measurable, reasonably stable individual difference. That is not in dispute. The standard instrument, the revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory, has good reliability and predicts future partner counts. [Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008: Strong]

But it has three separable facets, and the arrangement is almost comically inconvenient for you:

- **Behaviour: Her actual history of uncommitted sex** · *No, and interrogating her about it is its own kind of answer*
- **Attitude: What she thinks about casual sex in the abstract** · *Only through actual conversation*
- **Desire: How often she fantasises about people she isn't committed to** · *Completely invisible*

The facets have genuine discriminant validity: a woman can hold permissive attitudes and have little casual-sex desire, or the reverse. So “is she open to this?” was never one question. In the validation data, past behaviour and **desire** both predicted future partner numbers, with behaviour predicting them somewhat more strongly, while desire best predicted relationship change. And desire is the facet that is entirely inside her head. [Penke & Asendorpf, 2008]

Behaviour and desire each predicted later outcomes, but desire is entirely internal. Surface cues cannot reveal an individual's SOI-R profile.

The averages are real and they will still mislead you

Across 48 nations, Schmitt found that men averaged more unrestricted sociosexuality, with a mean gap of $d = .74$. [Schmitt, 2005: Strong] Lippa's dataset of more than 200,000 participants across 53 nations also found consistent male-higher averages, while greater gender equality tended to be associated with higher women's sociosexuality and smaller sex differences. [Lippa, 2009: Strong] Clark and Hatfield reported that about 75% of men and none of the women accepted a stranger's direct invitation to sex on a university campus. In two preregistered Austrian field studies published online in December 2024, Kunz and Greitemeyer found lower, nonzero acceptance: 28% of men, 11 of 40, and 5% of women, 2 of 40, accepted the sex invitation. These are group-level findings about direct invitations from strangers, not a rule for any individual woman. [Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Kunz & Greitemeyer, 2025: Moderate for the modern replication]

So the gap is real. Here is why it still won't help you.

At $d = .74$, the sociosexuality distributions overlap substantially. That group average cannot locate the individual in front of you. [Schmitt, 2005: Strong] Knowing she is a woman tells you almost nothing about *this* woman.

And her position isn't even fixed. The strategic-pluralism work is explicit that women's mating psychology is *conditional*: trade-offs shift with her circumstances, her relationship status, her environment, and what a given encounter is actually for. [Gangestad & Simpson, 2000: Strong] The same woman can be genuinely uninterested in casual sex in March and genuinely enthusiastic in June, with a different person, in a different room.

You are not assessing a permanent property. You are asking a much narrower and far more answerable question: *is there interest here, now, with me?* Inspection cannot settle that question. Her actual responses are better evidence than a profile.

The receipts: Chapter 2

- Pre-date self-reports predicting pair-specific initial desire: **no reliable variance; cross-sample less than 0.1%** · *Moderate*
- Pre-date self-reports predicting general tendencies: **4–18% actor variance; 7–27% partner variance** · *Moderate*
- Post-date perceptions accounting for pair-specific initial desire: **16–29%, measured alongside desire** · *Moderate*
- Cross-national sex difference in sociosexuality: $d = .74$ **across 48 nations, $N = 14,059$** · *Strong*
- Within-sex variability vs. between-sex gap: $d = .74$, **so the distributions overlap substantially** · *Strong*
- Sociosexuality facets: **behaviour and desire both predict future partners; desire is invisible** · *Strong*

Tonight

Write down the filters you currently run: the types you skip, the profiles you don't bother with, the "she's not the type" calls. Be honest; nobody is reading it.

Now cross out every one that is a guess about her *disposition* rather than a fact about her *stated intent*. What's left is your real filter. It should be short, and it should be about what she said she wants.

3. The Graveyard

A chapter of claims that were retracted, failed stronger tests, or never had evidence strong enough for the advice built on them. Names included, because vagueness is how this stuff survives.

I need to do something the rest of this genre never does, and it will cost me a few pages of your goodwill.

A recognisable shelf of dating advice, the confident, citation-flavoured kind, rests on several different failures: retracted studies, formal expressions of concern, effects that shrank or disappeared in stronger tests, and sources too thin to carry the recommendation built on them. Those categories are not interchangeable. This chapter names which failure applies to each claim.

Here are the records.

1. The touch experiments. Retracted.

If you have ever been taught that a brief, casual touch on a woman's forearm dramatically increases compliance with a courtship request, you were taught a result from the field-experiment corpus of Nicolas Guéguen, an extraordinarily prolific producer of small, charming, headline-friendly field studies. Touch and compliance. Compliments and phone numbers. Mimicry. Waitresses. Hitchhikers.

Independent critics, chiefly Nick Brown and James Heathers, documented implausible data patterns and missing ethics approvals across that corpus. Multiple expressions of concern were issued in 2023–2024, and **five studies were formally**

retracted in March 2025. [Retraction Watch; Expression of Concern, Psychological Reports: Dead]

There is no preregistered replication of the courtship touch-compliance effect. Which means there is no trustworthy effect size for it, which means anyone quoting one is quoting a number that no longer has a source. Every touch technique built on that literature should be treated as unsupported, not “probably still true.”

Touch still matters in courtship. But what survives is the observational work on reciprocity-gated escalation (Chapter 7) and the general literature on consensual touch, which frames its effects through affiliation and comfort, not through compliance engineering. That is a meaningfully different claim, and it points at a meaningfully different behaviour.

2. Wear red. $d = 0.13$.

The red effect (wear red, be perceived as more attractive) was a media favourite for a decade. The meta-analysis puts it at about $d = 0.13$, with evidence of publication bias, and it has failed two large replications. [Lehmann, Elliot & Calin-Jageman, 2018: Dead]

A d of 0.13 is not a strategy. It is wardrobe superstition with a p-value. Wear red because you like red.

3. Power posing. Disavowed by its own co-author.

Stand expansively in a bathroom for two minutes, alter your testosterone and your risk appetite. A larger replication found no significant effect on hormones or any of its three behavioural tasks, although participants reported feeling more

powerful. Dana Carney, a co-author of the original 2010 paper, later published a statement that she did not believe the embodied power-pose effects were real. [Ranehill et al., 2015; Carney, 2016 statement: Dead for the original hormonal and behavioural claim]

What partly survived is the subjective bit: adopting an expansive posture makes people *feel* more powerful. That is worth knowing, and it is a much smaller claim than the one you were sold. Watch for this pattern: the felt effect surviving while the embodied mechanism collapses. It recurs constantly in this field.

4. Ovulation targeting. Killed by preregistration.

Two meta-analyses published in the same year reached opposite conclusions about whether women's mate preferences shift across the cycle. [Gildersleeve, Haselton & Fales, 2014, yes; Wood et al., 2014, no] That should have been the first clue.

Then the large, preregistered, hormonally validated studies arrived and found no compelling evidence that preferences for masculinity track hormonal status, and that general sexual desire (but specifically *not* desire for uncommitted sex) moves with the cycle. [Jones et al., 2018 ×2; Jünger et al., 2018: Dead, as a preference effect]

The modest desire bump is real. The personality change is not. And since cycle position is invisible to you, the entire literature has zero actionable content, except as a demonstration of how a decade of confident findings can evaporate the moment somebody has to declare their analysis in advance.

5. Deviance in the dark. Not a reliable foundation.

The familiar claim that dim lighting disinhibits strangers is commonly traced to a 1973 *Psychology Today* report. It was a magazine article, not a peer-reviewed journal paper, and the source supplied for this book does not establish a modern preregistered replication. That makes it an insecure foundation for dating advice. It does not prove that lighting has no effect. [Gergen, Gergen & Barton, 1973: Speculative, insufficient evidence for a prescriptive dating claim]

The honest conclusion is limited: this source cannot carry the confident recommendation built on it.

6. The 70% responsive-desire claim. The cited surveys do not support that number.

Two surveys asked women to choose the sexual-response model that best matched their experience. The Basson model was selected by 28.6% of 111 partnered female U.S. registered-nurse respondents in one study and 25.6% of 429 sexually active partnered women in a Danish population sample in another. Those are model-endorsement rates in specific samples, not population estimates of how many women “have responsive desire”, and they do not support a 70% claim. They also do not show that the remaining women never experience responsive desire. [Sand & Fisher, 2007; Giraldi, Kristensen & Sand, 2015: Moderate, sample-specific]

Responsive desire remains a useful model for some people. These studies support heterogeneity, not one number or one model for all women. The correct lesson is to avoid turning a model into a universal percentage.

The Bullshit Detector

Five questions. Run them on any “research says” claim, including every claim in this book. Anything that passes all five is rare, which is precisely the point.

- **Has it been retracted?** Search the paper on Retraction Watch before you search for its conclusion. The touch corpus was cited in textbooks for years after its problems were public.
- **Was it preregistered?** Preregistration reduces analytic flexibility and makes undisclosed outcome-switching harder. Treat a small unregistered study as exploratory evidence, not a settled result.
- **Did a second lab find it?** Collapses cluster in single-lab findings. Power posing. Red. Require two independent labs before you change your behaviour.
- **What is the effect size?** Demand the number. Compare it with two effects reported in this book: dyadic desire was reciprocated at $r = .14$, while generalised desire was negatively reciprocated at $r = -.41$ [Eastwick, Finkel, Mochon & Ariely, 2007]. If nobody will tell you the number, there isn’t one worth telling.
- **Who were the participants, and what were the stakes?** Field studies and vignettes answer different questions. Prefer evidence that matches the real decision, population and setting, and examine each design’s trade-offs.

What this chapter is really for

Not scepticism as a personality. Scepticism as a filter with a specific setting.

The six examples do not fail in one way. Some were retracted. Some shrank under larger or preregistered tests. Some remain contested. Some were never documented strongly enough for the confident advice built on them. The practical conclusion is narrower than “all false” and more useful: none supports the technique in the form it was sold.

What survives scrutiny is duller and structural. Ask better questions. Get strong. Meet in person sooner. Make declining cheap. Remove pressure. Say the true thing. And be precise about what that list is: associations that held up, plus this book’s inferences from them, not interventions anyone has trialled. Nobody has randomised men into honesty and counted the dates.

You will notice that none of that fits on a graphic. That is roughly why you haven’t been sold it.

Tonight

Take the last piece of dating advice you paid money for, or the last one you actually followed. Run the five questions on it.

If you can’t answer question four, the effect size, you never knew how big the thing you were doing was supposed to be. That is not your fault. It is the business model.

The Field Card

A ONE-PAGE REMINDER FROM YOU CAN'T READ HER

THE FIRST RULE

A positive hunch is a hypothesis, not a verdict. A clear no is an answer. Hesitation, withdrawal, ambiguity, or lack of reciprocity means stop or step back. Ask rather than assume.

THE LOOP

Offer something small and easy to decline. Read what she does with it. Match the level she demonstrated, or drop back one.

THE ENGINE

Ask one follow-up question that proves you heard the last answer. Then share something equally real.

THE SUBTRACTION

Remove hurry, exposure, obligation, and audience. If declining is hard, the response is not clean evidence of interest.

SIX OVERRIDES

1. Any no ends it.
2. Too drunk means no yes is available tonight.
3. Ambiguity is not consent.
4. A trapped audience is not an audience.
5. Consent is continuous and revocable.
6. Never engineer compliance.

THE SENTENCE

"I'd like to keep this going, only if you would."

Ask clearly. Make declining easy. Take the answer well.

You have finished Part One.

Part Two begins with Chapter 4, "Elicit and Verify", the replacement for guessing.

Continue with the full 12-chapter book

<https://youcantreadher.com/book>

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The author, honestly

THE AUTHOR, HONESTLY

Duncan Reeve is a pen name, and this page is the only place in the book where you get to know why.

I am not a coach. I do not run a programme, a bootcamp, or a private community with tiers. I have never charged anyone for a phone call about their love life and I do not intend to start, partly on principle and mostly because I would be bad at it.

What I am is somebody who spent a long time reading this literature properly (the meta-analyses, the preregistered nulls, the retraction notices) after having spent an embarrassing number of years believing a version of it that turned out to be made up. The graveyard chapter is not a flex. Most of those findings are in there because I once repeated them with total confidence to men who trusted me, and some of that advice was, in hindsight, actively bad for the women on the other end of it.

The pen name exists for the boring reason: this book argues, in public, that most of what a large industry sells is worthless, and it does so while discussing sex, consent and the specific ways men get things wrong. I would rather the argument be judged on its citations than on my face. Canadian copyright law is explicit that an author may be associated with their work under a pseudonym, and I have taken it up on the offer.

If you find an error (a number I have quoted wrongly, a study that has been retracted since publication, a claim I have graded too generously), I would like to know. A book with a chapter about failed replications does not get to be precious about its own.

The complete 12-chapter book: youcantreadher.com/book