**Book Review**

*On the Rocks: Straight Talk About Women and Drinking*. By Susan D. Stewart. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, 163 pp., $36.00 (hardback); $34.00 (eBook).

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*On the Rocks* is an insightful, well-organized, and concise look at American women’s behavior and attitudes regarding alcohol. The idea that women’s drinking is increasing, “closing the gap” with rates among men has been a frequent refrain in the United States over the last century. Stewart strikes an admirable balance in taking this issue seriously without sensationalizing. Setting the stage for her study, she reviews statistics about binge drinking and alcohol-related deaths among women (both rising over the last several decades) while noting gaps in knowledge (particularly about older women) and a lack of treatment options for women. Her goal is to understand the reasons why women’s alcohol use is increasing. Using grounded theory and a feminist perspective, Stewart interviewed a sample of 32 women and then analyzed these interviews alongside selected elements of popular culture to explore a series of inter-related topics: women’s drinking practices, women’s attitudes toward alcohol and the origins of those views, and the relationship between alcohol and changing gender roles. Throughout, Stewart successfully challenges rigid binaries that have long characterized American debates about alcohol.

Because she did not intend this to be a study of women with alcohol use disorder (AUD), Stewart normalized drinking when recruiting interview subjects. The participants completed a survey about their drinking practices before Stewart conducted face-to-face interviews. The study sample was relatively homogeneous by race, socioeconomic characteristics, and marital status. Stewart is forthcoming about the limitations of the sample but notes that drinking has increased the most among white, college-educated, and middle-class women like those in her sample, so this group merits attention (p. 15).

One significant strength of Stewart’s approach is that it allows individual voices to come through, not in isolation as in memoir—a common
genre when it comes to women and alcohol—but rather in the context of nuanced analysis. Stewart reveals some of her methodological challenges to readers, noting when the findings surprised her and led to new questions. This transparency adds to the value of the book for teaching research methods. Stewart provides useful appendices showing the characteristics of the sample and a snapshot of the results. The book includes thorough notes and an extensive bibliography.

The body of the book is organized into chapters that focus on drinking behavior, attitudes toward alcohol use, cultural representations of drinking women, and the ways in which alcohol consumption is intertwined with women’s roles in the workplace and as mothers. Stewart seeks to move beyond common tropes such as “hopeless alcoholic” and “party girl” to gain a more accurate picture of women’s drinking behavior and to evaluate the extent to which commonly used paradigms for defining alcohol use apply to women. Some of her most intriguing findings illuminate a lack of precision in terminology and a dissonance between language and behavior. For example, most of her subjects defined themselves as “social drinkers,” yet their self-reported consumption did not align with their own definitions of social drinking. With a research design that allowed open-ended prompts and follow-up questions, Stewart reveals the limitations of language in how her subjects described and labeled their alcohol consumption and that of others. In her initial discussion of these issues, Stewart could have offered a more explicitly gendered analysis, whether the interviewees spoke in those terms or not. She does, however, provide a robust analysis of a gendered double standard in later chapters and in the book’s conclusion.

Other chapters examine women’s attitudes toward alcohol and how those are transmitted within families and through media; how women encounter alcohol in social settings and the workplace; drinking and motherhood; and how the interview subjects have been affected by others’ drinking. Stewart draws on lifecourse and ecological theories to consider women’s drinking by age and cohort and to place women in familial and social contexts, with appropriate attention to issues of privilege and to differences among women. Stewart also notes that marijuana use emerged from the interviews as an important issue deserving attention.

In On the Rocks, Stewart highlights women’s voices while also providing insightful context and analysis regarding women’s drinking and women’s lives. Her findings also reveal the limitations of current vocabulary for describing alcohol consumption. Stewart has demonstrated that Americans are deeply ambivalent about alcohol, and a gendered double
standard persists. A cultural legacy dating back to the temperance move-
ment of the nineteenth century makes it challenging to even talk about
women’s drinking in a straightforward way. *On the Rocks* is an important
contribution to a necessary and important conversation.

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