



Standing up for men

NON-FICTION

WHAT MEN WANT: In Bed. By Bettina Arndt
 Melbourne University Press. 342pp. \$34.99.

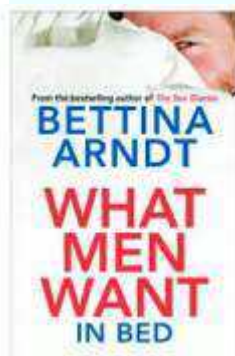
Reviewer: **SHELLEY McINNIS**

How sweet it was to be reading Bettina Arndt's sequel to *The Sex Diaries* during the 2010 federal election. The lurid detail of male sexual dysfunction may have become a little tiresome, but it was always refreshingly real to be reading of men for whom nothing was moving forward or, er, standing up for real action. As the post-election hand-wringing about the hung parliament began, it was equally delicious to be considering this book about a most private subject.

Of course, there is always politics. Arndt's *Sex Diaries*, which came out early last year, created a storm in feminist circles with its advice to women to become more sexually generous to their male partners. She encouraged her sexually uninterested sisters to dip their oars into the water and paddle those canoes. Poor Bettina has been back-paddling on that score ever since, clarifying with the sisterhood that she never meant to suggest women do things they really don't want to do.

In *The Sex Diaries*, the renowned sex therapist reported on the sex lives of 98 couples who kept records of their intimate negotiations. Arndt was struck by the strength of men's longing for physical companionship with women and evinced great sympathy for their expressions of frustration, disappointment and loneliness. I'm not surprised she decided to follow up last year's book with this one, which involved 150 men writing for her for one year about what they want in bed.

The surprise for me about this book is that it isn't more about what men really want in and out of bed. It begins promisingly with chapters on the male gaze, yen for pornography and quirky sex, and need for variety, but then morphs into a rather extended exploration of sexual dysfunction and its treatments.



One learns rather more than one wants to about erectile dysfunction and the pros and cons of little blue pills, vacuum pumps, penile implants, and injections. To be fair, Arndt does warn in the book's introductory chapter that some of the book's passages will be a "bit ripe" for some readers. She

isn't kidding, and I say this as one who has lectured on the subject.

Still, if I were a middle-aged man afflicted with erectile dysfunction or premature ejaculation, or if I were an older man with prostate cancer wondering which treatment to pursue, I'd appreciate the squeamish-making information contained in this book. Partners of people in these positions could be equally interested in the experiences of the book's diarising protagonists, which aren't the usual subject of pub or dinner-table conversation. More's the pity. Arndt would argue, and anyone who has ever lamented the clammed-up nature of Australian manhood would have to agree.

Unfortunately, while the svelte, sympathetic, single, 60-year-old Arndt comes across as a likable men's libber, in *What Men Want* she also manages to step into some serious sexual-political doo-doo. Feminists and family-friendly types are likely to be scandalised by her facile and tolerant treatment of pornography. Arndt sidesteps argument by asserting that she does not condone violent or exploitative porn, but her protests aren't persuasive because she appears not to recognise how these phenomena might be related. She is no theorist. She is a nuts-and-bolts gal fascinated less by ideas than she is by, for example, tales of unusual therapeutic applications of bicycle inner tubes and toilet rolls.

The book becomes repetitive in some of its later chapters, and I found myself skipping the diary entries. I got the impression that Arndt didn't know how to

finish it. When she does, with some cheery advice not to take it all too seriously, to try to find the funny side of sexual mishaps, it doesn't ring true. Is she running for office? Arndt has been taking sex very seriously for 35 years, and Australian couples have benefited from her rather humourless, singular focus. As I lift my head above the parapet in this capital city of the hung parliament, I'm wondering what her next instalment will be about. Oh, dear. More people moving forward and standing up for real action but negotiating first. Fair enough, but it's time to find another suitable book.

• Shelley McInnis was a lecturer in human sexuality for seven years.



Bettina Arndt: cheery advice