

INTIMATE DETAILS

For sex therapist Bettina Arndt, there is no “us” and “them”. She shares some of her carnal knowledge with NEIL JAMESON.

You may not agree with her, but you have to admire Bettina Arndt.

For the better part of 30 years the sex therapist, writer and clinical psychologist has assumed the most uncomfortable of positions: straddling that vast sexual divide that exists between men and women, trying to identify the central truths and arrive at a better understanding that will allow us to rub along together.

Most of the time she has conducted this discourse with characteristic good humour, but it can't have been easy.

At the risk of rubbing women the wrong way, Arndt has found herself championing the male half of the conversation for the simple reason that men are disinclined to speak up for themselves. And boy, has that got her into trouble with those who think that one lone voice on behalf of men is one voice too many.

Susan Maushart, the author of *Wifework: What Marriage Really Means for Women*, is among the chorus wondering why on earth men might need a woman to speak on their behalf.

“I don't really get why a woman would feel the need to be a mouthpiece for this incredibly powerful sector of society. It's a bit like having a black spokesman for the plantation owners.”

Arndt: “When I write about women nobody notices. When I write about men I get attacked. I've always been interested in both sides – I'm a woman, so of course I understand and support women's issues. But what really attracts me to the male story is that it's untold. The whole debate has been conducted by women and men have opted out of the cultural dialogue.”

Why?

“Because they get howled down. It is easier for me to talk for them than men to talk for themselves.”

Arndt wasn't always in the men's corner. It just happened that way.

“I started off as a clinical psychologist working with women, helping them with their orgasmic problems. But inevitably men started to talk to me as well because I was talking about the most intimate aspects of men's lives. Men would take me aside and I'd wind up hearing about their erection problems, their family law issues and relationship problems.”

Now 61, throughout three decades of writing and discussion, Arndt has book-ended the male sexual existence from the rampant horniness of youth to erectile dysfunction of old-timers, from premature ejaculation to prostate problems. And she's not stopping any time soon.

In her latest book, *What Men Want – In Bed*, she recounts diary entries from 150 men, many of them middle-aged or older, in which they reveal with absolute candour, sadness and even hilarity the constant challenge of living with the eternal, merciless flame that is the male libido. The desire gulf that exists between the sexes has been occupying a good deal of Arndt's thinking of late. As she explained in her 2009 book, *The Sex Diaries*, which gathered first-hand accounts from couples, it seems that the gap in desire is hard-wired.

“The normal female sex drive is notoriously fragile, delicate, distractible and linked to emotional connection – which is why it is so easily dampened by everyday hassles, tiredness, stress



and relationship problems. 'I wrap up sex in all the garbage of the day,' a woman once said to me.

"Testosterone-driven male drive is so very different, allowing them to use sex to relax, to get away from the stresses of the world. One man told me he understands perfectly why Clinton wanted oral sex in the Oval Office – 'What better relaxation when you have the weight of the world on your shoulders,' he quipped.

"The evolutionary psychologists argue mothers aren't meant to be bonking all the time, so their distractible libido is there to ensure they take care of their young. Research shows that at the start of relationships that fragile libido gets a dose of firefighters from the brain chemistry associated with being 'in love' but within a few years the firefighters usually disappear, leaving the female's distractible drive a poor match for the male's eternal flame.

"These are the common patterns, which cause so much strife in relationships. Of course there are many exceptions."

In an age of greater financial equality, that

gulf might explain why women are jumping out of marriages in record numbers, leaving their men scratching their heads and wondering what the hell just happened.

Arndt cites research by Brisbane Family Court



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counsellor Peter Jordan, who found most men were totally blindsided by marital breakdown. "It was like being hit in the head by a piece of four-by-two," was one man's impression.

The research shows that, on an organised level, men have coped poorly with this reality.

Arndt: "One of the most interesting experiences in my career has been working on government committees looking at issues like

family law and child support. It was fascinating looking at the different levels of advocacy for women and men. Women's groups are very organised and thoroughly professional but, since educated men usually fight their battles through their lawyers, the men's groups are often dominated by men who lack that professional clout."

The result, she says, is something less than a level playing field.

"Women who have breast cancer surgery get reasonable government support for breast reconstruction and prostheses while men with erectile dysfunction following prostate cancer surgery receive not a cent of support for their treatments. You can ask why, why aren't men marching in the street for the right to an erect penis?"

Maybe they could march in that beer ad, right behind the guys punching above their weight.

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Bettina Arndt will be guest speaker at Lake Macquarie City Council business lunch on Thursday, December 16. Bookings: 4921 0309.