



# THE *secret life of* MEN

## *Sex therapist Bettina Arndt explains why nookie matters so much to your bloke*

**A**ll over the world, it's the same: sex scandal; media frenzy; another prominent man caught with his pants down. Every day, there's another tabloid story, another tut-tutting talk show about men in trouble over sex; wives outraged by a straying partner or the discovery that their husbands look at internet porn; older women complaining that Viagra encourages men back into the saddle just when they'd hoped their partner might be ready to hang up their spurs.

Recently, I was talking to a man who was struggling with the sexual consequences of his prostate cancer treatment. "If I couldn't have sex, I'd kill myself," he said. This notion of sex as a reason for being is alien to most women,

who don't understand that compulsive male drive – relentless, uncontrollable, all-consuming.

It made sense to give men a chance to answer that constant refrain from women: What is it with men and sex? So, last year, I recruited around 150 men of all ages and backgrounds. Some responded to in-depth surveys; others kept diaries, recording their innermost thoughts about day-to-day sexual experiences. Sometimes their partners came on board, leading to fascinating his-and-hers accounts.

Given the rare opportunity to write about what sex meant to them, my diarists took up the task with enormous enthusiasm. "Hooray! This is about the best Christmas gift any man could receive," said one about his wife's unexpectedly passionate response to his lovemaking.

They wrote with astonishing honesty and humour about the place of sex in their lives, their craving for intimacy, their fears and why they're willing to risk so much for that tangle of sweaty bodies. Perhaps the most telling example of the nagging sexual itch came from a man who said he wouldn't be able to help with the diaries – because he was a 71-year-old virgin.

No, he wasn't joking. He explained he'd wanted to wait for the right woman, and she never appeared. He'd had a happy life, but was plagued by his powerful sex drive. Ultimately, he resorted to medication to control his urges: "This process is something I have no conscious control over at all," he wrote. "So there it is – the power of men's sex drive, which nature has given us to ensure the survival of the species!" >

## WHY MEN STRAY

"It's a simple, unavoidable truth that almost everyone knows to be true, but few dare to discuss: variety and change are the necessary spices of the sex life of the male of our species," say Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá in their book, *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*.

Among my diarists were men who find themselves unable to resist this restless urge for sexual variety. "I'm a family man, a flirt, a sexual monster," wrote Nathan\*, describing a personal life that's in free-fall due to his constant sexual adventures. His 13-year marriage began when he cheated on his girlfriend with her best friend, whom he ended up marrying. "So the excitement of doing something sneaky and forbidden started early," noted the 35-year-old, explaining he managed to stay faithful for about four years before succumbing. "Then the urges for something different came back. That meant going out to find some action and even visiting an establishment if nothing else was on offer. I've had multiple encounters with married women throughout my married life."

There's a stream of famous men in trouble over sex. Hugh Grant stopping his car for a rendezvous with a lady of the night; Bill Clinton unable to resist Monica Lewinsky; Tiger Woods not resisting much at all; as for Shane Warne...

"A man is basically as faithful as his options," comedian Chris Rock once joked, and options for famous men stretch around the block. With each fresh sex scandal, experts line up to pontificate on why these men who have everything take such risks for the sake of sex. Men who make it are risk-takers, they suggest; narcissists who assume they don't have to play by ordinary rules. The theories often make sense, but the truth is that many of them are just normal men with luscious options jumping into their laps.

Of course, we shouldn't forget there are many who resist – politicians, sportsmen and public figures who manage to stay on the straight and narrow. And that applies to ordinary mortals, too. Yes, there are many who have affairs, but they're still in the minority. Some of my diarists revealed they'd had a one-night stand, or an affair or two lasting a few weeks, months perhaps – tiny lapses in 10, 20 or 30 years of marriage. Only a select few are serial offenders.

We all know someone who seems unable to keep his trousers zipped. But they're rare compared to men who struggle to remain faithful. Research shows that 2.5 per cent of Australian men report having had an affair in the past year. True, those percentages add up over time, but the fact remains that the majority are monogamous for most of their marriage.

## HUNGRY EYES

One topic that cropped up time and again in the diaries was men's sadness that women's self-consciousness often deprives them of the delight of feasting their eyes on the bodies they love.

In their diaries, women poured out their hatred for all manner of apparent imperfections – fat bottoms, bulging thighs, breasts too large or too small – while men wrote about their frustration at their partners' efforts to keep everything out of sight, bemoaning the delicious curves forever hidden by clutched bed sheets, tightly tucked towels and closed doors.

James, 50, who's happily married to Sophie, wrote about craving more access to the sight of what he sees as her lovely body. "She has the tummy of a woman in her 40s who's had a few children, but I don't mind that at all. She has the beginnings of varicose veins, her neck is a bit saggy, her bum is flat, and so on – none of that matters to me. The unfortunate thing for me is that she can't seem to enjoy my attentions and she usually wants the lights out during sex."

**"MY WIFE HAS REFUSED SEXUAL ADVANCES FOR TWO YEARS. I DON'T WANT DIVORCE. I'D STILL PREFER HER LOVE AND INTIMACY"**

## REVEALING ALL

The secrets that emerged when these 150 men agreed to talk about their sex lives were amazing: the man who wears his wife's underwear beneath his bowling shorts; the man who left his marriage after 19 years of no sex; the happily married men who occasionally sleep with other men; the 40-year-old who frolicked with his elderly lover in her nursing home.

There were tales from the coalface of the new Viagra revolution, with diarists explaining what it's like to pop the little blue pills or use other remedies or cope with sexual changes after prostate cancer treatments. His-and-hers diaries revealed how partners react to this bumpy journey. "How do you know if you're going to get lucky?" asks one man complaining about wasting pills when his wife goes off the boil by the time the drug kicks in.

The willingness of these men to write with devastating honesty about such intimate matters will make it easier for men everywhere to share sexual knowledge – with each other and with their partners. **SM**

**What Men Want – in Bed by Bettina Arndt (MUP, \$34.99) is in stores tomorrow.**

## LATE-NIGHT VIEWING

The diaries provided fascinating insights into what's become one of the new battlegrounds in marriages: internet pornography. Women are often shocked when they discover their men looking online, but the male diaries revealed that it helps them keep a lid on their powerful drive – particularly in relationships where they're getting little sex.

Research for my recent book, *The Sex Diaries*, showed many men spend their married life deprived of regular sex. In these circumstances, men can't understand women's outrage over their use of porn, as this letter shows: "I'm a married man with strong sexual desires. However, my wife has refused any sexual advances for two years now and has no desire for sex or any form of intimacy. I've found I can relieve the sexual tension by using pornographic material.

"My wife found out I'd been using this and all hell has broken out. She says divorce is the only answer if I don't stop, as this, in her eyes, is a filthy act. Her previous two husbands had affairs with other women while married to her. I don't want divorce. I'd still prefer her love and intimacy."

Most of these men aren't interested in looking at violent or degrading material. Rather, what appeals is the notion of watching a sexually enthusiastic woman willing to respond to man's every whim – an erotic world just as fantastic and unrealistic as the suave heroes from women's bodice-ripping romances. While the desire for pornography can sometimes become compulsive, most men turn to it for good reasons: as a harmless outlet for their relentless sexual curiosity; to cope with mismatched desire; as relief from the tensions of real-life sex. It's a quick-fix, an easy way to keep the lid on their lusty nature.