

A photograph of a bed with white linens and pillows, serving as the background for the book cover. The bed is neatly made with two white pillows at the top. The white sheets and pillowcases are slightly wrinkled, creating a soft, textured appearance. The background is a neutral, light brown color, likely the headboard of the bed.

THE SEX DIARIES

Why Women Go Off Sex and Other Bedroom Battles

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Fifty Thrusts and Don't Jiggle My Book

There is a wonderful scene in the movie *Annie Hall* in which the camera switches between Woody Allen in his psychiatrist's office and his lover, Diane Keaton, in hers. They are each asked how often they have sex.

'Hardly ever', Allen says plaintively. 'Maybe three times a week.'

'Constantly', Keaton groans. 'I'd say three times a week.'

That's the scene that everyone remembers even thirty years after the movie was released. It touches on a great truth about relationships—that after the first lusty years are over, most men want more sex than their female partners. Of course, it's not always the case. There are passionate women who never lose interest and some men who do. But if we walked through the streets of Australia asking who's not getting enough, there'd be ever so many more male hands than female hands waving in the air.

In 2006, the BBC reported: 'A woman's sex drive begins to plummet once she is in a secure relationship. Researchers from Germany found four years into a relationship, less than half of 30-year-old women wanted regular sex'.¹ There's still a steady stream of such stories, news reports suggesting that women go off sex. All over the world, researchers are scurrying around to try to pin down the cause. Is it to do with hormones, or brain

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chemistry? Is it part of an evolutionary legacy? What's the role of the psyche in all of this? But there's no doubt it happens, and everyone knows it. It has entered our marital folklore and become an accepted part of our personal dynamics. Hang around a pub for long enough and you'll hear the jokes about the fallout—the sexually starved men. Like the story of the cow from Woy Woy.

The only cow in a small town in Victoria stopped giving milk. Eventually the townspeople found a replacement cow in Woy Woy, New South Wales, which proved a gem. It produced lots of milk and everybody was very happy. They decided to breed with it, so they bought a bull and put it in the pasture with their beloved cow. However, whenever the bull came close, the cow would move away. The people were very upset and asked the local vet what to do.

'Whenever the bull approaches our cow, she moves away', they said. 'If he approaches from the back, she moves forward. When he approaches her from the front, she backs off.'

The veterinarian thought for a moment and asked, 'Did you buy this cow in Woy Woy?' The people were dumbfounded since they hadn't mentioned where they had bought the cow. 'You are truly a wise vet', they said. 'How did you know we got the cow in Woy Woy?' The veterinarian replied, with a distant look in his eyes, 'My wife is from Woy Woy'.

I've spent much of the last thirty-five years listening to stories about wives from Woy Woy. From the time I started working as a sex therapist back in the early 1970s, people have been talking to me about their sex lives. What I hear about most is the business of negotiating the sex supply. How do couples deal with the strain of the man wishing and hoping while all she longs for is the bliss of uninterrupted sleep? It's a night-time drama being played out in bedrooms everywhere, the source of great tension and unhappiness.

But this drama is usually a silent movie, with couples rarely talking about the subtle negotiation that goes on between them. His calculations: 'What if I ...? Will she then ...?' Her tactics: dropping her book as he appears at the bedroom door and feigning sleep; staying up late in the hope that he'll doze off. Tensions. Resentment. Guilt. And then there are the rare couples who magically maintain mutual lust for each other.

That's what this book is all about. Through radio interviews and magazine articles, I recruited ninety-eight couples to spend six to nine months keeping diaries for me, writing about their daily negotiations over sex.² They are couples of all ages, from 20-year-old students to people in their seventies who have been married over forty years—young couples at the start of their relationships; pregnant women; couples caught up in the exhaustion of young families; women who want more sex than their husbands and women who'd live happily without it; older couples dealing with health issues like prostate surgery and arthritis. Some wrote every day for months—one man ended up providing over seventy pages of details of his love-life—while others provided only brief weekly summaries. As I expected, the cow from *Woy Woy* took centre stage.

Women know their loss of sexual drive is a huge issue in their relationships. Many write saying they can't bear what it is doing to their men. They understand their resentment but they feel they can't help it; they just rarely want sex any more. 'I hate it that I don't have a sex drive like before. I would do anything ... well almost anything', writes Nadia (aged forty-one) from Sydney.

Listen to Judy. 'If there's an OFF switch in the female body, mine was turned many years ago', writes the fifty-eight year old from Bathurst, New South Wales, explaining that sex has been the single most divisive issue in her 27-year marriage. She's had enough: 'I have found that my already low libido has pretty much

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disintegrated and sexual interest is right up there with algebra, housework and trying on bras!’

Her husband has a strong drive and used to want sex twice a day, but hers has always been low: ‘I’m actually quite inhibited, don’t like experimenting and generally find sex and everything that goes with it a big yawn. If there was a drug that turned women on, I would not be the slightest bit interested’. They have fought about sex for years and she’s finally persuaded him to back off a little. Now they are down to having it a few times a week. ‘I’d still rather read a book’, she says, adding:

I just feel bloody guilty. I sense when he is feeling like sex, and I psych myself and prepare myself to cope. Shit, that sounds dreadful but it’s the truth. I think having sex when you don’t really want it is the most horrible thing. Once I would still respond, and even have orgasms despite not wanting it but now I don’t have any response at all, so it feels horrible. Inside, I’m screaming for it to be over quickly, but outside I’m pretending ... moving with him, grabbing his back, making him feel that I’m with him. But I’m not. I think he suspects; in fact, I’m sure he suspects, but it’s a game we both play.

Judy knows how much it hurts him that she’s not interested.

The hardest thing is that he knows I don’t enjoy it. It drives him to distraction. There is always a tension there, though it’s never actually stopped him doing it! Must be dreadful for him. When he finishes, he’s always got a kind of ‘pissed off’ vibe, and, believe me, I totally understand but gosh I wish I got the same kind of understanding for where I’m at, not the underlying unspoken accusation that there’s something wrong with me.

She adds, sadly: ‘It seems most partnerships are terribly out of sync. How nice to be in harmony with desire. Does it exist?’

Oh yes, it exists. 'I have no recollection of ever being refused sex', writes Rob, a very happy man from Perth, married for over forty-four years. What a treat it is to read this couple's diaries. His wife, Jenny, comes in for a cuddle at the breakfast table and undoes her dressing gown, exposing her breasts so he can kiss and nuzzle them. Often he comes into the shower with her. 'I rub his penis in my slippery hands which feels good for both of us', Jenny tells me. Her husband explains that Jenny's enjoyment of lovemaking has always been as fulfilling as his, and describes it as an integral part of their loving relationship. 'I am still moved by the beauty of her body, her breasts, which are still very beautiful to me, and I love seeing her vulva, imagining myself kissing her clitoris and seeing her lips swell in preparation for my penis to enter', says the passionate 65-year-old.

It has always amazed me to hear such stories of long-lasting passion. From the time that I first started talking about sex on television and radio, the couples who really love sex have reached out to me. I remember buying a ticket at an airport when a fifty-ish saleswoman looked left and right, leaned over to me and whispered, 'Isn't sex wonderful!' I have long known about the lusty couples who spend a remarkable amount of their lives between the sheets. They are the lucky ones. Yet they are rare and sadly outnumbered by the men and women who struggle, day after day, with the corrosive effect on their relationship of women's low libidos.

With my sex diaries, it was the men's stories that really set me back on my heels. It is so rare that men talk openly about such personal issues, but the diaries gave them permission to let loose. Every day I received page after page of eloquent, often immensely sad diary material, as men grasped the opportunity to talk about what quickly emerged as being a mighty emotional issue for them. Men might tell jokes about sexually deprived husbands, but talk

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to them privately and they aren't laughing—that was the most powerful message emerging from the many thousands of pages of personal communication in the diaries. Men aren't happy. Many feel duped, disappointed, in despair at finding themselves spending their lives begging for sex from their loved partners. They are stunned to find their needs so totally ignored. It often poured out in a howl of rage and disappointment.

Andrew from Queanbeyan, New South Wales, is forty-one years old, has been married for six years to Lorraine, and has two girls aged four and two. The couple started off having sex every day, sometimes twice a day, but sex has been on the decline ever since—now Andrew is lucky to have sex once every five to six months.

He's a very upset man:

I am totally at a loss as to what to do. I do love her and I think she loves me but I cannot live like a monk. I have deliberately tried not to mention sex much at all but now I am so frustrated I don't know what to do. I am at breaking point. I cannot and will not continue on like this. I refuse to go through life begging.

He knows he's not alone. He simply can't understand how men ended up with such a dud deal:

What makes women think that halfway through the game they can change the rules to suit themselves and expect the male to take it[?] If we started to abuse them or treat them badly, that ... is totally unacceptable, but for them to do this to us is a part of life and acceptable. I JUST DO NOT GET IT!!!!!! What about the male?????? The new world expects the male to be a provider, father, understanding husband, considerate and everything else. Well that is ok but if he does not get his needs met, who gives a shit?

'Would you like to change sex in any way?' was the question asked by US sex researcher Shere Hite of the 7000 men who

responded to her survey. 'More, I just want more', came the overwhelming reply. 'We live in a sex economy that produces an ongoing pool of surplus male desire, a world that gives men precious little opportunity to feel desired, feel desirable and appreciated for our sexual natures', one man told Hite.³

Yet for men, this is usually a private misery. So many men writing to me report that they have never before told anyone about the sexual tension they experience. Like Nick, for example—a 53-year-old retired police officer from Melbourne. He tells me his sex life is non-existent. His erection problems are part of the story, but also his wife has no sex drive:

I love my wife dearly and we have a fabulous marriage and care for each other very deeply. I still find my wife sexually attractive and would love to make love to her. I understand that we are getting older but I miss the affection and the closeness of making love to my wife. Over the past several years I have really suffered in silence to the point I could just sit down and cry. I mean, a male my age does not cry, nor does he speak about the problem.

How different is that from the way most women deal with it? Many of the women report amusing stories of sharing the issue with their friends, exchanging tips, offering each other solace for the business of dealing with grumpy husbands. Their tales are often very funny. I loved the woman who wrote to me complaining that her husband claimed his ability to get an erection would fade away if his cock wasn't continually exercised. 'This is a man who seriously spends too much time listening to the paranoid rantings of his trouser sage', she added wryly.

Judy offers funny reports from cappuccino sessions with her friends. She mentions one woman who has cancer: 'She said at a recent get-together that now she's growing her hair back and feeling a lot better she's realised that her husband has got used to

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going without sex and she's not about to remind him!' Another of Judy's friends, who has had no interest in sex for years, said that recently her husband wanted sex and she read her book while he was doing it. 'Can't quite get my head around that', Judy adds.

What is it with this reading business? US comedian Emo Philips once quipped, 'My girlfriend always giggles during sex—no matter what she's reading'. I'd always assumed it was just a joke, but then a friend of mine mentioned how a member of her book club had laid down conditions for sex with her husband—'You can have fifty thrusts but don't jiggle my book', she told him.

It may sound startling, but after so many years of sitting around with women, hearing stories about their sex lives, nothing would surprise me. I've certainly contributed to these conversations, shared in the general hilarity over the stories of how to get out of having sex. Like staging a fight last thing at night, knowing that then he won't approach you. Or pretending to be sick. Or being delighted when he gets a late-night business call so then you can feign sleep by the time he returns to bed. There was a time when I felt just the same, when I too announced I'd be happy never to have sex again. Female solidarity on this issue is so very comforting. It is only when you listen to men talking honestly about what it's like to be on the receiving end that you realise the impact of the contempt with which we treat them.

Back in the early 1960s, Betty Friedan wrote in *The Feminine Mystique* about 'the problem that has no name'—women's unvoiced frustrations with their housewifely role.⁴ Women live unexamined lives, she said, talking about the strange stirring, vague sense of dissatisfaction and unvoiced yearning suffered by women in the middle of the twentieth century. By naming the problem, she encouraged women to say 'I want something more'. And we have been saying it, very loudly, ever since.

But now it is men who live unexamined lives. Men live day by day never publicly voicing their discontent, keeping their hidden yearnings to themselves. Their 'problem that has no name' is sexual frustration.

One reason it is so rarely discussed is that men experiencing sexual rejection feel ashamed. It is not the sort of thing they are likely to discuss with their mates or broadcast to the world. Songwriter Fred Small writes:

Economic and political realities notwithstanding, most men do not perceive women as powerless, in part because women hold the power of rejection. I suspect that a man who whistles at women on the street actually perceives women as having more sexual power than he. We are trained from childhood to believe that real men get sex from women, that if we do not get sex from women, we are not men, we are nothing.⁵

It takes courage for men to admit to each other that they are not 'real men'. Gradually, my male diarists started to talk about the issue with other men. I received a steady trickle of letters from men reporting they had discovered that their friends were also on short rations. Sydney man Clive (aged forty-eight) had a long talk to his best mate, who reported he spent his life grovelling for sexual favours from his wife:

This is a guy who is the salt of the earth, devoted husband and father, doesn't play around, works really hard and gives his family a good standard of living and I just shake my head. He is a martyr for his family but doesn't seem to be appreciated or given much in return.

Clive has three sons. He thinks about what their marriages will be like. Will they too spend their lives grovelling for sex?

Unless some of us are prepared to speak out nothing will ever change. If we were to speak out in public (most of the people

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I know are professional people and would be frankly too scared to speak out) we would most likely be ridiculed, accused of being deviates, sexual fiends, perverts, and most likely they would not understand why our wives would bother to still even live with us.

It is clearly very rare for men to speak out about the issue, but Nigel Marsh is an exception. He has written a very funny book about the year he spent taking stock after being fired from his job as an advertising executive. Yet what really struck a chord with readers of his bestselling *Fat, Forty and Fired* was the brief chapter he wrote about sex. In it, Marsh tells the story of a married friend—monogamous, loving, in good shape—who doesn't think it is right or fair that he should be made to feel bad about wanting sex. He decides he needs to ascertain first where sex ranked in his wife's priorities:

'Sweetheart, is sex as important to you, say, as a holiday away?' he started.

'No? Okay, how about a weekend away?' he continued.

'No? That's fine. A good meal?' he suggested.

This line of questioning continued until, as Marsh writes, 'he got into a serious debate with his wife about whether sex was something she looked forward to more or less than cleaning the oven. She eventually settled on an equal ranking'.⁶

Nigel Marsh dared to suggest that men, especially married men with kids, aren't so much pussy-whipped as pussy-neglected. And he was knocked over in the ensuing rush of responses. Seven hundred men wrote to him to say they were permanently sexually frustrated, that their wives never initiated sex. Instead, one said, they 'dispense' it. Many of the men believed their wives lived in a willing state of denial: 'In their hearts they know their husbands aren't satisfied with boring, grudgingly dispensed sex once every three weeks, but they'd rather not talk about it. Because then

they might have to do something about it'. Do something? Oh yes, Marsh has a solution: 'Bonk more'.

It's not as crass as it sounds. In his sequel, *Observations of a Very Short Man*, Marsh bends over backwards to say all the right things, spelling out the very good reasons why women lose interest, describing the innumerable issues women tell him must be sorted out before they will want sex.⁷ But he bravely goes on to suggest that women might just find that having more sex may actually help them fix those other issues.

Of course, the question arises as to what we mean by 'sex' and whether women would be keener to participate if there was more of the lovemaking many of them preferred, such as the gentle touch of a slow hand, soft lips and tongue, rather than the lusty rutting many men prefer: more hors d'oeuvres and less main course, perhaps. But whatever the menu, there are also women out there suggesting that we do it more often. Trawl through the chat sites on the internet and, amid the men and women complaining about their sex lives, there's always a scattering of posts from women doing things differently.

'Of all the things you do in your daily life to make your husband happy, to keep your household running—how many of them give you physical pleasure?' asks a woman on a mothering website. She goes on: 'Well, what if I told you that your husband couldn't begin to care less if you did any of those things, so long as you did the one task that does give you pleasure?' She suggests that women often overcompensate for their lack of sex drive by working hard at domestic chores, assuming their husband will notice their sacrifice and think, 'Gee, no wonder she doesn't want sex. Look how hard she works'. But that's not going to happen, she continues. 'They don't see how hard you work. All they see is you're not having sex with them.' The writer suggests that women put sex on the to-do list—not every day, but maybe

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once or twice a week: 'Shag a little more than the low-libido partner would like and a little less than the high-libido partner would prefer and I swear to you, your marriage will improve in huge ways'.

Hang on a moment. Isn't that suggesting that women just do it? That sometimes they should have sex when they are not in the mood? The very suggestion runs into a massive ideological roadblock. Women's right to say 'no' has been enshrined in our cultural history for nearly fifty years. It was one of the outstanding achievements of the women's movement to outlaw rape in marriage and teach women to resist unwanted advances. But it simply hasn't worked to have a couple's sex life hinge on the fragile, feeble female libido. The right to say 'no' needs to give way to saying 'yes' more often—provided both men and women end up enjoying the experience. The notion that it might be in women's best interests to stop rationing sex is sure to raise hackles, but this is an issue that deserves serious attention.

The case is best made by a passionate letter I received when I first asked for volunteers for the diaries. The writer, Sam, is a 54-year-old, twice-married man from Brisbane whose first marriage fell apart over battles about sex:

As my first marriage unravelled, two marriage counsellors were engaged by my first wife and me. The second counsellor asked me to take a week to think about my sex issues and to try to put my feelings into words. As it turned out, I didn't need a week. As I pondered her request, the answer came to me like a revelation. If sex is mutual, when both people want it, that's wonderful. If one partner wants sex and the other doesn't but offers it as a gift, that too is pretty darned good. But my first wife regularly refused, complaining about my unreasonable demands. Sometimes she begrudgingly complied, which made me feel like a thief, as if I had stolen something that was not rightfully mine. My advances were unwarranted and unwanted,

and I felt the way she so often wanted me to feel, unwelcome. Sex was rarely mutual and almost never a gift. After twenty-five years of marriage I decided I deserved happiness. I divorced her. A few years later I remarried.

Rose, my second wife of seven years, has a demanding job as a manager. Nevertheless, she has never said 'no'. She has never used the headache defence, never been too tired. Always, she makes sex a gift if she is not in the mood herself. Often she finds herself enjoying the moment. She does this because she cares about me, about my feelings and my needs. In my case, I'm sure you can guess the outcomes. If I notice Rose is run down and tired, seldom will I reach for her, other than to give her a cuddle. If she is not well, I look after her, tuck her into bed and either read or veg out in front of the TV. On the other hand I am perfectly capable of springing a sexual ambush on her as she walks through the door at the end of a long day. I am far from the perfect husband, but I do love and care for her, not because I am a wonderful bloke, but because her so very obvious caring for me can lead to little else other than reciprocity.

I approach Rose for sex less frequently than I did my first [wife], but we have more and better sex. We are the most happy and relaxed couple you are likely to meet. A sexually frustrated man will reach for his wife at every opportunity, until she drives him away with her selfishness and emotional barbs. However, a man who knows his wife loves him and cares for him, who knows she will be there for him when he needs or wants her, becomes very relaxed about sex. It becomes easy for him to be considerate, and to care for his wife. A starving man thinks about little else other than his own need for food. A sexually frustrated man becomes fixated on sex. Unfortunately, the more demands he places on his wife, the more frequently he is likely to be met with refusal or made to feel like an unwelcome glutton. This becomes an emotional vortex, sucking both of them into despair and unhappiness.

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All this applies to any part of our lives together instead of being restricted to sex. Rose dislikes being left alone but if I feel like going on a camping trip with my sons, she encourages me. She is an introvert, and dislikes being dropped into a room full of people not known to her, so most of the time I stay close to her under these circumstances. We try to see each other's needs and to meet them ...

It all seems so simple. If you love someone, you care for them; their needs and wants are as important as ... yours. Each of us is unique in the ways in which we show our caring, and all of us fail sometimes. But if your women readers took the lead from my dear wife, they might just find that their grumpy, disgruntled husbands become what they once were and could be again, wonderful blokes who loved and cared for them enough to want to spend the rest of their lives with them.

Sam does make it sound simple. But it seems extraordinary that sex is treated so differently from all the other ways in which a loving couple cater to each other's needs and desires. We are willing to go out of our way to do other things to please each other—cooking his favourite meal, sitting through repeat episodes of her beloved television show. Why, then, are we so ungenerous when it comes to 'making love', which should be the ultimate expression of that mutual caring? 'Love is as love does', said M Scott Peck in *The Road Less Travelled*.⁸ Surely, maintaining sexual intimacy is one of the crucial tests of doing love.

So the sex diaries weren't just about bad news. Yes, some documented the terrible tension, anger and resentment that erupts when couples clash over sex. But there were also diaries brimming with intense erotic adventures, so very, very sexy to read—couples writing about the sexual joy they share together; so many pages bearing witness to their tenderness, their loving, their caring. There are many couples who are getting it right—very right. They have much to teach us all.