

**WHAT  
MEN  
WANT**  
IN BED

**BETTINA  
ARNDT**



MELBOURNE  
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PRESS

# Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
<b>Part I</b>	
1 The Heart Has No Wrinkles <i>The Male Gaze</i>	19
2 The Feather or Whole Chicken <i>On Men and Pornography</i>	39
3 Gotta Get Some Strange <i>The Quest for Sexual Adventure</i>	64
4 Filling in the Blank Space <i>A Taste for Something Kinky</i>	86
5 When He Has the Headache <i>Men with Low Libido</i>	105
6 The Great Cage of Domesticity <i>Tackling Mismatched Desire</i>	133
<b>Part II</b>	
7 My Nookie Days Are Over <i>The Tragedy of Impotence</i>	161
8 Oh, What a Feeling! <i>Pills and Pokes</i>	188
9 The Toilet Roll Houdini <i>After Prostate Cancer</i>	212
10 The Old Goat Is Back in the Saddle <i>Reaction to the Rejuvenated Penis</i>	239

11 An Elephant Is Close Enough	255
<i>Wary Wives and New Lovers</i>	
12 Good News for the Minute Men	278
<i>Controlling Ejaculation</i>	
Epilogue	300
Appendix	305
<i>How to Use the PDE5 Inhibitor Pills</i>	305
<i>Using the Injection Therapies</i>	306
<i>Hints on Using a Vacuum Device</i>	307
<i>Where to Go for Help for Erection Problems</i>	308
<i>Pelvic Floor Exercises</i>	309
<i>Stop/Start Exercises</i>	310
Notes	312
Bibliography	325
Index	332

*To my children: Jesse, Taylor and Cameron. Simply the best.*

# Introduction

Forty years ago American writer Philip Roth made a huge splash with *Portnoy's Complaint*, his exuberant tale of the randy Jewish adolescent who spends half his waking life locked behind the bathroom door. Ever since then Roth has been writing about the pulsating, driving life force that is male sexuality.

As Roth turned seventy, the lion of literature was still pondering that never-ending itch: 'the fact that, as far as I can tell, nothing, nothing is put to rest, however old a man may be?'<sup>1</sup> Nathan Zuckerman, the ageing hero of *Exit Ghost*, is incontinent and impotent but remains at the mercy of a relentless sexual appetite. A beautiful woman half his age still provokes a hungry, Pavlovian response. Even though his flesh is failing, 'the velocity of attraction allows for no resignation and contains no resignation—there is only room for the greed of desire'.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Dying Animal*, Roth has his central character, David Kepesh, look back on the frustrations of curtailing that robust drive within the constraints of marriage, and provides a telling insight into what sex means to men. He asks what there is, besides sex, to help men take the defeats, and the frustrations. Yes, there's having children, and making money.

That helps, but it's nothing like the other thing. Because the other thing is based in your physical being, in the flesh that is born and the flesh that dies. Because only when you fuck is everything that you dislike in life and everything by which you are defeated in life purely, if momentarily, revenged.<sup>3</sup>

The greed of desire. This notion of sex as a reason for being is alien to most women. They don't begin to understand that robust, compulsive male drive—relentless, uncontrollable, all-consuming. That hydra-headed urge. Constant, sparking sexual energy. Roth's *other thing*.

Men have been talking to me about that other thing for much of my adult life. It was the male voices that resonated most strongly in the project that led to my book *The Sex Diaries*. Ninety-eight couples wrote diaries describing how they negotiate their sex supply. Both men and women wrote vividly, describing how they deal with tensions over mismatched desire, but it was men who really seized the opportunity to pour out their emotions, sometimes in daily emails. Long after the book was published, letters continue to arrive from men keen to have the chance to explain the place of sex in their lives, its intense joys and incredible frustrations.

Many describe their relief at the discovery they are not the only ones experiencing a sexual drought in their relationships. As one man put it:

I can liken it to being the first in line for crucifixion. Being at the front of the line, you are bearing the cross and can't see that behind you there is a whole line of men going through the same experience. Sure you will still get crucified but at least you know you won't be lonely on top of the hill.

The loneliness he speaks of stems from the fact that men rarely talk publicly about why sex matters so much to them. They don't dare. Some twenty years ago *Rolling Stone* journalists Steve Chappie and David Talbot took time out to take their country's sexual pulse. Their book, *Burning Desires—Sex in America*, carefully dissected the growing forces that were making heterosexual union so precarious and male sexuality so reviled.<sup>4</sup> Prominent women led the fight to expose what they saw as men's vile and

dangerous sexual nature. There was anti-porn campaigner Andrea Dworkin, the woman who regarded intercourse as 'collaboration with the enemy'; and sex researcher Shere Hite, who saw men as 'dehumanized beings', 'half mortals' who disconnected sex and feelings. There seemed no escape from the attack on men's sexuality.

Unsurprisingly, it left many men reeling and silenced: 'Like a man who sullenly withdraws to his tool shed to escape his wife's temper and misery, American men simply opted out of the culture dialogue', explained Chappie and Talbot, commenting that men were so far removed from the field of battle that the term 'sex war' seemed a misnomer. 'The stronger sex could only mount an occasional guerrilla raid, leaving women firmly in control of the ideological terrain.'<sup>5</sup>

In his best-selling book, *Manhood*, Steve Biddulph argued that when it comes to sex, men have been badly short-changed. He wrote:

Our sexuality is basically a huge energy source which pushes us towards union with a partner and release from the ordinary. It's tragic that a source of energy so important to us has been exploited, misunderstood and demeaned by our culture and our religion. Most men are basically still ashamed of their sexual feelings.<sup>6</sup>

The shaming continues. Look what happened to the unfortunate Macquarie banker who was shown in the background with his computer screen displaying photos of near-naked supermodel Miranda Kerr while a colleague conducted a TV interview on interest-rate rises. His embarrassing gaffe quickly became news across the world, his bank apologised for any offence he might have caused, and a feminist philosopher leapt into print, claiming his behaviour could blight the ability of female colleagues to perform well at work.

It is hardly surprising that it is rare today for men to openly express their delight in matters carnal. In a recent essay in *The New York Times*, Katie Roiphe laments the passing of the Great Male Novelists of the last century—Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Henry Miller—writers who celebrated men’s aggressive virility. These were writers who brought ‘their talent, their analytic insights, their keen writerly observation, to the most intimate, the most unspeakable moments, and the exhilaration, the mischief, the crackling energy was in the prose’.<sup>7</sup>

Roiphe makes an interesting case that the batch of youngish male novelists—the late David Foster Wallace, Benjamin Kunkel, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Franzen—often present their characters as repelled or uncomfortable when faced with a sexual situation.

Rather than an interest in conquest or consumption, there is an obsessive fascination with trepidation and with a convoluted, post-feminist second-guessing ... The younger writers are so self-conscious, so steeped in a certain kind of liberal education that their characters can’t condone even their own sexual impulses: they are, in short, too cool for sex.<sup>8</sup>

In the real world, in private, men certainly aren’t too cool for sex. They revel in it. My *Sex Diaries* project showed that very clearly. But while the focus there was on mismatched desire, I quickly learnt there was so much more that men wanted to talk about. Their diaries overflowed with their thoughts and feelings about what it means to be a sexual male at this point in our cultural history. They wanted to talk not just about desire but about other aspects of their sexuality: their craving for intimacy, their delight in her pleasure, their fears and tensions, secret cravings, their bodies, erections, orgasms. And with so many couples struggling with tensions over sex, the men wanted to explain to women why it all matters so much to them.

It made sense to give men a chance to answer that constant refrain from women—what *is* it with men and sex? I recruited another 150 or so men to write for me for more than a year. They came from all walks of life and age groups, supplying long, detailed sexual histories. Many responded to in-depth survey questions, but others also kept diaries, recording their innermost thoughts about their day-to-day experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Given the rare opportunity to write about what it meant to them, my diarists took up the baton with enormous enthusiasm. Look at this Christmas diary entry from Owen (68), writing about his joyful love-life with his wife of forty-two years, Isabel:

Spent Christmas Day with all our rellies at home and Boxing Day with our neighbours enjoying a few drinks and just socialising. Great day and great night. The delayed sex had me worked up until I could hardly bear it. Straight after we arrived home I set the aircon going and swept Isabel off her feet into the bedroom and gave her a massage from head to toe, undressing her as we went. It was really great. I gave her a really passionate and very enjoyable kissing, sucking and licking feast—more than I have ever done before. She was in ecstasy for about 15 minutes and said she hadn't enjoyed it so much in years. I finished about 5 minutes later and to my surprise she wanted more. This is unusual—and something I would never turn down. I gave her more stimulation with my fingers and she came again—twice! Hooray! This is about the best Christmas gift any man could receive.

Sometimes their wives and partners wrote diaries as well, and other women sent in their own contributions about what they observed about male sexuality. But the heart of this book is about men and sex—*their* sexual dreams, longings, frustrations and the thrill, the elation they experience through carnal pleasures.

Men wrote at length about internet pornography—why a man would choose to sit there night after night staring at the flittering computer screen, pretending to be working but secretly delving into the vast, throbbing sexual world now laid open to him. Men know all too well the trouble it will cause if they are caught out. They are stunned by the intensity of women's reaction to what they see as a harmless outlet for their unrequited lust. What is a man to do when his wife tells him his viewing habits leave her feeling betrayed, when she acts as if he is some kind of criminal, pervert, low-life?

Men talked extensively about their delight in their partner's bodies: 'We are more than happy to take the rough edges and imperfections—after all we men are full of them. We can look beyond the flab and saggy boobs and love a woman for who she is', one wrote. In a loving relationship, that forgiving gaze can be such a gift to a partner who doubts her own attractiveness. Yet his-and-hers diaries expose the tension created as a woman's self-consciousness clashes with a man's enjoyment of his partner's nakedness.

Then there's the quest for sexual adventure, that restless male urge that brings so many men unstuck. The oral sex in the Oval Office that helped lose Clinton his presidency; the parade of mistresses that soiled the reputation of the squeaky clean golfing hero; the erotic, exotic temptations of swinging that lured a Melbourne millionaire into dangerous sexual company. Men talk about why it is worth it, why they are willing to risk so much for the sake of that tangle of sweaty bodies, those brief moments of puffing and panting.

Such adventures aside, it was their lusty joy in bonking that shone through most strongly. I loved this throwaway line from a man, explaining what he hoped for in his own sexual life: 'I was raised to believe that passionate sex in reckless abandonment leads you to a warm, wet, wonderful world'.

That wonderful world remains an all-consuming presence in the minds of many men. Our popular culture continues to reflect this obsession—in movies, media stories and jokes and cartoons. There's a nice story about an old pilot who is drinking coffee at Starbucks when a young woman sitting next to him asks, 'Are you a real pilot?'

He replied, 'Well, I've spent my whole life flying planes, flew in WWII in a B-29, and later in the Korean conflict, taught fifty people to fly and gave rides to hundreds, so I guess I am a pilot.'

She said, 'I'm a lesbian. I spend my whole day thinking about naked women. I get up in the morning and think about naked women. When I shower, I think about naked women. When I watch TV, I think about naked women. It seems everything makes me think of naked women.'

The two sat sipping in silence.

A little while later, a young man sat down on the other side of the old pilot and asked, 'Are you a real pilot?'

He replied, 'I always thought I was, but I just found out I'm a lesbian.'

Many men do spend a fair chunk of their waking hours thinking about naked female bodies, thinking about how much they would like to see, to touch, to pleasure and enjoy. Haven't we all heard that hoary old chestnut about men thinking of sex every seven seconds? It's nonsense, of course. Research by Edward Laumann and colleagues from the University of Chicago suggests that more than half of men report thinking about sex every day, while only one-fifth of women report thinking of sex that often.<sup>10</sup>

Imagine what it is like to think so much about sex when you fear your body will let you down. Men explain the plight of the impotent man, the misery so eloquently described by Roth: 'The once rigid instrument of procreation was now like the end of a pipe you see sticking out of a field somewhere, a meaningless

piece of pipe that spurts and gushes intermittently, spitting forth water to no end'.<sup>11</sup> My diarists show why it matters so much when the ageing body, or ill-health or prostate-cancer treatments render erections a thing of the past, why they can't let nature take its course. And why they are so delighted by the drug company's promise of never-ending Viagra-inspired virility.

They display a truly remarkable inventiveness when it comes to finding ways of keeping their equipment fully functioning. There was the diarist who fashioned his own 'cock rings', cut out of soft inner tubes from bicycle tyres. I dubbed him the 'Toilet Roll Houdini' after learning of his extraordinary exploits with his pelvic muscles. He boasted that he was able to insert his penis into the cardboard core of a toilet roll and with one flick of his muscles, his penis would burst forth, splitting it from end to end.

Inventiveness abounds too when it comes to their rich variety of sexual interests, their exotic kinks and special quirks. Men are twenty times more likely than women to acquire unusual sexual habits, forbidden tastes that even their partners rarely know about. With my diarists, it all came pouring out. Who could resist the intriguing story of the pensioner who, with his wife's approval, wears her knickers under his bowling shorts.

Last year I received a letter from a 50-year-old man who'd recently walked out of a 24-year marriage. He'd lived for nineteen years without any sex in his marriage and he finally decided he couldn't stand it anymore.

Our family, friends and children had no idea until BANG!  
I broke and walked out. My wife will not forgive me and give me another chance. She doesn't understand I'm a man with passion and desire. I've remained loyal and faithful to my wife all this time and now it's a disaster. My wife must have known that by marrying a man that sex would have to be a part of the deal. I just don't figure it.

There'd been absolutely no sex in their marriage for the last nineteen years after their youngest son was conceived.

Have got wonderful memories of the night Mike was conceived. WOW! Was I a happy camper when she woke me by nuzzling her breasts across my face whilst I was asleep. The rest was magic. It simply made me feel like a man. My wife had given me the gift of love, taken me to the most wonderful place that some say is the reason for being. I have captured every moment of that amazing experience and held it tightly to my heart ever since. How can a woman be so turned on and give me such a wonderful time then zip—nothing?

The man adores his wife. He now feels he's made a dreadful mistake in leaving, but he got to the point where he couldn't stand it:

Try sleeping next to your wife night after night not being able to touch her. Try watching her shower, dress and undress and not be able to have her. Try taking her out for a dinner then theatre then stay at a five star hotel and not a thing. Try ballroom dancing for two years and not be romantically aroused. Watch her walk out into a room dressed so elegantly wearing something that reveals her full breasts and keep cool about it. Try standing next to her and smell not only her perfume but the very essence of her. Try being Mr Handyman, gardener, Mr Clean up the house and cook or anything else to keep her happy and contented. God only knows I tried to love her, care for her, understand her and appreciate her. I never had an affair, never went to brothels or even bought a dirty magazine. I've been trustworthy, loyal and honest, always putting her care and safety first. She has been my focus, my life.

Now she is angry and hurt that he left her.

Whenever we have talked recently she always says, 'Why did you leave me?' I tell her I broke down and needed to get out for

a while. She said you left and this was unforgivable. I just don't get it! Damn this hormone testosterone! It's gushing out of every pore on my body making me hornier than a jack rabbit every waking and sleeping hour of the day. She doesn't understand a man's needs and refuses to admit any responsibility for what happened. She is steadfast that she didn't do anything wrong. Work that one out, folks. How do you make a woman with this view understand us men?

'Men want sex more often than women at the start of a relationship, in the middle of it, and after many years of it', reports Roy F Baumeister, a psychology professor at Florida State University who has written extensively on gender differences in sexual drive. His team's research concludes that men not only think about sex more often, they have more frequent and varied fantasies, desire sex more often, desire more partners, masturbate more, are less able or willing to live without sexual gratification, expend more resources and make more sacrifices for sex, desire and enjoy a broader variety of sexual practices, and have more favourable and permissive attitudes toward more sexual activities. He concludes that 'the tragedy of the male sex drive' is men's state of perpetual readiness, which so rarely meets its match.<sup>12</sup>

Even in dating relationships the mismatch is there. There are studies of dating that show that at the start of these relationships the man typically wants sex earlier and more often than the woman does. Psychologists Laurie Cohen and Lance Shotland from Pennsylvania State University found that the average man reported he expected to have sex after about eleven dates, whereas the average woman expected sex only after eighteen dates.<sup>13</sup> In their book, *The Social Dimensions of Sex*, Roy Baumeister and his co-author Dianne M Tice sum up the dating research as follows:

Throughout the entire relationship, the man will be sexually disappointed, at least in the sense that he will be having less

sex than he wants. But for women, typically there is little or no gap between desire and reality. The amount of sex a woman desires is on average very close to the amount she has. For men reality never catches up to desire.<sup>14</sup>

Some men miss out more than others. Following my request for volunteers for this project, I received an intriguing letter 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 that as a young man, with his hormones raging, he thought about sex a lot and had many opportunities as women seemed to like him.

However, I just could not bring myself to have one night stands. It had to mean something more and my relationships never progressed that far. Mostly I would end the relationship when I felt that we were not a match. I did not want to be with just any girlfriend when the 'right one' came along. Unfortunately, I still haven't found her.

He clearly wonders whether he has missed out on all that much, writing eloquently about watching friends go through the pain of marriage break-ups or struggling to cope without much sex in their marriages. 'I'm not complaining—I have a good life. There are no arguments in my household!' he writes chirpily.

But he's still a man with strong sexual needs and firm views about their importance to men: 'My impression of women is that they appear to have a choice—sex or no sex. I don't believe that men do. They are wired to propagate the species. Men build up a sexual tension that needs to be released at regular intervals', he writes, explaining he tries to suppress these feelings but his body won't let him. He's now on medication that reduces his libido. But even now that powerful drive breaks through:

I go happily along for about 3–4 weeks, not really thinking about sex at all. Then early one morning, out of the blue, I will have a sexual dream. I will probably wake up with half an erection and feel an overwhelming urge to masturbate. This urge will not and cannot be denied. This process is something that I have no conscious control over at all. So there it is—the hidden power of men’s sex drive, which nature has given us to ensure the survival of the species!

Of course there are men who are different. I heard their stories mainly through their frustrated partners, who complain bitterly about being sexually rejected. A few brave men with low drive did take part in the project, with some explaining that they were never very interested, and others talking about the reasons that once-burning drive simply faded away.

They are rare compared to the vast numbers of men who just can’t get sex out of their minds. Harrison (48) wrote to me explaining that he had no physical relations in the last twelve of his 27-year marriage. He knew exactly what he was missing:

I want to hold a hot, live, beautiful woman in my hands again, to feel the hot breath of desire, I need to hear that slight gasp, to feel warm, tight, smooth skin slip under my fingers, I need to trace my finger tips along a line of cheek and lip, to feel the shape and curve of arm, leg, thigh, tummy, shoulder, back, bum, the soft, tangle of pubic hair. I have had all this before, a long time ago, and I want it all again.

What’s missing from the male accounts of sexual rejection is the critical question of whether they are really giving women what they want in bed. As one of my female readers put it: Do women go off sex because men are rubbish at it? This intriguing issue was raised by many of my diarists, with some women complaining that men fail dismally to press the right buttons, while men grumble about never having been given the guided tour they

need to get things right. The quality of the sex is a vital part of the story.

Men wrote with great passion about all these issues. I was often touched to receive such open, revealing material from men who admit that they had never before spoken of these matters. Some wrote with great eloquence; others expressed themselves far more simply. 'Why at age 71 have I spent so much time and effort to try and still have some enjoyment from sexual activity?' pondered Lewis, describing a long and tortuous journey to try to regain his erections after prostate-cancer surgery. His wife feels that at his age he should have 'grown out of all that', but he concludes that with age it makes sense to try to hang on to as many of the good things in life as long as possible. 'Sex is one of life's pleasures that I hope to enjoy for at least a few more years.'

Men have gained a lot more than a few extra years in this new age—with the coming of Viagra and the other miraculous new erection treatments. An astonishing one in two men aged over fifty experience erection problems, but now they have a whole new armament to attack their fading potency. The revolutionary change this has produced in the sex lives of many older couples is an untold story that is truly fascinating.

What is it like to pop a little blue pill? Does the erection feel the same or different? Is poking an injection into the penis as bad as it sounds? There are so many questions that must flit through the minds of men confronting the prospect of trying the new treatments—questions that very few are willing to answer. That's what my diarists have now provided—stories from the coalface of this brave new world, as men tell their stories, often with humour, and sometimes perhaps providing far too much information. It was a difficult task deciding how much of this glorious detail to include, knowing some men will be desperately keen to know all,

but the intricacies of pumping up a penile implant or fitting a cock ring might be a little over the top for some readers.

What language to use? Many of my diarists describe their erotic lives using blokey men's talk bound to raise eyebrows of readers with delicate sensibilities. But to rewrite their lively accounts to achieve something more proper and formal would rob these rare, delightfully candid accounts of much of their vigour. I've also included some erotic, raunchy passages from the diaries where, for instance, a man quite undaunted by his capricious penis explains just how he manages to romp with his partner, whether soft or hard, with relentless enthusiasm. It's meant to be sexy, to stir the loins a little—surely a book about sex should do a little of that? But it also might just help other men see that a faltering erection needn't bring them down. Yes, I realise these passages might be too ripe for some. But it is obvious from the diaries that there are many men and women still floundering, ignorant about just how to give and accept sexual pleasure. I strongly believe there's real value in reading *how* others make love, the nitty gritty of what they actually do with each other.

*What Men Want* includes five chapters on erections—not just on restoring faulty equipment but on how this all plays out between couples. What about the woman who was delighted at the thought that her man was being forced to hang up his spurs—how does she feel about this miraculous rejuvenated penis? How does a woman support a man who is giving up hope that any treatment will work for him? That's where my couples come in providing his-and-her accounts of this bumpy journey. And while there are many women who feel they have earned a rest and who now react to all this with a shudder of horror, there are some who are delighted.

There's a wonderful cartoon featuring an elderly man sitting on a bench overlooking a cliff top. Next to him is a little boy who asks, 'Grandpa, why are you sitting there naked like that?'

'It was your grandmother's idea', the old chap explains. 'Yesterday I sat here with my shirt off and got a stiff neck ...'

Women pushing men back into the saddle are not common but they do exist, as my diarists show. And there are older men who find themselves quite bewildered when their partners attempt to whip them back into action. It's all just part of the sexual journey that lies ahead for the younger man—a journey for which most men are grossly underprepared. The legacy of men's reluctance to talk openly about sexual matters is that they must deal with obstacles to successful lovemaking on their own. How tragic to read men's stories and see them missing out on sexual pleasure, on connecting with their partners, simply because they never share their knowledge of what makes sex work for them.

There's a wonderful article written by comedian Bill Cosby about his first sexual experience. He describes his late teen years when he'd been working on his girlfriend to have sex with him. Finally she agreed to do it—the following Saturday. But that left Cosby with a problem. He didn't have a clue what sex was all about; he just didn't know what to do. Remember this was back in the 1950s—before the internet—at a time when naked bodies never graced our screens, books or magazines.

Cosby tried subtly to get the juice from his mates: 'Well, man what's your favorite way of gettin' it', he asks one friend. The answer isn't very helpful: 'You know, just the regular way'.

The conversations went nowhere. Next thing it is Saturday and Cosby is on the way to his big date, still in a spin because he still doesn't know how to do it:

So now, I'm walkin' and I'm trying to figure out how to do it. And when I get there, the most embarrassing thing is gonna be when I have to take my pants down. See, right away, then, I'm buck naked in front of this girl. Now, what happens then? Do you ... do you just ... I don't even know what to do ... I'm gonna just stand there and she's gonna say, 'You don't know

how to do it'. And I'm gonna say, 'Yes I do, but I forgot'. I never thought of her showing me, because I'm a man and I don't want her to show me—I don't want nobody to show me, but I wish somebody would kinda slip me a note.<sup>15</sup>

This book is that note. Here's the knowledge men need to enhance their sex lives and their relationships. My splendid diarists have lifted the lid on so many aspects of their intimate lives, writing with devastating honesty and good humour about what it means to be a sexual male at this time in our cultural history. Their openness will make it just a little easier for men everywhere to start the conversations they need to have—to share that knowledge with each other and with their partners.