

# The Sexpert's Tale *by* Carol Martin-Sperry

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## **The story of sex from the '60s to the 60s**

In the early '60s there was a wonderful enlightened gynaecologist whose practice was in her beautiful Nash Terrace house in Regent's Park. She was a feminist ahead of her time. This was before the Pill and access to condoms, unthinkable for girls, was furtive and embarrassing for boys, who could not be relied on. She provided sex education, a painless physical examination, the fitting of a diaphragm and the admonition that it should be used every single time one had sex, no matter what the time of the month. She saved countless girls from unwanted pregnancy and instilled sexual confidence and self-esteem.

On the other side of the Park, a posh Harley Street gynaecologist, FRCS no less, with a discreet nursing home in the suburbs, was plying his highly lucrative trade as an expert abortionist, sign here, no questions asked, cash please. A lot of cash, no shortage of customers. The Abortion Act was not passed until 1967. Those who could not afford Harley Street quality relied on the backstreet practitioners, a

risky procedure which often resulted in damage to the reproductive organs and consequent infertility.

Whatever the circumstances, the whole issue was associated with guilt and shame, stigma and secrecy. Women were still trapped by their biology and moral hypocrisy.

However as early as 1961 the miracle Pill came along (so famous it does not have a qualifying name), with the potential to transform women's lives right across the world. At first it was only available to married or at the very least engaged women. Then it was more freely prescribed to unmarried women with menstrual problems, broadly interpreted. It took about 5 years before it was truly available on demand. The rest is history.

Freud had put sex on the menu for the 20th century. Kinsey published his reports in 1948 and 1953. "Lady Chatterley's Lover" with its fabulous descriptions of sex and its use of the words "fuck" and "cunt" in their true meaning, came out in 1960 after the famous obscenity trial. But sexual activity was still shrouded in ignorance

and secrecy. Girls were expected to marry and brides were expected to be virgins. Sex education was minimal and sexuality was still suppressed if not repressed. When sexual activity did take place it was often hasty and furtive, in less than ideal conditions. No sharing of beds in the parental home or the university halls of residence. If you were unlucky enough to get pregnant and marriage was not on offer and you decided to keep the baby, you were defined as an unmarried mother and your child was illegitimate. It took courage to overcome the stigma that went with these labels.

But something was stirring. Around 1963 girls were cutting 12 inches off their hems, discarding those horrible restraining panty girdles and suspenders and in many cases disposing of if not actually burning their uncomfortable wired padded bras. The deforming pointy stilettos were replaced by flatties and low heels. No more expensive perms, shampoo and set, curlers and rollers under the claustrophobic hairdryer. Now it was Vidal Sassoon's quirky cuts and wash'n'go. Girls found a new freedom in their bodies, literally from top to toe, and with it a positive awareness of their attractiveness and sexuality.

In 1963 Betty Friedan, a leading figure in the Women's Movement, published her feminist book "The feminine mystique". This was a wake-up call. She expressed the growing dissatisfaction women felt in being trapped in the '50's domestic role of housewife and mother, at the service of their husbands in their suburban enclaves. She was hugely influential in changing the way women perceived their function in life.

In 1963 Phillip Larkin wrote his poem "Annus Mirabilis" which said that

"Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me)-  
Between the end of the  
*Chatterley* ban  
And the Beatles first LP."

Indeed the Beatles released their first album "Please please me" In 1963 and Bob Dylan told us that the times they were a changin'.

Out went guilt and shame, ignorance and inhibition, furtiveness and secrecy, in came fun and free love. Mick Jagger could get no satisfaction (patently untrue) but the sexual revolution and the permissive society were truly on their way.

Something amazing happened in the summer of 1967. The Beatles released "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and "All you need is love". 100 000 people converged on Haight Ashbury, a rundown neighbourhood of San Francisco. This event consolidated the hippie counterculture movement with its philosophy of liberal drug use, communal living and free love. These were the flower children in the Summer of Love and there was no looking back.

"You've come a long way baby" was the slogan for Virginia Slims, an American cigarette designed specifically for women. It could have come straight from "Mad men". But there was still a long way to go.

In the UK the Lord Chamberlain was stripped of his power of censorship and "Hair", the controversial hippie rock musical with nudity, drugs and sexual freedom broke new ground on the London stage. It was revived in the West End in 2010 as a piece of cultural history.

"Hair" was followed a couple of years later by Kenneth Tynan's "Oh Calcutta", a series of sex-related racy sketches with much nudity.



Then came the Oz trial. The Australian hip satirical magazine had moved to London where it was part of the underground press, pushing the boundaries with its discussions of sex, drugs and alternative lifestyles and left-wing politics. The edition edited by school kids had the editors in court on obscenity charges. Although they were found guilty they were acquitted later on appeal.

The '70's kicked off with several major publications. Germaine Greer's "The female eunuch" picked up where Betty Friedan left off. This was not just about women's perception of themselves, this was about the shaping of stereotypes and the untapped power of female sexuality. Traditional values had repressed and neutered women who were conditioned to be compliant, sexless and effectively powerless. Greer's voice was that of a radical revolutionary feminist who identified the enemy as male figures in positions of authority. It was a ground-breaking best-seller which changed the way people thought about sex.

"Our bodies ourselves" written by the Boston Women's Collective, was about every aspect of women's health and sexuality from a feminist point of view. It

encouraged women to know and understand their bodies through shared experience and led to consciousness-raising groups where women explored sexual issues and exchanged intimate knowledge of their bodies.

The first illustrated sex manual to come out of the sexual revolution, "The joy of sex: a gourmet guide to lovemaking" by Alex Comfort, was published in 1972. The format was inspired by "The joy of cooking" and the text was laid out like a menu with starters and main courses. The faintly ludicrous drawings were based on photographs and were considered to be erotic at the time. The book featured various sexual positions and practices including oral sex, bondage and swinging. An updated edition was published in 2008.

Next came "Spare Rib", the radical magazine born out of the women's movement which explored feminism, gender roles and sexuality.

But what exactly are the physical processes that occur during sex? Masters and Johnson pioneered research into human sexuality, based on observing and measuring sexual intercourse and masturbation in the laboratory

They published their findings in "Human sexual response" in 1966. One of their conclusions was that there was no difference physiologically between the so-called vaginal and clitoral orgasms.

Shere Hite picked up this controversial issue in "The Hite report on female sexuality", the result of thousands of interviews. She was a feminist sexologist and writer who focussed on the meaning of sexual experience. She did not agree with Masters and Johnson's narrow definition of orgasm in women which stated that it was a result of penetrative sex. She found that only 30% of women were orgasmic with full intercourse and that 70% were orgasmic with clitoral stimulation. There is no doubt that her work was a major influence on how we perceive sex and sexuality.

The female orgasm remains a mysterious marvel. What exactly is it? Where does one feel it? How does one make it happen? Does it matter if it does not happen? Whether it is experienced as a butterfly flutter or as river deep mountain high, it is now certain that it originates in the clitoris with its myriad nerve endings and that women's sensitivities and experiences vary.

But where is the clitoris? If she does not know where it is, how is he supposed to find it and what is he supposed to do with it when he does? This is why it is so important for women to know and understand their bodies and their sexuality and for men to share that knowledge.

What was on offer in the culture for men at that time? Soft porn "girlie mags" such as Playboy, Penthouse and Mayfair, each one raunchier than its predecessor. They started out with pictures of topless models with big full breasts, moved on to nudes with big full breasts and curvy bums and eventually to full-frontal but neat-looking genitalia. These magazines had problem pages which were an excuse to write about male sexual fantasies in explicit detail.

By the 1990s most of this pornographic output had been replaced on a massive scale by the internet porn explosion which now caters to every possible predilection, both legal and illegal. It runs 24 hours a day and nothing is off limits.

Matters were improving for homosexuals but at a much slower pace. In 1967 homosexuality was decriminalised between

consenting adults over 21. This was amended to over 18 in 1984. It was only in 2001 that the age of consent was dropped to 16 in line with heterosexual practice. Section 28, which outlawed the teaching and promotion of homosexuality, came into force in 1986 and was not repealed until 2003.

Unfortunately AIDS made its appearance in the 1980s with devastating effects in the gay community.

The sex toy industry suddenly took off as a result of the changes in sexual attitudes. If you wanted to buy a vibrator in the '70s you had to go to a seedy Soho sex shop or find something mail order which would arrive by post in a plain brown envelope. Now sex toys are on sale on the High Street with fantasy dress-up outfits, whips, handcuffs and sexy lingerie. Your local pharmacy stocks condoms with a choice of colours and flavours. The internet stocks anything and everything.

There is no doubt that a rampant Rabbit or some battery-operated buzzy thing will bring satisfaction to the most anorgasmic women, but it will never give you a hug or whisper your name.

During the 1980s the post-war

generation were mostly settling into marriage, children and careers. However after a decade of liberal and liberated sex many were finding monogamy too much of a challenge. Some couples were just too bored to have sex with each other once the romance wore off. The rise of individualism and self-entitlement often led to flings, affairs, divorce and re-marriage. As ever, sex had consequences.

By the '90s it was time for the midlife crisis and the menopause. For some people the desire for sex waned. Pharmaceuticals were on hand to help. For women there was HRT to keep them young and for men the wonder of Viagra and its successors. According to the research those who are healthy enough and interested enough can go on having sex till they die in old age. One can still go out with a bang not a whimper.

So can we find peace and love in the 21st century? Will sex ever settle down from the swings and roundabouts of the '60s? Maybe, as Chou Enlai replied when asked for his opinion on the French Revolution, "It's too soon to say".

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