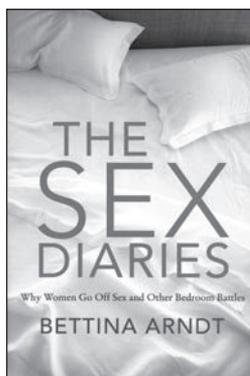


## *The sex diaries of Bettina Arndt*

**B**ettina Arndt established her career as a sexual crusader, courageously challenging mores and behaviour, and championing the liberation of women's sexuality. It is now not uncommon in professional circles to hear a lament of "*What has happened to Bettina Arndt?*" Her more contemporary profile is as a champion of the men's movement. Not that this is a problem—it can be important to sit in the sexual debate from multiple perspectives. The criticism seems to come more from an apparent lack of objectivity (the cornerstone of good journalism) in her research projects that leaves her work looking both flawed and biased.



In '*The Sex Diaries: Why Women Go Off Sex and Other Bedroom Battles*', published in March 2009

by Melbourne University Press, Arndt has written about men's higher desire for sexual intimacy, their evidence-based and irrefutable 'need', and their justifiable suffering and anger about sex. She argues that women have a lower sex drive, although she quotes women who are the 'exception'. One could wonder why she didn't seek

to balance her samples to ensure equal exploration of these experiences. However, that is not her goal. In wanting to argue for the male position, she has left her sample skewed and the result, despite her persistence at one line of argument, is confusing and inconsistent.

She quotes David Schnarch in saying that the person with low desire determines the frequency of sex. What she doesn't see, but is evident in her book, is that the person with higher desire can *define* the problem. The men in her sample define high desire as good and worthy, and those not able (or willing) to keep up with or meet the needs of this high desire as not. Arndt picks up this ball and runs with it unquestioningly.

Arndt has recruited 98 participants in her qualitative research project through her media appearances and contacts. She aimed to have both parties in the couple participate, although this didn't always work out. The end result was 88 men who experienced higher desire than their female partners, who spoke eloquently and passionately about their loneliness and frustration in their committed relationship, and how they were choosing to stay, suffering, bewildered and deprived, for the sake of their children. They also wanted their partner, despite, for some, the feeling of being 'duped' in the promise of sex that was never fulfilled (p.55).

Their partners were the fodder for the central focus of the book—what is the matter with women's sexuality? Women with 'feeble' sex drives, women who *'know their lack of drive is a huge issue'* for their relationship, and who *'can't bear what it is doing to their men'* (p.3) The argument is that brain chemistry, hormones and pharmacology does not offer us much of an explanation or any real hope to get these women going, nor does their regret at their poor partners' suffering drive them

forward. Arndt in fact emphasises the 'fact' that women are stuck with a low libido. She quotes their lament at this, but more often she quotes women who find it hilarious that they thwart their men's attempts to make overtures, women who laugh with their friends about it, and even deliberately manipulate situations to avoid any physical contact. In fact, she makes many of the women out to be rather hostile in these relationships, uncaring and unwilling to budge. This is reinforced by the quotes of the ten women with higher sex drives than their male partners. Around five of them are said to be unwilling to put up with it and are leaving their partners, painting women in this position as intolerant, while the 98 men are quoted in a way that positions them as pinned and martyred on the lance of their female partner's barbs and neglect.

Paradoxically, she quotes at length men who say they go to endless trouble to satisfy their partners, offering limitless cunnilingus, massage, etc, only to be rebuffed, as well as women who say they endlessly have told their partners what they want and find their men refusing to comply. She writes of men who have the patience of Job, moving quietly to their shed for years so as never to pressure their partners, as well as many examples of men who pounce, prod, grab and harass their partner's consciously and openly, even though they know it distresses them. She puts this down to men's understandable reactivity to so much deprivation. While the reader knows all these examples exist, Arndt uses them to construct an argument that appears contradictory rather than as conveying a continuum of possibilities.

Arndt writes of the influence of children and parenting on sexual relationships with little support or understanding of the very real demands of this life stage. One example stood out, of a woman in a six year relationship with two children aged four and two. Such women were challenged to not 'use themselves up' on parenting, but to leave more room for sex, without any comment about the context of family demands. Instead Arndt implies that women can stretch themselves further, even though this is not their need at this life stage. Of course, at the extreme of women who enslave themselves to family life, this may be a useful 'in principle' challenge. However, as a rather blunt argument, neglecting the struggle of many women to hold themselves afloat at all in the face of the demands of young children, she offers no realistic solutions for couples in this position.

She balances the many initial chapters on male suffering and the lack of resolution for women's sexual deficits with men who are said to be lucky enough to be married to 'juicy tomatoes'. Such women are the stuff of the playboy fantasy—wearing stilettos and nothing else to the front door, cooking and even gardening in sexy lingerie, offering naked breasts with evening cocktails. Such imagery is also the despair of many women, challenged tiresomely over the years to construct themselves only as the male fantasy figure, not in a fantasy of their own desire.

How can this be? Arndt has made it clear that desire will

waver for women, so what is the explanation for the 'juicy tomato'? Unfortunately there isn't one. It seems to be luck of the draw for men. Certainly she suggests in one chapter women should *'just do it'*: have sex whether they want to or not, and she quotes many women who say this can be good once it gets started. Of course, other women note that this is exactly what women have done for years, with no particular advance for them in the bargain. Arndt writes of these polarities in different chapters of the book, and so loses the more interesting possibilities of juxtaposing them together and wrestling with their differences.

These are only a few examples of the ways that her argument lacks order and complexity (which in my view would have been a lot more interesting). She doesn't ask the questions that arise naturally from her research, such as:

*'Are these women having the sex they want, or are they giving up because it isn't worth having with their current partner?'*

*'Why is it that women are quoted as avoiding sex at all costs and yet she quotes some getting out their vibrator as soon as they are alone?'*

*Why haven't her male subjects spoken to their partners in the detail they have spoken to Arndt? Doesn't Arndt notice that she has become the classic marital third, the person to whom the (undifferentiated) male confides because she is less scary than their familiar partner? Arndt instead paints their female partners as virtually unapproachable, yet as soon as the diaries become known in the couple relationship, Arndt notes many couples used them to start talking and have better sex. This would suggest to me the problem may be as much to do with communication than women's feeble desire, a point that isn't made central to this work.*

*What else are the men doing to address their needs, other than suffer or act out in hostile ways? Men will often find it more acceptable to express their emotional needs in sexual ways. However, there is no attempt to deconstruct the meaning of sex to the male participants. Their need is pure and simple and somewhat Neanderthal, a series of caricatures that often do them no favours.*

Arndt quotes a number of men who *'have had to'* resort to affairs to get by. This in itself is debatable (but not in this book), particularly in the face of the lack of clear attempts to address the problems, such as through communication or counselling. Even more extreme however are the men she quotes as having multiple sexual partners, seeing different lovers every week, one man who had slept with women and men, some had multiple, long term parallel relationships. To present these scenarios as evidence of male's desire and ways of looking after their own needs lacks any credibility.

So what is the value in this book? The main value is in contributing to the general debate about sex and its meaning in relationships, as a conversation starter and a starting point for couples to clarify their own reasons for discrepancies between them at different life stages. It certainly got my blood boiling in many ways, but I found myself talking to lots of people about it, and this does bring a closed subject out into the public forum. I just wish Arndt had used this opportunity to really create bridges and connections in the debate rather than divisions, with the emphasis on pathologising women. We know that

no one changes in the shamed position, and by putting the burden fully on women's shoulders, it is unlikely to advance what she hopes it might, at least not directly. I don't think this assists men at all either, especially the many men she quotes who are trying to attend to their partner thoughtfully and with sensitivity. There are some useful, challenging ideas here, even if they are controversial in the current social climate. *'The Sex Diaries'* is reasonably priced and an engaging read. If you and

your friends/colleagues enjoy being provoked in discussion and tussling with social issues, this is a stimulating book.



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