



Garden & Desires

The Evolution of
WOMEN'S SEXUAL
FANTASIES

Emily Dubberley

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About the Book

'My favourite fantasy is group sex with three or four women.'

'My history professor, he's so damn attractive, in my fantasy he's doing me really hard.'

'I'm the meek little chambermaid of some wicked Victorian doctor who straps me naked to a table and objectifies me completely.'

There is no such thing as forbidden fruit in the garden of desires.

Discover real women's most secret fantasies in this highly erotic, revealing and provocative exploration of the female sexual imagination. In the twenty-first century world, is the sexual revolution over?

Or has it barely begun?

About the Author

Emily Dubberley is one of the UK's leading sex writers. After completing her dissertation on whether women wanted their fantasies to come true, in 2001 she created Cliterati, the UK's original fantasy website for women. Cliterati has subsequently attracted international press coverage and reaches 10,000+ visitors per week (300,000 page views per month). It was shortlisted for best sex and relationships blog in the Cosmopolitan Blog Awards 2012 and is currently shortlisted for best blog in the Xcite Book Awards (Emily is also shortlisted as Best Sexpert in the same awards).

Emily founded the *Lovers' Guide* magazine, *Scarlet* magazine and *Erotic Knave* magazine, and is the author of more than 25 books about sex, love and relationships internationally published, selling over a million copies. She has freelanced for numerous publications including *Cosmopolitan*, *Grazia*, *Easy Living*, *FHM*, *More*, *Elle*, *Men's Health*, *The Guardian* and *Glamour*, and has had articles syndicated worldwide. She wrote and presented a monthly podcast show *Sex Talk With Emily Dubberley* for Audible.co.uk, and has extensive radio experience with stations including LBC, Kerrang! and Radio 4. She is frequently quoted as a 'sexpert' in magazines including *Cosmopolitan*, *Elle* and *Company*, has been involved with TV shows for all the terrestrial channels and various satellite channels, and writes for numerous websites including iVillage.co.uk, TheSite.org and MSN.

For more information, see <http://www.dubberley.com>.

Garden & Desires

The Evolution of
WOMEN'S SEXUAL
FANTASIES

Emily Dubberley

BLACK
LACE

Thanks to Nancy Friday for planting the first seed -
and all the women who've shared their fantasies and
helped the garden grow.



Part One

Prologue: A Brief History of Female Sexual Fantasy

FEMALE SEXUAL FANTASY began in 1973. That may sound ridiculous, but until Nancy Friday wrote *My Secret Garden*, female sexual fantasy did not officially exist. Not even in the pages of women's magazines.

Anaïs Nin may have achieved a certain measure of renown for *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds*, but these erotic classics were published posthumously in 1978. *The Story of O* pre-empted *Fifty Shades of Grey* by 58 years - and has sold millions of copies - but Anne Desclos hid behind her pseudonym for forty years, only eventually revealed as Pauline Réage at 87 years of age. More significantly they, and the handful of openly sexual female writers before them, all wrote fiction. Friday was the first woman to collect women's real sexual fantasies and, in doing so, show that women had a sexuality of their own - a highly contentious idea in 1973.

In the month of *My Secret Garden's* release Helen Gurley Brown (then editor of *Cosmo*) ran a feature written by her in-house psychiatrist, with the opening line, 'Women do not have sexual fantasies, period. Men do.'

And it wasn't just *Cosmo*. At the time Friday wrote *My Secret Garden*, the mainstream thinking of sex therapists, psychologists or psychiatrists was that women didn't have sexual fantasies. Friday was conflicted by this information, as she fantasised, and set out to discover whether she was the only woman who did. Apparently, even when talking to

'some of the most sexually active women in New York and London', she was met by confusion. Only her persistence, placing discreet classified ads and interviewing rare, open friends helped prove that, for some women at least, sexual fantasy existed.

After *My Secret Garden* achieved popularity – and notoriety – Friday said, 'It's important for people to realize how new this subject is. But we have come to accept that women do have private, erotic thoughts.'¹

What she was too modest to admit is that this acceptance is largely as a result of her own pioneering work.

Fantasy After Friday

OF COURSE, WOMEN have always had a private sexuality – but until 1973 the idea that they did was stifled by the media, medical establishment and society alike. Once Friday opened the door to the secret garden, she was joined by similarly sex positive writers: Erica Jong, whose 1974 book *Fear of Flying* coined the term 'zipless fuck' (talking about a woman's desire for casual sex with a stranger) and whose novels included masturbation, rape fantasy and unashamed oral exploits involving a tampon; Shere Hite, whose 1974 book *Sexual Honesty By Women, For Women* was the precursor to her international best-seller, *The Hite Report* – one of the first books to report that women found climax through penetrative sex harder than orgasm through masturbation, posited the now generally accepted view that clitoral stimulation is key to female climax, and suggested that sex needed redefining for true sexual equality; and Betty Dodson, whose 1974 book, *Sex for One: The Joy of Selfloving*, presented an unashamed guide to masturbation, heavily laced with anecdotes about group, public and otherwise non-normative sex. Dodson also ran interactive

masturbation classes for those who wanted to take things further.

These revolutionary texts reflected the changes in society: a new willingness to talk about – and maybe engage in – sex. In 1973, Margot St Clare created sex-worker activist group COYOTE (Call off Your Tired Old Ethics), a ‘loose women’s organisation’ dedicated to decriminalising sex work. In 1979, Tuppy Owens created Outsiders, a charity that helps disabled people socialise and find partners, offering open-minded support for people who want to talk about – and have – sex; and funded in part through the decadent and inclusive ‘Sex Maniacs’ Ball’. And these were far from the only organisations and activist groups that bubbled up, helping to broaden the scope of sexual discussion.

Most pivotally, the contraceptive pill was made available to unmarried women in the US for the first time in 1973 (the UK had introduced access for all women in 1961), and Roe vs Wade made abortion legal too. For the first time, female sexuality was separated from motherhood. Being childless became a choice – albeit one still frowned on by society (as demonstrated by Rita having to hide her contraceptive pills from her husband in the 1980 film *Educating Rita*). In a 2000 interview for *Shabhal Sun* magazine, bell hooks said, ‘I can remember the sheer bliss that sound birth control offered us. For it meant we did not have to fear the penis. We could embrace our curiosity about it, our wonder and our passion.’

However, it was not all positive. Susan Quilliam, co-author of the new *The Joy of Sex* says, ‘The hype of “the Swinging Sixties” and seventies gave the message that having sex was what all young people should be and were doing, so a lot of girls in particular did what they were expected or were pressured to do, not what they really wanted to do. The boys still ruled, and now they had fashion and the Pill on their side – if you didn’t put out you were uptight or frigid.’

Women were certainly still judged for their sexuality – Hustler’s infamous ‘meat grinder’ cover in 1978, depicting a naked woman being turned into mincemeat gives an idea of the perception of sexual women – but for the first time, it was accepted that women had a private sexuality in the same way that men do. The sexual revolution was taking seed.

Bonkbusters and Ballsy Women

THE 1980S SAW the garden of desires grow. Judith Krantz was declared a pornographer for her ‘sex and shopping’ novels and was unashamed to admit the sex scenes were designed with arousal in mind. Shirley Conran’s *Lace* shocked the world and topped the charts with its graphic depictions of under-age porn, teenage abortion, BDSM and a memorable sex scene with a gold-fish. Jackie Collins wrote sexy female characters often portrayed by her sister, Joan, on screen: confident, desirable, voracious women who weren’t scared to demand what they wanted – and use their sexuality to get it. Jilly Cooper ensured country living was seen as no less racy than international jet-setting with her ‘bonkbusters’. Titles were strong and sexy: *Riders*; *The Bitch*; and *Scruples*.

With the bonkbuster, came the ballbuster. Women weren’t just presented with images of sexual empowerment, but with coined liberty. Many books revolved around strong women striving to create business empires or otherwise achieve independence. The books were career-focussed and unafraid to tackle harsh issues. Underneath the glitter and fabulous parties were stories of abortion, rape, racism, abuse and surviving adversity: and most of the glamorous heroines used intelligence, tenacity, sisterhood and sexuality to help them overcome these obstacles. Though the books were romantic, the ‘happily ever after’ ending

was rarely simply the acquisition of a husband. The heroine of the bonkbuster achieved fulfilment through work-life balance: professional success went hand in hand with self-development, romance and friendship.

In addition to graphic and wild sex, these books dripped with consumerism. Money, sex and power intertwined between the bonkbusters' gold glinting covers, introducing women to a new trifecta of happiness that was rapidly seized on - and exploited - by the media. Such books were dismissively referred to as 'soft porn' but the capitalism within their pages was at least as gratuitous as the sex. The bonkbuster was the precursor of *Sex and the City* - thematically, sexually and aspirationally.

It wasn't just hot writing that was encouraging women to accept and admit to their sexuality. In 1983, Madonna released her first album and soon, her confidence and sexual openness had lifted her to stardom - complete with complaints that *Like a Virgin* corrupted young minds and endorsed sex outside marriage: an accusation still levelled at many sexually open female musicians today (particularly if they are women of colour). Madonna's unashamed sexuality certainly provided a generation of women with a new icon - and fantasy figure. As one *Garden of Desires* survey respondent said, 'My earliest fantasies, aged six, were triggered by a Madonna video full of androgynous people writhing against one another.' And she was far from the only person to be sexually inspired by Madonna.

In 1984, Candida Royalle launched *Femme Productions* - a sex-positive porn production company, targeting narrative-led erotic films at women and making films designed to enhance couples' sex lives. This brought female fantasy further out of the closet - and deeper into some couples' lives.

Though initially resistant, women's magazines finally decided to nurture the seed of female solo sexuality, which in turn increased the amount of women who would admit to

having fantasies. The garden was growing faster with every passing day.

Changes in the Garden

IN 1991, NANCY Friday revisited female fantasy in her book *Women on Top*. While she had surmised the fantasies within the pages of *My Secret Garden* were strongly linked with guilt, she found that the new fantasies, collated between 1980 and 1990, were more driven by anger. Women were starting to demand pleasure rather than feel ashamed of themselves for seeking it. Guilt still remained to a degree, but it was fading. Friday said in her Introduction, 'I learned the power of permission that comes from other voices. Only women can liberate other women; and only women's voices grant permission to be sexual; to be free to be anything we want, when enough of us tell each other it is OK.' Many women who filled in the survey for *Garden of Desires* supported this idea - as one woman said, 'I loved Nancy Friday's books as a young girl. It made what I thought was shameful and weird acceptable.'

However, there were also increasing concerns that the garden was getting out of control. Mary Whitehouse and other censorship groups tried to tame the beast of sexuality. Sex-positive feminists crossed swords with anti-porn feminists, who conflated sexual expression and open female sexuality with violence and sexual exploitation. In 1986, Linda Lovelace released her book *Out of Bondage*, asserting that her appearance in *Deep Throat* was non-consensual as she had a gun held to her head, and viewers were watching her getting raped. Dark reality started to seep through the glossy fantasy. And it was about to get worse.

The Naughty Nineties?

BY THE 1990S, HIV/AIDS was casting its shadow over sexual freedom. The excess of the 1980s woman – confident, sexy and shoulder-padded – was replaced with the Zen earth-mother of the 1990s. Tantra started to attract media interest. Rather than fighting or fantasising, the modern woman was a victim, to be helped through her trauma with therapy – and possibly a healing crystal. Scaremongering stories about career women who'd 'left it too late' to get married or, worse, have children became an increasingly insidious media narrative. Strong and athletically sexy supermodels were replaced with vulnerable waifs; ballbusters were replaced by supermums 'having it all' – or downsizing to enjoy more quality time with the kids.

As the 1990s progressed, the bonkbuster was tamed, replaced by 'chick lit'. Designer orgies were thrown out in favour of 'comedy of errors' dinner parties, and characters obsessed about their cellulite rather than trying to create a business empire from scratch. Instead of tackling issues such as abortion, war, rape, class, racial discrimination, feminism and domestic violence, characters had to struggle against being a few dress sizes larger than their peers; having credit-card debt; or merely being single. Women were encouraged to nurture their insecurities and navel-gaze rather than confront larger issues facing 'the sisterhood' as a whole. Sexual guilt and paranoia replaced the confident sexual desire of the 1980s. *Basic Instinct* was arguably one of the most iconic sexual films of the 1990s – and perpetuated the myth of the dangerous overtly (bi)sexual woman, much as *Fatal Attraction* had in 1987.

However, it wasn't all bad news for female sexual expression. Madonna was still pushing boundaries. Her video for *Justify My Love* featured sub/dom, bondage and same-sex kissing; her 1992 book, *Sex*, featured her in a number of fantasy-inspired photographs; and her album *Erotica* explored numerous sexual themes, as did her (poorly regarded) film *Body of Evidence*. However, when she

handed her panties to popular TV host David Letterman and urged him to sniff them, it was a step too far: she faced harsh media criticism and subsequently started to de-sexualise her image and embrace a more spiritual persona, more in keeping with the 1990s (and expectations of women her age).

Salt'n'Pepa raised awareness of safer sex issues with their international hit, 'Let's Talk About Sex': a subversive rallying call, as sex had historically been used to oppress people of colour. Hypersexualisation had been used under slavery to justify the rape and impregnation of women of colour by (mostly) white slave owners, as was stereotyping of people of colour as bestial and 'other' in an attempt to legitimise their oppression; being a sexual woman of colour was dangerous. Black women had long been stereotyped as the 'hoochie', 'jezebel', or the 'gold digger' and as such, sex was a contentious subject for discussion. Kelly Brown Douglas spoke of the black community's unwillingness to enter into sexual discourse. 'For Blacks, to discuss sex publicly is like eating a watermelon in front of White people. All you do is confirm their images of you.'

However, with HIV/AIDS affecting all communities, it was a potentially life-saving message. Salt'n'Pepa's subsequent single, 'Shoop', was similarly sexually open, encouraging women to admit their desires and be sexually dominant. Over time, Christina Aguilera, Mary J Blige, Erykah Badu, Missy Elliot and Destiny's Child added to their rallying call, encouraging women to be honest and open about their emotional and physical desires.

Innovative publishers and publishing imprints such as Cleis (founded in 1980 in the US) and Black Lace (founded in the UK in 1993) kept female fantasies growing – albeit in dark corners – by creating erotic books specifically aimed at women. In its early days, female-oriented erotica was heavily biased towards the historical 'romance' – possibly inspired by early historical 'bonkbuster' *Forever Amber* – but

over time, pioneering editors such as Kerri Sharp at Black Lace introduced more contemporary themes, stronger female characters and a vivid array of fetish. Paranormal fantasy also started entering the scene: one of the most popular erotic sub-genres in recent years (giving a possible hint as to the secret of the success of 'Twilight'-inspired *Fifty Shades*). The erotica market kept diversifying to attract an ever-growing female audience – and a spattering of porn magazines aimed at women also started to appear on the market, including *For Women* and *Playgirl*. The couple-oriented *Lovers' Guide* became the first UK film to legally feature erections, ejaculation and penetrative sex, with the objective of education. It became the first non-fiction film to sell over a million copies, in part down to the outraged newspaper headlines declaring it filth – and a reported 75 per cent of the 1.3 million buyers were women.

While female sexuality was finally recognised, it was still something to be talked about in hushed whispers rather than openly discussed. Although porn mags for women were available, the buff, pumped men between their pages, smiling out underneath the caption, 'He's an able seaman', seemed far more appealing to the gay male than heterosexual female market; and, more to the point, they couldn't show an erection, under the visually representative 'Mull of Kintyre' guideline (the angle at which the Mull of Kintyre protrudes from Scotland – a limp 'semi-' at best). Couple-oriented porn was still decidedly niche. Most erotic writers still hid behind pseudonyms – much as Anne Desclos had done forty years before. And though Black Lace was one of the biggest players in the female erotica market, total book sales across two hundred and fifty titles of around three million books were nothing compared to E. L. James's record-breaking sales a decade later. Few erotic writers could expect to reach a large audience – or to pay the bills from the product of their imagination.

Though attitudes were more liberal than before, female sexual fantasy was still largely the preserve of the sex-positive feminist movement, early adopters and – of course, as had always been the case – women in the privacy of their own homes, keeping their ‘filthy’ ideas to themselves. Most women still needed permission from the mainstream to be truly and openly sexual.

In her prescient paper written in 1987, ‘Whatever Happened to the Sexual Revolution’, Maxine Holz says, ‘According to the pendulum theory of historical change, sexual attitudes periodically shift from one extreme to the other. Thus the 40s and 50s were characterized by uptight, moralistic attitudes toward sex. In the 60s and 70s a cycle of sexual permissiveness followed, while now in the mid-80s, the pendulum appears to be in full swing back to the repressive extreme. Presumably, by the late 90s we can expect yet another reversal.’ Sure enough, that reversal was just around the corner.

00-pening Up? Millennial Sex

FEMALE SEXUALITY BURST back into public consciousness in the 2000s, with *Sex and the City* (SATC) leading the way in 1998. Suddenly, we saw women on mainstream television talking about casual sex, vibrators and anal play. Samantha happily threw herself into her sexual adventures without guilt or remorse (though it was no huge surprise to feminist viewers when she was punished with cancer in the later series: no slut should go unpunished in media, after all). More significantly, Charlotte, the ‘good girl’, had a sexual side. When she developed a fixation with her Rampant Rabbit in ‘The Turtle and the Hare’, the toy became the first ever sex toy to sell a million in a year (and inspire the mockumentary *Rabbit Fever* in 2006, about women hooked

on their toys attempting to ‘kick the rabbit habit’). It was official. Good girls liked sex too.

With every new *SATC* came new items to buy. Newspapers and magazines devoted endless column inches to ‘getting Carrie’s look’. Her fashion sense attracted at least as much attention as her sex advice. Female sexuality was teamed with fabulous shoes. Sex, power and money were together again.

And that was far from the show’s only influence. In 2001, I founded female erotica site Cliterati.co.uk and after every episode of *Sex and the City*, we saw a huge boost in fantasies submitted to the site based around the episode’s theme, from using toys to watersports. The show gave permission to women to admit their desires – and Cliterati gave them a forum to share them, allowing me to see first-hand the power the media has over our sexuality: if you can see it on ‘normal’ TV, it must be OK.

However, female sexuality was still not entirely accepted. When I launched Cliterati, I thought female sexual desire was taken as a given. I thought that helping women share their sexual fantasies would be seen as sex-positive. I was wrong. We got hate mail from men threatening to rape us for being ‘filthy sluts’, and women saying we must be men hiding behind a facade because women wouldn’t write ‘that kind of thing’. However, we also got grateful letters from women thanking us for providing something they’d wanted for years: and in some cases, helping them climax for the first time ever. So I removed our email addresses from the site, masked our physical address in the domain records and continued.

After *Sex and the City*, the garden of desire ran rampant. I was approached by publisher Gavin Griffiths, who liked what he saw on Cliterati and wanted to create an offline equivalent: and so *Scarlet* magazine was born, featuring erotica, sex education, sex-toy reviews and features on

sexual penchants of all kinds. (Aptly, it ceased publication at issue 69.)

Female porn producers including Anna Span, Erica Lust, Petra Joy and Jennifer Lyons Bell followed in the footsteps of Candida Royalle, making porn for women – but rather than simply accepting the idea that women required romance and narrative, they each brought their own perspectives to ‘female friendly’ porn. There was a common core of treating performers with respect, but they and other female – mostly feminist – and queer pornographers also brought greater variety to a previously male-dominated industry. There was a greater diversity of body types, sex acts and scenarios. Some female pornographers subverted tired old tropes such as ‘pizza delivery man gets sex’ and ‘doctors and nurses’, presenting them from a female perspective, while others ripped up the porn rule-book altogether. Female fantasies were increasingly used to inform porn, rather than remaining in women’s heads.

Buy, Buy Baby

Burlesque hit the mainstream, moving from working men’s clubs to glamorous supper clubs. Initially, the burlesque scene featured a diverse range of performers of numerous body types. However, as time went on, fat and queer performers became more marginalised, replaced by the slender Dita von Teese and glamorous ‘beauties’; satire became increasingly replaced with striptease; and the initially subversive art form was replaced by a magazine-friendly sanitised version of burlesque, accessorised with designer corsets, crystal pasties and vintage make up. The neo-burlesque movement still offered an alternative to the consumer led ‘corporate’ scene but the mainstream view of burlesque was informed by glossy stereotypical depictions of the industry through films such as *Moulin Rouge* and

Burlesque. The seductive call that 'sex sells' was reaching deafening levels.

Ann Summers exploded, cashing in on the popularity of the rabbit and building the profile of sex toys on the high street: sex toy sales were no longer something to be conducted secretly – though many women still enjoyed the female camaraderie of the Ann Summers Party. The erotic boutique developed as more companies flocked to satisfy women's growing desire for sexual exploration, and with it came solid gold vibrators, discreet sex toys disguised as lipsticks and rubber ducks, and a growing acceptance that women masturbated.

Toy companies finally realised that if they wanted women to use their devices, actually designing and packaging them with women in mind would probably be a good idea. They developed a strange attachment to producing pink or mauve vibrators featuring 'cute' animal heads – with the objective of 'feminising' the products – and to a degree, it worked, as the products were non-sexual enough to be featured in mainstream women's magazines. The phrase, 'by women, for women' – as used by Shere Hite back in the 1970s – became ubiquitous with female-targeted sex toy companies, to such a degree that the phrase is now all but meaningless. Over time, innovative companies produced less patronising, more design-led sex toys for women. Brands including Lelo, Shiri Zinn and Fun Factory created tasteful, ergonomically designed toys that looked as beautiful as they felt. The sex toy market was no longer the preserve of seedy back-streets: sisters were doing it for themselves.

The media also reflected this new sexual freedom. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* brought a greater variety of accepted sexual relationship models into the mainstream, introducing lesbianism and BDSM relationships into popular TV narrative. Soap operas and drama shows started to feature gay and lesbian characters, and before long bicuriosity

became the latest label to wear. Though this did introduce new stereotypes such as the 'lipstick lesbian' it also gave implicit endorsement to those who had previously been afraid to be honest about their sexuality.

Films such as *Secretary*, *The Notorious Bettie Page* and *Shortbus* made new generations curious about the fetish scene, while Jean Paul Gaultier was just one designer to draw inspiration from fetish wear. This saw a rise in fetish clubs: a mainstreaming of the 'perverted' - though only at its most stylised and least sexual. BDSM still entered the courts on several occasions when the powers that be deemed people had transgressed from 'acceptable' sexuality and the porn-and-violence debate became ever more heated. Elsewhere, the sexual revolution was gaining traction too: trans women (and men) were finally protected on the basis of gender-reassignment sex-discrimination under the UK Sex Discrimination Act in 1999 - an important step towards acceptance (though sadly, discrimination is still rife).

The internet flourished with chat forums, adult dating websites, online fantasy games, and messaging programmes that made cybersex a new way to play. Women could not just share fantasies but create avatars to interact in 'alternative reality' environments; or hook up a web cam and put on a sex show for a lover or stranger. Fetishists found each other in forums and newsgroups and the gap between reality and fantasy started to close. People's dirtiest dreams were coming true on a daily basis: and at the very least, if you couldn't do it, you could almost certainly read about it or watch it online.

Sex for Sale

Sex parties were also entering the mainstream. Fetish and swinging parties became increasingly common, albeit

mainly in cities. Designer orgies attracted media coverage, giving 'beautiful people' (with equally beautiful wallets) the chance to live out their fantasies for one night only, at least. For the first time, women were as able to buy sexual pleasure as easily as men.

However, Belle de Jour still attracted outrage in 2005 when she wrote her memoir about being a sex worker. Her honest book showed her selling and enjoying sex - and money - attracting claims that she must be a man - and accusations that it was a fantasy. When she was finally 'outed', it turned out she had indeed been a female sex worker before writing the book - and used her earnings to fund her academic career. The so-called 'fantasy' was a reality. (Today, the UK's National Union of Students reports growing numbers of students are becoming sex workers - and the English Collective of Prostitutes agree that they have seen increased numbers of calls from students since tuition fees were brought in. As such, the fantasy of the middle-class, academic sex worker is most definitely a reality.)

The book was turned into a popular television programme in 2007 and, as her fame grew, Belle de Jour was accused of glamorising sex work, by representing her genuine experience in the industry. It seemed that the trifecta of sex, power and money could only be attained by women in fiction. However, there was an opportunity for sexually open women to cash in once Belle de Jour opened the door. For a while, sex confessionals became the 'next big thing', offering titillation along with true-life stories of being an escort, dominatrix, swinger or simply a sexually active single woman. This ran parallel with a grubby trend for papers to 'out' anonymous sex writers. Female sexual memoirists including *Girl with a One Track Mind*, Belle de Jour and *The Bride Laid Bare* all saw their books top the sales charts - and all were later stripped of anonymity against their will. The media might have been open to

women sharing their sexual thoughts but not without a generous side dish of slut-shaming.²

Suzanne Portnoy, author of *The Butcher, the Baker, the Candlestick Maker* (a frank memoir about a mother in her forties enjoying casual sex and swinging while running her own business) spoke of this slut-shaming in an interview with Kay Jaybee, about the online response to her book. “‘Is her name down in the dictionary next to the word ‘slut?’” was a typical posting. I skimmed through the three dozen other comments. “One thing this woman will probably never get from a man ... respect. I hope she regularly gets tested for AIDs.” I’ve never been much of a masochist but somehow felt compelled to check back 24 hours later. Nearly one hundred people had posted responses, all but one echoing the original sentiment, only in increasingly stronger language.’ Portnoy was philosophical about the comments. ‘It’s not just that imagining a middle-aged woman having sex is the discomfiting equivalent of thinking about your parents still “doing it”.’ It’s that a mother having sex is wrong, bad, evil, immoral, scandalous. That this belief is still prevalent, even today, shows the virgin/whore myth is still well and truly alive – and being used as an excuse to stifle women’s sexual freedom.

For a while, the book market was awash with stories from women prepared to share their sexual experiences, and in doing so show that women liked sex too. However this trend was short-lived and soon the sex-memoir market died down to be replaced by the ‘misery memoir’ – but not before it had inspired thousands of ‘normal’ women to create sex blogs of their own, and share their fantasies, realities or both.

Sex Sells

As women became more open about sex, manufacturers and advertisers rushed to exploit our fears and desires, and in doing so make a profit. By defining 'normal' sexuality, whole new markets were opened up: every new 'disorder' and 'dysfunction' was accompanied by a treatment, pill or product to buy to solve the 'problem'. And by defining 'sexy' in ever more stringent terms, the same was true for the beauty industry.

Referencing Ariel Levy, author of anti-'porn culture' book, *Female Chauvenist Pigs*, Ros Gill says, 'Raunch culture [referring to the media representation of sex] isn't about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It's about endlessly reiterating one particular - and particularly saleable - shorthand for sexiness.'³ One enlightening survey reported, '*Playboy* addresses men and *Cosmopolitan* addresses women, yet the visual rhetorics of both magazines reflect the male gaze and promote the idea that women should primarily concern themselves with attracting and sexually satisfying men.'⁴

The increasing media focus on celebrity only added to the problem. 'Sex trend' reports became increasingly common in women's media - thus influencing what women 'should' and 'shouldn't' fantasise about (or, indeed, do). In the vast majority of cases, these weren't based on genuine research but instead on whatever the female celebrity *du jour* was endorsing (or being judged for) whether with her words or her behaviour.

Spend to Be Sexy

As sex has increasingly featured in women's magazines, we have been pushed to pursue ever higher standards of sexual attractiveness - as dictated by the media - who in turn are all too willing to sell us products to help us conform to the media ideal of sexual attractiveness. Meg Barker says, 'In

the last decade or two we've witnessed the invention of cellulite, the seven signs of ageing, muffin tops, bingo wings and, more recently, increased attention on the genitals.' This 'genital beauty' market started with the Brazilian wax, in 1994, rapidly expanding into 'designer vaginas'. By 2009, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery reported American women were spending \$6.8 million on designer-vagina surgeries, and in 2008, the NHS carried out 1,118 labiaplasty surgeries - an increase of seventy per cent from 2007. Many blame porn for pressures on women to have 'conformist' bodies - and more recently genitals. However, like many other cosmetic treatments blamed on pornography, the Brazilian was actually popularised through the media. Celebrities including Gwyneth Paltrow and Paula Yates raved about the sexual benefits of a hair free pudenda and, as with the rabbit vibrator, after being featured in a storyline on *SATC*, it really shot to fame, attracting an explosion of coverage in women's magazines that still continues to the present day.

Although the Brazilian trend no doubt fed into porn as it became increasingly normalised (with the added 'bonus' that being hairless makes the genitals easier to see in their intimate detail on camera), it was women's magazines who benefited from advertising for waxing salons, plastic surgeons and 'vajazzles'; and as such, they had the most to benefit from in commercialising female genitalia by representing anything other than the pink, 'groomed', 'neat' vagina as ugly. (Indeed, one surgeon claimed his most popular surgery was 'the Barbie' which made a woman's genitalia resemble that of the infamous doll.)

Over time, yet more intimate procedures have sprung up, from labial dyes and anal bleaching to the G-spot injection - which was condemned by numerous doctors and led to one doctor being struck off, after 'effectively amputating' parts of women's anatomy with lasers during the surgery.

For a woman to be sexy, she is expected to spend more time and money than ever before: fake tan, fake teeth, fake tits – women are being urged to buy their way to sexiness, ‘because you’re worth it’. And the glut of products and services designed to alter our sexuality in some way only looks set to continue. Much as Viagra changed male sexuality by offering the option of ‘an unpopable balloon’, now ‘female Viagra’ is just a few years away. In June 2013, the UK’s *Daily Telegraph* reported, ‘A Dutch company called Emotional Brain claims that early clinical trials of a new drug, Lybrido, shows promise in the treatment of hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), defined as a lack of sexual fantasies or desire for sexual activity.’ That female sexual fantasies were not thought to exist forty years ago, and now a lack of female sexual fantasies is used to diagnose women as having a sexual disorder just goes to show how much judgement and control is still imposed over our sexuality today. In 1973 people were shocked at the idea that women fantasised at all. Now women with a low libido who don’t fantasise are being told that they need a medical cure for their ‘condition’. Attitudes to female sexuality may have moved on – but possibly not as much as we might think.

Fifty Shades Freed?

FIFTY SHADES IS the latest series to bring female sexual fantasy to the fore. E. L. James freely admits to sharing her own fantasies through the book – without any idea of the impact it would have. In doing so, she commoditised her fantasies in perhaps the most lucrative way any woman has to date: the film rights sold for five million dollars, on top of weekly book sales amounting to £800,000 per week at the book’s peak – before you take into account any merchandising deals – and she was listed by *Time* magazine as one of the hundred most influential people of 2012. E. L. James’s

fantasies have resulted in the reality of a bulging bank balance and a lot more power – for her at least.

But it's not just her own reality that James has changed. Since the book burst onto the scene, sales of jiggle balls and spank paddles – as featured in the book – have shot up. Kinky-sex classes have seen a boost (as has interest in erotic writing) and the sex industry has been rubbing its hands together in glee at the increase in profits. However, this was not her intent: E. L. James was simply putting her *Twilight*-inspired ideas down in words. 'Everything about *Fifty Shades* is fantasy: fantasy man, fantasy sex. It made me feel slightly less of a pervert when other people enjoyed the fantasy as well.'⁵

'Less of a pervert': even today, the stigma of fantasy sex still lingers, echoing that faced by Friday forty years ago. James has been quoted as saying, 'All female fantasy is derided. It's an insight into how misogynist the world is.' BDSM may have replaced mortgages as acceptable dinner party conversation and the phrase 'mummy porn' might have entered the vernacular, but that doesn't mean female solo sexuality is completely accepted. Indeed, the dismissive phrase 'mummy porn' surely reinforces the fact that people are still shocked at the idea that women – particularly mothers – fantasise. We still have a long way to go before a woman sharing her erotic ideas won't automatically be greeted with slut-shaming, concern for her mental health or cries that she's a man.

Women are as guilty of this slut-shaming as men. On her site, Plasticdollheads.wordpress.com, Gemma Ahearne says, 'Female tweeters admit that they join in slut-shaming/slut-bashing because they are just glad it isn't them being victimised, and because by slut-shaming someone else, you are distancing yourself from the action.' However, our relationships also have a lot to answer for. As one survey respondent, a 39-year-old currently building her coaching