

## Sex: often medical, always personal

By Nardi Reeder Champion

The recent film *Kinsey* took me back to the era when I got married—the inhibited 1940s. Dr. Alfred Kinsey, a Harvard-trained entomologist at Indiana University, shook up my generation. The first person to research sex scientifically, he wanted to find out “What do people actually do, sexually?” So did I, although not for the sake of science.

Liam Neeson (one reviewer called him “a sequoia of sex”) is magnificent as Alfred Kinsey—a driven, difficult, brilliant, and, in the end, unbalanced genius. Leaving the movie, I said to the young friend who had brought me, “That was strong stuff.”

“Really? How so?”

I almost tumbled into the generation gap between us. “I’m not used to discussions of orgasms and penis size,” I replied.

My friend laughed. “Did it bother you?”

I had to stop and think. “No-o-o. Sex should not be hidden, as it was in my day. We didn’t know the correct word for anything.”

I grew up in the Age of Innocence. Sex was a mystery to be solved by marriage. My mother, born in 1879, was scolded for saying a neighbor was “expecting.” To cop Johnny Carson’s quip, not even a pause could be described as pregnant. Fear of pregnancy gripped most mothers and daughters. If a girl “got herself pregnant,” as the saying went, she vanished.

**No clue:** My mother applauded Margaret Sanger but gave me no clue what Sanger recommended. My friend Betsy asked her mother flat out. “Birth control,” her mother said, “is deciding how many children you want—and then having that many.”

In 1934, as a Wellesley freshman, I was required to take hygiene—as sex education was then called. It was taught by Dr. DeKruif, the (divorced!) campus physician. After she discussed the reproduction of the amoeba, the paramecium, and the white rat, we were ready for her famous 40-minute lecture on sex, known as the organ recital.

It was a damp firecracker. Dr. DeKruif raced through, light on detail, heavy on warning: “Never wear red satin; it arouses men.” We rushed to Filene’s to look for red satin dresses. Her final sentence: “Young ladies, remember—dancing leads to babies.” In my case she was right. I tangoed with my husband, Tom, and we had five children.

In 1989, I sent an article titled “Fifty Years of Sex” to the *New York Times Magazine*. An editor called. “We’ll take it, but I have to cut the five-year-old who spilled coffee in her grandmother’s lap and said,



SUZANNE DEJOHN

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“Gwanny, did you burn your wagina?” “Why?” I asked. “My boss says the word vagina has never appeared in the *New York Times* and it never will.” I couldn’t believe that I, the slow learner regarding sex, was more liberated than the *NYT*.

Tom and I were in our thirties and had three children before Kinsey’s bestseller, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, smashed taboos, gave us the vocabulary to discuss sex, and damned U.S. sex education as “morality disguised

as fact.” Our kids studied sex in seventh-grade science. The teacher said if their chosen animal didn’t reproduce, they would not get promoted to eighth grade. To demonstrate, she placed a male gerbil in the female’s cage. I don’t think the teacher anticipated the results. After mating—while the children watched, open-mouthed—the female ate the male. Tom’s comment: “Lotsa luck to the psychiatrists who try to straighten those kids out.”

**New crisis:** The winds of change attained cyclonic force with the discovery of the Pill. Fear of pregnancy vanished. Soon Tom and I and other parents faced a new crisis. Should we put a visiting son or daughter in the same bedroom with a significant other? We balked at first, then rolled with the punches.

Now, at 88, I’m daunted by today’s wildly evolving mores. The threat of AIDS has colleges handing out Safe Sex Kits and the *Times* quoting a female student saying, “A year ago I wouldn’t be caught dead with a condom, but now it’s like a credit card—you can’t leave home without it.” When I was in college I’d never seen a condom, and I thought oral sex meant talking a good game.

Our friend, Dr. C. Everett Koop, led a sex-talk crusade when, as U.S. surgeon general, he issued 107 million pamphlets on AIDS. I applauded Chick Koop’s venture, but one sentence in his pamphlet shook me: “Dating does not mean the same thing as having sex.” No one had to tell us that.

**Selecting sex:** I’ve come a long way and so has the *New York Times*. The *Times* recently ran an article on “vaginal reconstruction,” whatever that is. My generation zoomed with the speed of light from the chaperone to the Pill, from premarital chastity to hookups, from selecting a mate to selecting what sex we want to be.

How does an old lady sort it all out? I cheer for the sexual revolution that needed to happen. Surely it was a mistake for the wellspring of life to be unmentionable, or mentioned only in “dirty” jokes. It must be a sign of health that anything can be and is discussed.

Although people age, I’ve been happy to discover that emotions do not. After 59 years of marriage, my husband still delighted me sexually, albeit with a difference. I’ve been a widow for five years now—but the memory lingers on. Kinsey transformed sex into an open book, but love still remains a mystery. Fortunately. ■

The “Point of View” essay provides a personal perspective on some issue in medicine or science. Nardi Reeder Champion—the mother of three Dartmouth graduates and grandmother of three more—is a former member of this magazine’s Editorial Board and the author of many books, including *Bringing Up the Brass* (which was made into the movie *The Long Gray Line*). Her latest book—a memoir, *Everyday Matters: A Love Story*—was published in 2004. She is working on a book on aging that’s due out in 2006.