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The Joy of Sex - Revisited

During the past few months when almost every talk show on television has been engrossed in discussions with ex-Laker basketball player, Magic Johnson and Wilt Chamberlain; when Congress was probing the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill shenanigans, and we were further subjected to a major, major media event with the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson, the publishing world was treated to a book called THE NEW JOY OF SEX: A GOURMET GUIDE TO LOVEMAKING FOR THE NINETIES, by Dr. Alex Comfort (M. D.).

Not by a rush of titillation but of nostalgia, I hastened out to Arbor Books to buy the new edition. My nostalgia was not for sex itself (or, at least, not entirely) but for the old "Joy," which first appeared about twenty years ago and sold more than eight million copies, one of them to me. Oh, I loved the old "Joy," and was simply amazed and puzzled that anyone would feel the need for a new one, since the old "Joy," covered the subject with an encyclopedic thoroughness. And so, wondering what new tactics and strategies might have emerged since the

old "Joy," was published, I headed for the bookstore. Like a teenager making his first Trojan purchase, I cased the joint before summoning up the courage to ask the matronly lady if she had THE NEW JOY OF SEX. After a gasp, she muttered something about the police and then suggested that I should go to the SHEPHERD SHOP. My air of sophistication gone, I struck upon the brilliant idea of CALLING for the NEW JOY OF SEX. Letting my fingers do the walking, I rung up Carr's Bookstore, only to be connected to the local vice squad and South Central Bell's security department. Since shopping at home was definitely out, and this paper is pressing, I headed south to the Davis-Kidd Booksellers in Green Hills. All sold out.

As a man who has drunk deeply of life and lived on the razor's edge, I persisted through Music City and finally located the prized edition at Bookworld at the Cool Springs Mall on I-65 South. I decided to read the new volume right through. What had changed, of course, was not so much the nature of sex as the nature of joy, which has diminished and altered over the years. "When this book was first written, in 1973, sex was an extremely safe occupation, and any hazards attending it were social and emotional," Dr. Comfort writes in his new book. "The major

venereal diseases, especially syphilis, which had caused death and disability for the previous 400 years, were curable: those which had replaced them, nonspecific urethritis and herpes, though troublesome, were not life-threatening. This picture was changed in the late 1970s by the introduction to Western societies of the disease AIDS....The arrival of this disease totally alters the sexual landscape." After the safe-sex instruction, complete with pencil drawings of condom application, is out of the way, it is more or less back to business as usual for Dr. Comfort. "There is no occasion for panic, or for losing out on the joy of sex," he announces. Yet the new "Joy," is as different as night from day from the old edition and it was these small, decisive differences that held me spellbound to the book.

In the old "Joy," the great outside event of its cosmology was not AIDS but the Pill, which had opened a vista of sexual freedom that seemed to stretch ahead to eternity. But with that hedonism was coupled (so to speak) an odd sense of purposefulness. The original edition was called a Cordon Bleu guide to lovemaking-a reference, no doubt, to the french cooking school for young British matrons who want to learn how to make beef Wellington, and was divided jestingly into "main courses"

and "sauces & pickles." Its governing metaphor, therefore, was not that of the gourmet--of eating or consuming--but that of the chef, cooking and seasoning: *creating*. It inventoried where things fitted and how they could be made to fit differently, but the real pleasure of reading it came from the earnestness of its tone, which suggested a cross between discussion hour at Miss Porter's School and a night at a Paris brothel. Odd sexual practices were usually referred to by their French names such as the lazy position, but with a kind of homey awkwardness (Some women do indeed pass right out, the 'little death' of French poetry that always reminded me of the strange, affected way English waitresses have of pronouncing "pate" and "consomme.") The old "Joy" was realistic: "Taking an ordinary bath together has a charm of its own, though someone has to lean against the plumbing. It defined pornography as "the name given to any sexual literature somebody is trying to suppress," and above all, English. The culture it was struggling to liberate was referred to unself-consciously as Anglo-Saxon, the old "Joy" remarked. "Laughs never fail, because sex is funny," adding that if you haven't laughed "you end with boxed ears or tears or no orgasm all round." Pure Mary Poppins, that stern "no orgasm all round"; and those "boxed ears" stayed with me long

after other body parts were forgotten.

The old "Joy" was dominated by the old "Joy" couple, as they were presented in more than a hundred black-and-white pencil sketch illustrations. The publishers praised the artists on the copyright page for their "humor, honesty and directness." It is true they had these things but their realism was not one of anatomical precision; any Japanese erotic print is far more painstakingly detailed. It was, instead, a pious realism. The woman was heavy-hipped and rather sharp-nosed, and had one of those outlandish early-seventies Jane Fonda haircuts, you know the kind with straggly ends and a disconsolate little flip. The man was sagging around the middle, soft and unathletic, and shorter than she. He was hairy: his locks were much longer than hers, and he had a full, shaggy wild-man beard --one of those beards that you saw on post Viet Nam men who years before had been close-shaven and clean cut. The couple's bodies were as white and slack and unmusclcd as those of February snowmen. They were drawn in simple lines, enlivened inside the contours only by little patches of hair and the occasional suggestion of a navel. But the lovers' desire to transcend their sagging fleshiness through their relentless appetite made them seem spiritual--a new Adam and a

new Eve.

In the new "Joy," the man and woman are rendered in delicately shaded colored pencil. Apparently, new printing technologies have had a big impact on this new edition like new contraceptive technologies had on the old "Joy."

The new "Joy" lovers are younger than the old ones, and they have been working out. He has ripples and ripples of muscle, and his sternum and abdomen are bisected by a single longitudinal line, like that of a Calvin Klein model. When he is seen from the rear, the muscles on his back stand out like a chain of hills on a relief map. She is pretty--not conventionally beautiful, and still a little short-legged and wide-hipped, but with delicate, refined features, and a very small wardrobe of lace lingerie, and a look of gentle, distanced bemusement at the acrobatics they undertook. The man has now shaved for the Gourmet Guide to Lovemaking for the Nineties which may really be the new "Joy" for the woman today. He has blond, curly hair, which obviously has been blow-dried and filled with mousse.

The old male lover's penis, rendered in full-page illustration, emerged as a blunt stub from a swamp of tufts at the southern edge of

his paunch; the new man's member fits like a dashboard accessory on his Greek body, and it is rendered, in six colors, as a long, vertical shimmering blur.

The old couple's pudgy bodies were alight with purpose. When they took an erotic bath, they were shown wading, hand in hand, out into a pond--Out There, somewhere in a redemptive nature. The new couple are just entertaining themselves: they bathe in a molded bathtub with shining chrome plumbing and fashionable bath accessories. The old couple, when they bound each other to the bed, did so on a tiny, unmade, and obviously far too short institutional bed; the new couple bind each other to a brass bed half the size of Tiger gym, made up with pastel sheets and sprinkled with countless down pillows. The old couple had no home or furnishings; their love and the blank page were all they knew. The new couple have a bedroom decorated with nicely framed lithographs and healthy plants in terra-cotta Italian planters; their nightstand holds a bottle of Perrier and a silver candlestick. They are tender with each other and spend a great deal of time dreamily admiring each other's body. The old couple were far too busy for such mutual admiration: they slammed their hairy and sweating bodies together, fell

down exhausted, and then rose again, ready for another engagement.

There is a good deal of talk about the sensibilities of the woman in the new "Joy." There is a picture of her, naked but obviously a capable, career-minded person, standing proudly in front of her framed lithos, next to the legend "Nobody can be a good lover if he doesn't regard women as (a) people and (b) equals," and there is a good deal of talk about reciprocity, and so on.

The new "Joy" also includes a roster of ethnic variations. Sex, which twenty years ago was the grand cultural universal, the common language of mankind, has suddenly gone multicultural, like the curriculum. The new "Joy" adds to the detailed descriptions of Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and Turkish techniques with a new Serbian sexual style called the Lion position. Dr. Comfort has described Balkan sex as "passionate and affectionate as befits a race of bride-stealing warriors whose women were and still are, natural partisans: tough plus tender." That there are no other Estonian or other Baltic styles I put down only to the press of deadlines.

In *The New Joy of Sex*, Alex Comfort has completely revised his text and restructured his organization to address today's concerns about

sex and health and also to bring out even more clearly the fundamental point of the book--that there is really no good sex without love. The illustrations in the new "Joy" have been completely redone. A dozen erotic duo-tone photographs convey the sensual beauty of the human body in the buildup to lovemaking. Eighty five superb full-color drawings show sexual techniques and positions in explicit detail. For two decades The Joy of Sex has been regarded as a matchless and totally original guide to lovemaking. Now a brand-new edition heralds an old message that is in danger of being drowned out by cries of sexual doom: Sex is still the most rewarding form of adult play. And the very best sex is made with love. " Sexual behavior probably changes remarkably little over the years--sexual revolutions and moral backlashes chiefly affect the degree of frankness or reticence about what people do in private," Dr. Comfort writes in the new "Joy." But after reflecting on his two editions I are inclined to think that sex, like all other things, bears the imprint of its period. As sex is catalogued for us now, it seems limited in its ambition, narrow in its compass, beset by petty nationalism, and occasionally lethal--not at all unlike the new world in which it will have to find its joy.

REBUTTAL

MEMO FROM JANICE/FEDERAL EXPRESS/URGENT

Gentlemen of the "Club"

I am mindful that during the 89 years of the existence of the Athenaeum Society a woman has never been permitted to tender a rebuttal at a closed session. Due to the delicate nature of the subject matter, I ask that you suspend the rules. My comments may serve as my first husband's obituary because I promised to kill him if he gave this paper. You will not need a Committee from the Society to send me expressions of sympathy. Really, he didn't give it but copied it from the Book Review Section of the *New York Times* and the jacket cover from **that book** that he snuck in secretly and looked at the pictures for months! He thought it was so funny but I can tell you its *Much To-Do About Nothing--And I Mean Nothing!*

You noticed that my first husband has moved from THE BAR and Bars to Bedrooms. At least you have been spared THE MIND OF MINOLTA and the Video tapes.....**AND...**

With the passing of my late husband, I may now know **finally** the
NEW JOY....

Respectfully submitted,
MUST BE OBEYED"

"SHE WHO