

SECTION FIVE: COLUMNS ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

HOT MONOGAMY: A contradiction in terms?

Having now been married for a few years I look at life this way. When you're single, you are unhappy because you are always hot and thirsty with no water in sight. It's a perpetual desert with trekkers stumbling on the occasional oasis which eventually dries up. You dream of marriage and a time where hot and cold, free-flowing love is always going to be on tap. You will drink yourself into oblivion. You will drown in the abundant over-flow.

Then you get married and it's true. There is plenty of water around. Gushing, shooting springs, clear pools of glimmering moisture, available, just waiting to be lapped up. The problem is that no one is thirsty. Well, you might get thirsty every now and again but after bills and baby's bottoms and the traumas of domestic life, who has the energy to drink?

And so this chapter came about. The pitfalls of permanence. Life behind the picket fence.

I was not at all surprised by the recent results of a survey by Deakin University in Melbourne which proves that most people in marriages and long-term relationships have far less sex than media hype would have us believe.

Almost two-thirds of the couples who took part in the University survey - an intense year-long study of marriage or live-in situations in Australia - had sex from once a week to once a month. A percentage even answered "never".

Meanwhile another study reported in the American publication *Journal of Marriage and the Family* showed that not only weren't couples doing it that frequently, but they weren't doing it for that long either. Apparently the average couple has sex for only 15 minutes at a pop!

According to Professor Marita McCabe, the woman who instigated the Deakin University survey: "Although 90 per cent of couples said that sex was important or very important for them, we have found that the frequency of sex for married couples in longer relationships, particularly for those over 45 years of age, was around once a month.

"Those younger than 30 and in early relationships were the "several times a weeker's" but that dropped back significantly as the length of relationship and age of couple, increased."

She tells me that researchers also uncovered that people lie "significantly", usually to themselves, about frequency of sex. This is particularly true of men, who want to see themselves as potent. When interviewed, the wives told a very different story.

The survey forced people to take into account their 'dry' patches and make an aggregate assessment, thereby admitting to the true state of their sex lives.

With all the information available to us about the effects of children, aging and stress on libido and sexual prowess, it's sad to see that so many people still need to see themselves as veritable sex-machines.

A lot of this chapter has been inspired by the rather dramatic changes to my own sex life that I have witnessed since marrying, inheriting two teenage step-children and having a baby. I remain preoccupied with the eternal question: Can Eros and domesticity survive together in the same house?

If they can live together then they are certainly not easy bed-fellows, as I have discovered in trying to keep my own marriage hot and sweaty.

But I flatly refuse to let my vagina die a natural death, although I can see how vaginas could quite easily suffocate and a penises drop off, behind the closed doors of suburbia- without anyone even noticing. I guess when you think about it, it seems that I am one of those sad cases who wants to continue to be a sex-machine, despite the chronic lack of sleep from a teething toddler, work pressures and the general thrust and grind of life.

“Is it an impossible dream to imagine one can stay “hot and horny” whilst “married with kids”? I ask, as I drag my long-suffering husband along to all sorts of strange and often hilarious courses and clubs, workshops and weekend retreats, sex-shops and strip-joints in a bid to learn the ultimate secret: The Secret of Sex After Marriage.

I wish you all many hours of hot monogamy. Well, it may prove a contradiction in terms, but it sure beats the alternative.

BABY LOVE

My relationship with my husband has altered profoundly since our baby daughter began to grow up and talk and assume a personality of her own.

Our conversations revolve around her - the color of her hair in the sun, what she ate, how she ate, why she cried, how she smiled when we gave her crayons and paper. It is an obsession, our obsession - a shared, crazy, obsessive love that seems to bond us together like thick pasty glue, and yet it is tearing us apart.

We don't notice each other any more. I am trying to hear him but I hear only her, crying, demanding attention, or gurgling her happy sounds, the half -human language that keep me mesmerised. I am transfixed by the sentences, the meaning of her own treasured words. To me they are the most intoxicating sounds in the world. I can listen for hours to her sing-song voice without getting bored. I am in a trance. He can't compete. Nothing he says to me means as much.

And I can't compete. Nothing I do or wear, or create, holds his gaze like she does. It is only her he sees - her in an enraptured state, splashing in the bath, her in the back-garden, her with food being spat out all over the table and then rubbed into her hair. He is laughing, scolding, cooing, cajoling. He is looking at her the way he used to look at me, as if his eyes can't drink in enough, and I am competing with him to drink in even more of her and snap these memories into my mind like precious photographs of the best years of our lives.

He sees nothing but her, I see nothing but her. We are desperately, passionately in love with her, and there is nowhere to go with this consuming love.

The experts say that children sap libido. I know it to be true. There is no room, no space, no time between work and her, and her and work and finally sleep which we grab gratefully at the end of every exhausting, fulfilling, happy day.

"Let's go for dinner", I finally suggest one night after an emotionally draining day of new toys and dance steps and "Old Macdonald had a farm" played over and over and over again until we are both pulling our hair out. "I need to get away", I say thinking of how much time has elapsed since we had time for intimacy, since we just

held each other and loved each other and made love to each other and whispered secret thoughts.

At the restaurant we stare at each other through foggy, vacant eyes. We talk a little about him and a little about me and then the menu comes and it reminds us both of her and how naughty she's become at dinner time and how she says "No" to everything even if she desperately wants it - the beginnings of the terrible twos, and we are laughing and sharing our love of her and before we know it the bill has arrived and we've spoken of nothing else.

I sit at my computer wanting to write a story about how children affect people's sex lives and why. And instead of quoting the experts I am confessing to a love affair that is so overwhelming that we are losing each other my husband and I. We are both stuck in a place that is so heavy with loving and caring that we're forgetting how to be together. I wonder how many other couples out there have lost each other in the murky waters of parenthood?

The experts say that couples with children have 2 to 3 times less frequent sex that couples without. The experts also say that two children are more debilitating to libido than one, and three more than two. They talk of the physical and emotional exhaustion of raising kids. They talk also of the impact new roles have on sexuality.

This is true. I see myself as a mother now, I see him as a daddy, and it is hard to see each other differently. But I insist we try.

So finally we send her to mother-in-laws for the evening. She is gone and we start to talk about her. I put a stop to it. I put her toys out of sight and pour the wine, and it slowly begins to return, the eroticism, the conversation, the closeness, the sexuality. It comes slowly then fast and furious. Because I have missed this man, my husband, my lover who became a father, and he has missed me.

And we hold each other and vow to not lose each other again in the milky love of parenting. But I know that it is not easy to be like this and it is hard to let her go even for a moment. And I know that after a child is born, we like so many other parents, will have to remember to remember each other for the rest of our lives.

SEX MACHINE

For those of us whose sex lives are more erratic than erotic, the survey by Deakin University claiming that most couples in permanent arrangements had sex from between once a week to once a month, is welcome news.

It finally explodes a nasty myth that we have all had to live with since women's magazines, television and Hollywood movies have started bombarding our lives with the quest for the perfect orgasm, the better orgasm, orgasm of the G-spot, multiple orgasm of the nasal passage.

Many of us have laboured miserably under the terrible misconception that every other couple, including the neighbours, the milkman and his wife, and anyone in a hundred-mile radius, is having unbridled erotic experiences in every room of the house while we alone are influenced by the chronic ups and down of life.

Pulp fiction, churned out each week in the guise of "serious journalism", has lead us to believe that we alone are depleted by exhaustion, anxiety, work, children. We alone are worn down by the endless demands put upon us each day from old or dying parents, sick children, the unsympathetic boss - the general "coitus interruptus" of life.

The sense of inadequacy, unreal expectation or jealousy has been enough to make many people run off from perfectly good, normal marriages, in quest of this eternal bonking that we never seem to be getting. It has sent us into impotency clinics, to shrinks, to younger lovers, to hell and back with the question burning in our brains - why can't we manage it three times a month let alone three times a night?

And the sad conclusion that many people reach, if divorce statistics in this country are any thing to go by, is: "My marriage is bad. After all it must be my partner's fault I'd rather watch B-grade movie-stars battle Blobs, Things and furry monsters with button, than dangle naked from the ceiling covered in whipped cream."

But the chances are, there is nothing wrong with you or your marriage. The statistics reveal that after a long, hard day, the majority of people out there in the suburbs of Australia would rather turn on the TV than themselves.

But though the average Aussie couple may not have the stamina nor time to go at it all that frequently, when they do bonk, it seems to be a happy, satisfying experience.

My own research has borne this out. When I first got hold of the survey I ran around to all my married friends showing them the statistics. The survey was met with jubilation and excitement. "So we're normal?" sighed one girlfriend in what seemed to sum up the general response.

Talking to my friends over the years, I discovered that our sex lives waxed and waned with the weather and the degree of problems and time constraints in our lives. Our husband's libidos varied according to daily pressures and very often what was on television that night. And it was fine with us.

After our first babies were born, we concurred that it would be preferable to be boiled in oil while eating a tarantula spider than have sex. We all fantasised about bed, but it was the doona we yearned for, to have it's thick fluffy stuffings wrapped around our naked bodies while we drifted off to meet the sand man. My husband had to compete with bed-linen for my affections.

But we were happy. We had all had normal, healthy, sexual appetites before babies. And sex returned in time, as it always does after the various trauma's and problems of life pass over.

One friend Helen Rons, married five years with a toddler, admitted that she and her husband hadn't had sex for months when I showed her the survey. But she wasn't at all upset by it.

"Oh, its quite normal for us to have either feast or famine. We can go at it quite consistently then just lose interest. Once we've lost interest, time just goes by with one thing and another. I sit up watching TV till late or he watches the tennis.

"But then we may go away for a weekend and we fall in love again," she grinned.

The spate of recent surveys confirm a belief I have always held. That if you give most people the choice between okay sex very regularly or special sex less frequently, that most people instinctively go for the latter. After all, we all know what chocolate tastes like when we've been dieting, or how wonderful that cigarette or beer tastes when one is trying to cut down. It is quite logical to allow a few days or weeks to elapse in order to rebuild one's sexual appetites.

When you think about it, all the sex we had when we were single wasn't necessarily "great" because those lovers were better than our current partners. Rather, we had to wait so long between courses that we pigged out in wanton, blissful, ecstatic gluttony when the food finally came, raving about how good it tasted. And we never took it for granted.

In fact, a whopping 70 per cent of those surveyed by Deakin University, were perfectly contented with their infrequent sex lives. As long as sex - when they had it - was exciting and pleasurable, the majority showed a strong preference for quality sex over quantity.

So despite the "big-is-better", "more-is-best" mentality we have inherited from American culture, Aussies are still down-to-earth enough to vote with their bodies for satisfaction over performance to make sex the special act it should be.

But if the research filtering in from all over the world suggests the norm is quality not quantity sex, then why are most people still riddled with self recrimination and self doubt?

Why do so many men feel totally dejected because they can't get it up every night and keep it up for long periods of time? Why do so many women walk around feeling: "I'm lousy. I've lost it". Or "Our marriage has lost it". The mere knowledge of which has sent us on-mass looking for what it is we've lost?

It's because media hype never allows us to feel happy with ourselves. Whole industries have sprung up to help us get back what we THINK we've lost - selling sex aids, beauty creams, clothes and cosmetics, holidays, therapists for mid-life crises. And it's in the media's interests, feeding off the advertising dollar, to keep pummelling the myth.

But the truth is that whatever it is we fear we've lost, we never had it in the first place. It is another well-kept open secret that Eros and domestic life do not mix. And maybe they were never meant to.

It is impossible to discuss nappies and garbage bags with someone and then fall passionately into bed the way you did when you were courting. That's why for many centuries in Europe, before the industrial revolution, it was quite appropriate to take a lover.

There was the person you had torrid, unrequited love with, and there was your spouse for security and child-rearing.

Now we expect both in the one partner. We demand the challenge of the new, the erotica of romantic love, coupled with the day-to-day grind of making ends meet and rearing kids. But let's be realistic. Discussing the endless stream of bills, and family biological problems is not a turn on. And glaring at someone's dermatitis cream and haemorrhoid lotion on the bathroom shelf every day certainly takes the edge off passion.

Bills, boredom and bum creams do not, an erotic fantasy, maketh. It isn't that you can't have both. The statistics clearly show that you can. But it's difficult in the pressure-filled 90s to find the time or energy to slip out of our domestic roles and into something more comfortable. Hence the frequency of sexual activity declines as the effort needed to create romance increases.

Doctor Debbie Then, a psychologist from the West Coast of America, summed it up whilst recently in Australia. "You just have to look at personal hygiene to see what

is wrong with people's sexual relationships. When we are dating someone we take the time to get dressed, wash our hair, put on makeup and beautiful clothes.

"After several years of marriage, many women let themselves go. They don't bother to dress up for their partners any more. Men and women will often come home from work with bad breath, and smelly armpits. They're tired. They don't talk to each other."

But she believes familiarity does not have to breed contempt. She says the couples who take the time to create an erotic side to their marriage and who make the effort to flirt with each other, are the ones who have a satisfying sex life - no matter how frequently or infrequently they end up doing the deed.

HOT MONOGAMY

The course literature said that doing the workshop would help us "unlock the child within". We would be able to find our "playful inner core" and reinvigorate our marriage. We would learn how to reconnect with our "erotic fire".

It was the final one that got me. Something very sad happens to one's "erotic inner fire" after marriage and children. The "outer garbage can" of life filled with bills and last night's chops, and nappies, somehow lands on top of it.

Although my husband loved the idea of "unlocking the erotic fires that burn within", he didn't much fancy the prospect of unlocking the "inner child". He had heard about a prominent lawyer we know who was forced, during a recent workshop, to sit in a sandpit and talk to a gigantic teddy bear. The thought made him shudder.

But in the interests of my writing, he finally agreed to come with me. So we packed our sarongs, two pillows, and two towels and off we went. The courses is part of a new world-wide movement called Hot Monogamy, aimed at saving the sacred institution of marriage.

With one in every two marriages breaking up, anyone who is anyone in the international relationships arena is searching for a solution to this growing problem. The latest wisdom is the concept of Hot Monogamy which focuses on keeping sex alive within long term relationships.

There is a plethora of "how-to" books hitting the streets as part of the movement. Videos like the Australian-made Sacred Sex and its sequels are doing a roaring trade around the world. Therapists are taking couples away on weekend retreats - all with the aim of ensuring couples continue to keep their relationships hot and spicy - and away from predators.

In Australia, several hotels are now cashing in on the trend to "erotic time out" and are packaging dirty or romantic weekends away for married couples. I am told that some offer child-care on site.

There are some very good courses available around the country through associations like The Pleasure Spot in Sydney and Human Awareness Australia based in Canberra. But the minute we arrived at this particular course, I knew it was a mistake.

The smell of incense was so strong we were almost bowled over. My husband suffers from hay-fever and his inner child immediately started sneezing, much to the horror of our host who was trying to create a New Age ambience with whale music and shimmering candles.

We all stood around in a big circle rocking from side to side chanting some positive "love mantra" whilst my poor darling sneezed and wheezed. The host finally banished him to a corner of the dimly lit room where he stood all hunched over and dejected, sniffing loudly to himself.

As the room slowly filled with billows of smoke, others started to complain of suffocation. So the host eventually stormed off in a huff to put out his treasured incense.

After the "group-bonding ritual" we were sent off with our partners to learn how to reconnect "intimately". We were given a tray of different enticements and told to experiment. There was fruit, silk scarves, ice-cubes and a host of oils in bottles with different scents.

As instructed, I blind-folded my darling who had thankfully stopped sneezing. I then attempted to set his erotic energies on fire. I ran silk over his face and chest. He seemed to respond well. I fed strawberries into his little mouth. He giggled and laughed.

"Ask your partner how he or she likes to be touched", the host urged. I was amused by this. After so long, wouldn't one know how one's partner liked to be touched? But my husband whispered something into my ear which really surprised me. "Why have you never told me?" I said. "Because you never asked," he said.

He loved the feel of ice over his face and lips. We were suddenly in one of those erotic art films where people do strange, visceral things with egg yolks and bananas. As the music moaned its way to a crescendo I wanted to jump up and do erotic belly dancing and wild things with scarves. I felt my inner woman blend with my inner child. I felt untamed, passionate. As a final delight, I opened one of the little vials of oil and ran it under my husband's nose.

He was clearly in ecstasy, rolling his head from side to side in a euphoric frenzy. And then I realised something terrible. It wasn't a euphoric frenzy at all. It was a severe allergic reaction to the sacred aroma pong.

Sneezing, wheezing, coughing, spluttering followed. Gulping, snorting, honking, hooting. None of which was contributing to the general erotic ambience. In the interests of the group, we were asked to kindly continue lighting our erotic fires at our own home.

When he stopped sniffing and honking and we both stopped laughing we did indeed light our erotic fires. Because the truth is that Hot Monogamy - without the incense, whales and New Age mumbo jumbo - really has a lot going for it.

AFFAIRS

Anyone reading the papers the past two weeks would be forgiven for thinking that they're the only person in the entire country not having an affair.

Recently we had a new survey out putting the percentage of Australians who have had affairs at 40 per cent. On radio we heard how women are now doing it more than men, and how at least 15 to 20 per cent of the population are serial adulterers. And to cap matters off, the chief censor, John Dickie, got in on the fracas saying that it was all due to the fact that we watched too many wicked movies about it.

Well, a big hello to all you wild adulterers out there. This is Ruth Ostrow calling. Come in all you adulterers. Can you please tell my readers and I: How the hell do you

guys find the time between the shopping and working, and meetings and children, to have an affair? And what are you eating for breakfast that gives you the energy?

Because I suspect we're all telling porkies again. And that all this adultery stuff is based more on urban myths than reality. I don't know one person in my vast circle of friends who is really doing it. Don't get me wrong. We're not moralists. In fact, I surround myself with hedonists on principle. We all love the idea of copious, abundant, ceaseless nights of endless pleasure and passion. But the truth is, who has the time? I mean, get real!

Sure we all fantasise about it. For me it goes something like this. I get a secret crush on someone - usually a dark, brooding type from a TV drama. At the moment it's Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. Darcy spots me out in viewer-land, sitting on the couch in my flannelette nightie and fluffy slippers. He must have me.

Out of the TV he jumps, compliments me on my awesome beauty, swoops me into his arms, removes my flannelette nightie with the duckies on the collar, ravishes my pulsating body, declares undying love then vanishes back into the TV set. The whole fantasy takes approximately 5 to 10 minutes. Usually during the commercial break, while my husband is off making a cup of tea.

Compare this, time wise, to the reality of an extra-marital liaison.

You meet someone you fancy. The worrying begins. Does he want me? Will he ring? Worry, worry, love, goo, goo. (Wasted time: approximately 4 hours 30 minutes)

The first meeting. Probably over lunch or drinks. Awkward conversation. Trying to digest food. "Blah, blah, blah" giggle, pant, pant. Will he or won't he? (About 4 hours - including travel time).

Next day. Dreaming of him, love, love, moo, goo. Speak on phone. Set up meeting at hotel room. Worry, worry. Should we? Shouldn't we? Moo, goo, dream some more (up to 5 hours).

The big night. Getting dressed. How do I look? Does my breath smell okay? Worry, worry. Excuses to partner. Lie, lie, lie. Get in car. Driving, driving (About 3 hours).

Arrive at hotel room. Stiff, awkward silence. Fumbling about. Clothes removed. Mouths collide. Things happen. Usually not great the first time. "Sorry, sorry, I was too tense." Better luck next time. Wash, scrub, wash again. Drive home. Lie, lie, to partner. Get into bed. Worry. "Can partner smell sex on me? Did lover think I was a disappointment?" Worry, worry, sleepless night. (About 24 hours including recovery time.)

Next day a bit itchy. A bit itchier. "Oh god!" How do you ring someone and ask them if they've ever had genital warts? Herpes? Crabs? Snakes? Maybe it's the Ebola virus. "Should have made him wear a condom!" Yell, yell at yourself inside your head. Ring doctor.

Drive to get blood test. "What an idiot I am. I deserve to die." Wait, wait, suffering. Terrible, awesome guilt. Hate lover. All their fault. Look at children. Guilt, guilt. Nightmares of broken home. Suffering, waiting. Get results. All clear. Just a case of Guilty Genitals. (Approximately 48 hours of total terror).

Phone rings. Lover wants reassurance. "Was it good? Do you love me? You didn't just use me, did you?" Guilt, guilt, terrible guilt. Lover wants to meet again. Deciding, thinking (About 45 minutes).

At this point at least you have wasted about 92 hours for a 10 second orgasm. It's like my mum always said about eating chocolate: "A moment in the mouth, an eternity on the hips."

Do you do it again? Apparently of those 40 per cent of people who reported this week that they had had an affair, 70 per cent said they would never do it again. Can you blame them?

Not that I believe the statistics in the first place. If almost half the married population can manage adultery between children, nappies, working, meetings with people, fighting with the plumber, paying the bills, and cleaning up, then my husband and I are changing our breakfast cereals.

HONEYMOON

We have finally done it, flown all the way to another city so that we can leave the baby with mother for two days and have some time alone. Time alone, the concept has so profoundly escaped us over the past two years since she was born.

I can't even remember what it is like not to be glancing over my shoulder every moment to keep an eye on a very vibrant child. I can't remember what it feels like to lie in my husband's arms in bed at night without my ears pricked for any sign of a baby cry or snuffle.

The last time we were truly alone through the night without a baby in the next room, was on our honeymoon - just before she was born.

Alarming new statistics show that the minutes an average married couple spend alone, talking or touching intimately each week, can be counted on one hand. They also show that one in every two marriages is now ending in divorce.

I know from my reader's letters that those who set time aside for the relationship, for sex and love and indulgence, fare much better than those who neglect the small pleasures of life and who take each other for granted.

And so here we are. On a pilgrimage of pleasure. We have returned to the hotel where we spent the first night our honeymoon to reignite the passion, and to spoil each other with languid love, to revel in time out.

The room is as it was then - all white and fluffy with lavishly draped curtains, a king-sized bed with extra large pillows and doona. We jump like crazed kids all over the bed, up and down, up and down. The sense of freedom is overwhelming.

We waste no time getting into the indulgence we came here for. I slip into one of those nice, fat, towelling robes that people used to steal before hotels caught on. My husband pops the cork on a bottle of French champagne, and we sit overlooking the city, guzzling down the bubbly and stuffing our faces with very rich, chocolate truffles from the mini bar.

As he runs a bath in, I raid the mini bar again. Hotel mini bars are like Mount Everest. You raid them because they are there. I continue gorging myself on chips and cheese, nuts and pate, and anything that looks remotely edible as we plan our "pleasure itinerary" with all the fabulous and naughty things we are going to do over the next 24 hours.

It's a very tight schedule. At 6.30pm we intend to enter the black marble bathroom and soak in the bubble bath until we feel totally euphoric. Downstairs by

8pm, for a wickedly expensive meal in the hotel restaurant. Then into bed by 10.30pm to catch the start of the adult video "Hot Love" advertised on the top of the television set. After that, passion until dawn and then breakfast in bed.

So many fantastic things to do now we are free...free... We're going to have great fun, and greater sex to really justify our time alone and, of course, the ludicrous cost of the hotel room.

Sitting in the very hot bubble bath I notice I am feeling a bit faint. I've eaten a few too many chips. I may have also jumped up and down on the bed too many times. The harsh jets of water pummelling my spine and feet and legs are not helping either. Sometimes spas can make you feel like you are being clubbed to death.

Then it begins. It starts in my temples and moves to the front of my head. The holiday headache. One of nature's cruellest jokes. You feel like a player who doesn't notice he's broken his leg until the game is over. When the pressure is off and it's time to relax, the brutal pain hits.

I swish two pain-killers down with a swig of champagne and we continue to plan our pleasure itinerary. But my husband is frowning. He has gone very red in the cheeks.

"I feel suddenly tired," he says, stumbling out of the bath. "Must have been the flight over and all that champagne. I'll just rest for a few moments," he says. "Then we can have some real fun."

I get out of the bath too and flop beside him on the bed. We stare up at the ceiling feeling dreadful about feeling dreadful. The meter is ticking away. But it's hard work having a fabulous time on demand.

My darling puts his arm around me and we allow ourselves a brief cat-nap before dinner. We wake to the bell-desk ringing to ask us an odd question. Are we ready to check out?

My contact lenses are glued to my eyeballs. I stare in horror at the clock and the morning light. We bolt out of bed, dishevelled and guilty, and then we start laughing. Because it dawns on us. This is exactly what our wedding night was like, after all.

SLEEPING TOGETHER

I have never understood the presumption that because you enjoy having sex with someone, it automatically follows that you would want to sleep with them or rather sleep next to them - as in between the sheets, in the cot, and all that.

I was a great admirer of Harry in the film "When Harry Met Sally" who bravely volunteered that most men had a five-minute tolerance level for lolling about between the sheets after the great event.

Whilst five minutes of post-coital cuddling seems a bit frugal, at least we were hearing the words of an honest man. And honestly, when you think about it, there is no logical connection between wanting to wrap your body around another for the purposes of carnal delight, and of thereafter wanting to have them glued to you like a rock-limpet for the next eight hours - certainly not every single time you do the business.

Even more to the point, there is no logical correlation between wanting to spend the rest of your life with someone in marital bliss and wanting to retreat to the same bedroom with them to sleep within inches of another writhing, squirming,

possibly over-heated and probably restless, human body every night of the week for the rest of your life.

Which is why in homes around Australia there is a steep increase in "the other bedroom".

I have been noticing this trend for a long time but only thought to write about it when I recently saw an article from an American magazine called "Bed as a War Zone" based on a report that more and more couples were opting to keep separate sleeping quarters.

The reasons quoted included a sharp increase in male snoring. Already 20 per cent of males between the ages of 30 and 35 snore with this figure trebling for the over 60s. There are now over a hundred anti-snoring devices registered with the US patent office, but separate sleeping is becoming one of the most popular ways of coping.

The article claims that twice as many women as men suffer from insomnia, prowling around the house, getting in and out of bed or shuffling restlessly till the break of dawn. This is driving a lot of men from the nuptial bed.

Given that it has always been common for aristocrats and royalty to have separate sleeping arrangements, it seems that the notion of sharing the nuptial bed came from necessity, probably because poorer families were forced to share sleeping quarters at various times throughout history.

But modern couples are now beginning to question this practice especially those with enough money to keep a spare bedroom or those whose high-pressured lives necessitate a good night's sleep.

However, despite the growing prevalence of separate sleeping, there is still a social stigma to admitting it. The couples I talked to for this article would not let themselves be named, as if there was some shame in not managing to spend an average of 56 hours a week on top of another human body.

Miraculously and most fortunately my husband and I do sleep well together, largely because he is a very heavy sleeper.

But I once lived with a man who used to wake me up every night with illogical babbling. I tried ear plugs but he would shake me awake, as if even in his sleep he needed an audience. Finally, one night, I retreated to the spare room in desperation.

This happy sleeping arrangement continued till we finally split. It suited us both because he also hated me reading in bed. The sound of flipping pages had really annoyed him.

One couple jokes that they are lucky enough to have a house big enough to have a spare room. "It's a luxury not always having to sleep together," she chortles. "An investment in our future," says her partner. The problem for this couple is different time clocks. She loves to sit up late watching schlock TV and would drive him nuts shuffling about when she finally came to bed. He would bother her early in the morning opening and shutting drawers.

One woman who usually sleeps separately from her spouse reckons that she used to hit him in her sleep. Apparently this is quite a common occurrence like sleep-walking. During sleep many subconscious aggressions come out which is healthy for the dreamer, but not so good for those sleeping nearby.

My husband has just read over this, and wants to say that he is not at all happy with the temperature of our bed. He claims it is like an oven with my electric blanket radiating enough heat to cook a chicken. He says that if we had a spare room he'd sleep in there with the windows wide open so he could bask in the frosty night air.

Interestingly, in my discussions with people, different body temperatures rated highly as force driving people from the same bed, along-side doona stealing, teeth grinding, and thrashing about. But those sleeping separately should take heart. If it's good enough for the royalty, then surely it's good enough for us common folk.

STRIP-TEASE

I am pouncing around the lounge room shaking my love-"thang" at my husband. "My darling I.....can't get enough of your love, babe." I croon, singing Barry White. My husband is not watching. He is far more interested in the Paul Keating item on the news.

In case he hasn't got the message, I throw my shoes in his direction, and keep dancing about..."I don't know, I don't know why...can't get enough of your love...babe."

Still no response. Men who are married to women with small children, do not expect any love-thang to be shaken at them after about 10.30 at night. And they certainly stop shaking their love-thang at you.

Can't blame them really. It must be very demoralising to stare romantically into the tired, hollow eyes of a woman who has spent the day trailing around after a toddler. Or worse. A woman who has spent the day at the office and the evening trailing around after a toddler. "Hello in there? Hello?" Lights on, nobody home!

But I've got something very special in store tonight. "Ohhh babe...." I drawl and throw my top at him. It hits his face. He keeps watching TV oblivious to my love dance. He doesn't realise that I have not really been out all evening with my girlfriends. I lied. I went instead to a class given by one of Australia's best known striptease artists Elizabeth Burton.

Having written so copiously last week about the dangers of letting marriages fall into boring, non-erotic spaces, I reckoned I had to and find a way to inject a bit of spice around the house. I think it was the letters that terrified me.

Bags of mail from people who talked about how sex took a complete and utter nose-dive after children came along. The US statistics someone sent me warned that one child takes a huge chunk out of your libido. Two is worse than one, and god help anyone with three kids or more.

Meanwhile men grizzled bitterly that their wives never bothered to wear sexy lingerie. One whined his wife wore so many layers of flannelette it took ten minutes to get it all off, by which time he had lost his motivation. Others grumbled that the onus was still very much on men to instigate sex, and create atmosphere.

So off I went to join a group of raunchy and courageous women, many with small children at home, who don't want to let their marriages or relationships go into decline. These babes, in all shapes and sizes, are committed to remaining erotic.

The strip-tease courses are run regularly by Jo-Anne Baker of The Pleasure Spot in Sydney. But they are not the only spicy courses women, men or couples can do to put a bit of zing back into domestic life. Her course, which she runs around the country, include Tantra and Eastern love-making techniques, erotic massage, belly dancing, erotic photography.

"Relationships don't have to go stale," says Baker, whose cheeks light up a glowing red as the music starts thudding out White's cry of love: "Can't get enough of your love, babe.."

Our teacher Elizabeth, a leggy blonde in bikinis and stilettos, puts her hands to her hair and starts mincing around the room. "I want you ladies to start strutting. Feel the beauty of your bodies," she says as the music tempo starts to rise.

"Your own body is beautiful no matter what shape."

Women being women do not believe a word of it. We all stand about looking tense and doubtful and we are praying we won't have to remove too many items of our day-wear.

"Any man should be thrilled you are doing this for him. Believe you are lovely," and with this she suddenly throws off her clothes and stands there in the nuddy, "just to show that my body isn't perfect, either." She is close to 50 and close enough to perfect. But she is making a very important point.

If you believe yourself sexy, you will look sexy because you will exude a lovely confidence and sensuality.

There is such magic in being a woman. Such a joyous sexual energy that we are taught to repress. As career women, any hint of sexuality is now an act of incitement to sexual harassment. As mothers we feel guilty about expressing it because sensuality and motherhood don't go together in many women's heads.

But here, in this room, we can all rejoice the business of being female and suddenly the room is alive as socks go flying across the room. Smelly shoes are coming off, and old shirts are flying into space. There is a buzz and excitement that is intoxicating. We're becoming feral. Back to our wild primordial roots. "Can't get enough...Ooooh babe...can't get enough..."

Back at home my husband finally realises I mean business. He takes his eyes off the TV and his mouth falls to the floor as he realises I still have a love-thang. It certainly pays to try something a little wild and wonderful sometimes. Demi Moore eat your heart out!

FLIRTING

I recently caught my husband flirting with another woman.

We were at a party. I had wandered off to get a drink and before I'd taken ten steps some babe, all curls and smiles, had moved in for the kill. Given the chronic shortage of straight, available male talent in this country, it doesn't take too long these days for a man standing alone at a party to be supper.

From where I was standing I saw the sudden change in his posture and I particularly noticed the change in body language.

The experts say to look for feet pointed towards the love interest. I could swear, even at that distance, that my husband's foot was pointing not only towards the woman but directly up at her private parts. What's worse he was moving that foot around every which way like some deranged magnet searching for the right direction in. She obliged by sub-consciously moving her legs apart.

After a few moments she began playing with her hair which is a sign of intimacy. Then she leaned forward, smiling and bearing her teeth - the ultimate show of animal attraction. I knew under her clothing her bottom was probably turning red like those mating baboons on nature programmes.

Anyway I remained at a distance observing the game. He was clearly having a wonderful time. I presumed from the way he was puffing his chest out that he was telling the fire story - the one about the time he leapt to the defence of our apartment block by single-handedly putting out a raging fire.

She was gazing adoringly at this urban hero whose other feats include being able to open a sealed glass pickled cucumber jar with a single swoop, and who - when our lawn-mower was broken - spent several Saturdays manually lopping off every blade of grass with a pair of scissors. Though some would have recommend psychiatric treatment, my husband to this day remains very proud of this great achievement.

Anyway I was prepared to be all jealous and angry but as I watched the interaction it occurred to me how mandatory the whole act of flirting really was in modern life.

It was clearly important for my husband to be reasserting his manhood. What pleasure it was giving him recounting the fire story and beating his breast like some primitive beast.

Poor men are still being socialised by films that equate maleness with heroism - saving aircraft from terrorist hijacks, saving the planet from nuclear destruction. On film real men "boldly go where no man has gone before". In reality most end up in the suburbs fretting that there are no damsels to save or universes to rescue.

When they do manage some basic act of heroism like saving a dog from being run over or working out how to pre-programme the video recorder, their partners barely offer a patronising smile.

Men desperately need babes with open mouths and dilated pupils to show off to, to brag about work achievements to, to get an ego hit from. It's a basic, primordial need that harks back to male animals trying to impress females and implant their seed.

So here was my husband sub-consciously sussing out the seed planting potential and clearly loving every delicious minute of it. But the exercise was equally important for me. If one puts aside the apprehension that one is going to be abandoned, rejected, betrayed, and just allows flirting to be what it is, there is a wonderful resonance to it.

Much as we may love our partners, it is easy to take someone you live with for granted. But when you see your partner through the adoring eyes of another, passion flares up and you remember what it was that won you over. A little animal jealousy goes a long way.

I might add, the females species also needs to show off their colored bits occasionally. And I think our partners also like to see us flashing our colored bits at other males. It arouses the competitive spirit and gets the testosterone flowing.

Anyway after this party my husband and I went home and had a very hot time, and I really have to ask: what is so wrong with sexual energy being created from sources other than ourselves? Why are we so hung up on being the only source of our partner's turn on? Why are women in particular so jealous when their partners flirt?

In many countries of Europe it is quite natural for both men and women to relate to the world sexually. Flirting is a natural turn-on, as is watching the opposite sex from the side-walk coffee shops.

As long as you bring the sexual excitement you are feeling home, then what is wrong with admiring others, fantasising about others or experiencing the joy of watching them get turned on by you? The answer is nothing.

When done from the safety of a secure marriage I think flirting can be one of the most erotic, pleasurable things to do and probably more likely to prevent cheating than create it.

EROTICA

It sounds like a scene from some erotic movie. A couple staring deep into each others eyes as they share with their most secret, primal sexual fantasies. But it is not a scene in a movie, rather it is really happening out in the suburbs of Victoria.

Still on my searching for solutions to keeping marriages hot, I go to see Professor Marita McCabe at the Deakin University psychology department. After finding that at least 30 per cent of people in long-term relationships were sexually dissatisfied with their partners, she has set up a sexual fantasy therapy programme at a clinic run by the university, to help couples deal with the problem of flagging sex lives.

The programme, which is designed to teach people how to use sexual fantasy to put the zing back into their marriages, is the first of it's kind in Australia and is still highly experimental. Professor McCabe believes that the happiest marriages and relationships are those where the erotic side is very much alive.

She says problems for couples often begin because one person wants more sex than the other can provide. She says it is becoming more common for women to discover sex as they get older, which is when most men are coming off the boil. As this problem gets more acute, men will often avoid sex to avoid confronting their flagging libidos. Because her research has shown that men tend to control frequency of sex in marriage, shifts in libido can be disastrous for a lot of couples.

Professor McCabe feels that sexual fantasy and erotic thought often help men retain erections during their later years, and help bring sex back into the marriage. She says men are highly visual and can be easily stimulated. Fantasy can give men back their confidence. But sadly, many women feel threatened by their husband's psychological infidelities.

"We're trying to teach women that jealousy and anxiety often impede sexuality. If women allow themselves to engage in erotica it would help men and it would enhance their sex lives.

"We're also trying to teach both men and women how to fantasise. Many people won't give themselves permission to think erotic thoughts, because they feel it means they are kinky or weird or that they are going to go out and do the thing they are fantasising about.

"Often the reverse is true. The fantasy is the opposite of what a person would really do in real life. It is healthy to fantasise and it can create real intimacy between couples if they share their thoughts and feelings."

She says that while men experience frequency problems later in life, women can have the same problems after children are born. "They start seeing themselves as mothers, and the concept of mother is not a sexual one for most people."

Professor McCabe says she starts the programme by getting couples to listen to erotic tapes of Anais Nin stories. Then she tries to unlock their visual powers by encouraging them to go out and buy some erotic magazines or watch erotic movies. She says women get excited by visual stimulation, too.

"We get couples pleasuring each other. After they become more visual and graphic we get them into sensuality and touch. Then we get them flirting with each other by encouraging them to remember all the positive things that brought them together."

She says if people stopped feeling threatened by jealousy, then all the sexual energy that erotica created could be channelled back into the relationship to inspire lust. She says it pays to remember the adage: "It doesn't matter where you get your appetite, as long as you eat at home."

MASTER OF THE HOUSE

I have never understood my mother's attitudes to sex, nor she mine. It has always been like two islands with no bridge in the middle. She, coming from England and a culture that valued reticence and reserve above all else. Me, growing up in Australia in an era of mass communication, of women's liberation, of Germaine Greer and Erica Jong sharing their affairs in graphic, gynaecological detail with the whole world.

"Is nothing private to you?" my mother has asked repeatedly over the years as I've launched from sexploit to sexploit with glee, and compounded the sin by writing about it all. "No," I have said to her and continue to say. "No, I don't do anything that the rest of the world isn't doing daily. So why is it private?"

But last week someone kindly sent me some photocopied pages of a text book apparently distributed to schools throughout Australia and New Zealand in the 1950s, for the subject then known as Home Economics. I laughed heartily when I read it, and suddenly it was as if a bridge appeared out of the fog.

A bridge not only linking me to my mother and her values but to many of my older readers who write to me each week confused and affronted by my open and permissive attitudes to sexuality and relationships.

Not forty years ago women were being taught officially, through the education system, the sorts of lessons that today's modern women cannot in our wildest imaginations fathom.

The chapter How To Be A Good Wife begins thus. "When he comes home from work, listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first, remember, his topics of conversation are more important than yours.

"Have dinner ready. Prepare yourself. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work weary people. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it. Clear away the clutter. Gather up school books, toys and papers. Then run a dust cloth over the tables.

"Prepare the children. Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces, comb their hair and if necessary change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part.

Minimise all noise. Try to encourage the children to be quiet. Greet him with a warm smile and show sincerity in your desire to please and serve him."

My favourite lesson for aspiring wives concerns sex. "Never complain if he comes home late or goes out to dinner or other places of entertainment without you. Don't complain, even if he stays out all night. Count this as a minor compared to what he went through during his day."

A similar book on the subject implies that wives would probably count it as a blessing if their husbands stayed out all night. "After coitus, the husband must allow the wife to repair to the bathroom. He must not go after her for she will want to shed a few tears." Such is her suggested abhorrence to the act.

The lesson concludes: "Don't ever ask him about his actions or question his integrity. Remember he is the MASTER of the house and as such will exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him. A good wife will always know her place."

I read this out to my husband as he carries the shopping bags into the kitchen and walks around unpacking them and chasing the baby around the room to stop her writing on the walls with her new crayons. He laughs loudly and laments that he was not born into a time when Man was truly king.

But when I read it to my mother, there is no laughter. "This is exactly how it was for me," she sighs. "You children were always washed and clean the moment before your father came home. You were never allowed to speak. I was always made up, with dinner waiting. He came home and read the paper in silence. I can't believe you don't remember how it was," she says growing close to tears.

I don't remember. I remember only the 70s and the excited whispers as women began congregating around tables discussing Greer and the feminist books they were reading. I remember the tones of elation and joy as women realised that they were not born to serve, and the delight when they realised their bodies were indeed capable of great pleasure.

But not all women realised. And having now seen these text books, I am amazed - not that the open discussion of sexuality and relationships has elicited such an angry response in some of my older readers, but that more people are not angrier: women because their generation was denied this wonderful sexual freedom, and men because women like me came along and spoiled the party.

CABIN FEVER

Do you ever inexplicably feel the urge to stab your beloved in the arm with a blunt toothbrush? Do you suddenly feel like pouncing on the one you love and bludgeoning them on the head with a pillow or squeegee?

Relax chances are you are not falling out of love. Chances are that you are just temporarily spatially challenged. By spatially challenged I do not mean "a short person or midget" as politically correct lingo would have it put.

I mean you are feeling spatially cramped, hemmed in, chocked, stifled, stymied, suffocated. "I need space" you scream inside your head but no one, least of all your partner and brood of kids, are listening.

The mere sight of your partner makes you want to throw yourself headlong off a cliff. When they smile you feel the urge to set the house alight with gelignite. Especially

if it is one of those ingratiating "What have I done wrong?" sort of smiles that make you feel guilty for wanting to perform wanton acts of barbarism against them.

You want to yell: "Nothing is wrong with you. It's me. It's me. I hate you because you exist. Because you breath. Because every time I come into a room you are there smiling at me."

Now whilst politically correct people will be undoubtedly distressed by the level of violence expressed in this column, I doubt anyone living with another human being in a full-time, full-on, relentless and irreversible state of permanence will not understand what I am saying.

It's cabin fever - an old American term that was used to describe the deranged behaviour exhibited by people trapped in their cabins for weeks, during snow storms. Now used to describe the hysteria and panic people feel after spending too long on an international flight. Synonym: Stir crazy. It is a well-established fact that people in marriages or long term, live-in situations can go as stir crazy as prisoners in a Turkish jail. In fact, after a few years of marriage, many would opt for a Turkish jail - with the torture thrown in.

Cabin fever has traditionally been the emotional terrain of males. I have always believed men invented war, territorial conflict and bloody religious altercations so they could put on their heavy armour and march away for years at a time, to get away from their smiling female permanent others.

Then when war became unfashionable, they began building businesses and invading corporations so they could stay too busy to come home to their crammed caves. The money helped buy bigger caves so the wife and children could be further away. But not far enough. Never far enough. So they built sheds in their backyards and walled off "home offices" for themselves, to make escape easier.

Now women have caught the dreaded disease. With the multitude of stressful roles we must now play in the wake of economic equality, it is impossible not to feel overcome, exhausted, trapped, and hemmed in.

The problem with trendy role sharing is that men are at home more doing the ironing, shopping and child minding. In fact, everyone is at home. Aaarrrch! I am told that when husbands first retire, stir crazy wives will often lunge at them with kitchen appliances or try to iron their faces.

Anyway, with husband and I both working from home, I got a bad case of cabin fever a few weeks ago. At first I didn't know what it was. In all our years of living together, I had never felt anything quite as passionate.

I found myself staring at my husband's socks and wanting to set them on fire. I felt totally invaded by the bits of paper and coffee mugs he had spread over my desk.

"You two should go out to dinner together," my well-meaning mother suggested. "For a romantic evening". I ran and hid the wallet.

Finally a friend stepped in. "You just need a holiday from each other. A bit of space. It's hard being together all the time, and having a toddler to boot. It's only natural you're going stir crazy. "

This made sense. I tried to tell my husband as delicately as I could that I needed a break. He looked very hurt. I was about to cancel my arrangements when I heard him talking to a mutual friend on the phone.

"Ruth is going away," he was almost singing into the mouth-piece. I feel delighted. Over-joyed!"

The thing that I realised about cabin fever is that it is highly contagious. For the first few days your partner doesn't know how to appease you. Then he or she begins to resent your bad moods, which makes you resent their bad moods about your bad moods. "Hey, who's bad mood is this anyway?"

The next day I left for a short break. At first, I didn't think of home at all. The second day I was tempted to ring, but I overcame the urge. The third day I was curious and called home actually happy to hear my partner's voice. By day four I had rung three times, and by day five I was running off the train into his arms with excited glee.

We rushed back to our cabin, locked the door and whilst baby was at mother-in-laws bolted ourselves in for hours. Funny, even with the doors and windows locked, the air was suddenly fresh and crisp and invigorating.

DOING DEALS

I would once again like to take up an issue that has proved enormously controversial with my readers - paying partners for sex.

A couple of months ago I ran this letter from Anon in Hawthorn, Victoria. "In the shower after squash at my local centre some of the women talk about how much they charge their husbands for sex. Some claim they charge \$80 a time. The wife of a doctor even claims she gives her husband a heavy smack on the bum whenever he doesn't produce money before the act. They tell me I should do the same to my fiancée, especially after we get married. Do many women charge their husbands or boyfriends for sex? How much is an appropriate sum?"

A letter the following week stirred up even more trouble than the first. A woman from Gawler in South Australia wrote: "If a husband is prepared to pay a prostitute to have either straight sex or something kinky, then wouldn't it be better to pay that to his wife for his requests? It certainly helps the family budget."

What followed was nothing short of outrage. Pamela from Brisbane snorted that the women were nothing but "gold diggers". "It is better not to be married at all if you see your partner as a client, not as someone you love," she wrote.

But the worst anger came from men. "Your friends are fools and if there is more women in the world out there like them, us males should stay single. Love does not cost anything, why should sex?" grumbled R.J, of Toowoomba in Queensland

"Disgusted Male" wrote: "I know the average woman is still "carried" financially (by men) on a free ride through life. But to learn they brag about selling sex to husbands or partners is tragic. Male victims world-wide still empty smelly garbage, fix flat tyres, lift heavy equipment, but sex will always be a transaction."

"Jock" from Lidcombe in New South Wales wrote: If "Anon" is going to charge for sex after marriage, it is hoped that she will provide variety and value for money and not expect her husband to settle for the usual "dead fish" performance rendered by most wives. I wonder how women would react if husbands insisted on payment for the suffering they endure through the senseless, never-ending, boring, chatter inflicted on them by their partners who consider themselves to be engaging in interesting and meaningful discussions."

I got a lot of letters from both males and females who were angry at the tired, old myth that for women sex in marriage was a chore. Alan of Annerley in Queensland

surprised me with this one: "I work in a Therapeutic Massage Centre and am amazed by the number of women who phone up looking for sex and not just sex, but kinky sex. Men are not the only ones who enjoy sex, so let these women stop playing the martyr and making out they are doing their husbands a favour. Let's hear it for equality and let the men charge their wives for sex."

Meanwhile Barry of Adelaide cheerfully wrote: "Female friends have told me how pathetic most guys are at making love. I am still laughing at the average times of 2 to 10 minutes from your last article. So I say, ladies, make him pay in dollars if your guy isn't good enough to make you want to pay him."

One of the saddest letters came from "D" in Burleigh, Queensland: "My wife actually pays me NOT to have sex. After the first year of marriage she completely lost her libido. She couldn't wait to get finished and carry on with the ironing. She didn't like the way her attitude was hurting me so she suggested that whenever I felt a bit randy, she would give me a few dollars to go down to the pub for a few beers. By the time I got back, she would be already asleep. Now I am fast becoming an alcoholic! What should I do?"

A couple of years ago I stayed with friends who had a wonderful solution to the problem of sex, money and power, in a long term relationship. It was a very equitable proposal and one my readers may wish to consider.

My girlfriend and her partner kept a little note-book much like the exercise books we had in school. Each time one of them did something good or meritorious, they were awarded gold stars. Each star counted for one dollar. Different deeds earned different points. For instance, washing the dishes may win five stars, taking the children out to the park might earn ten.

The note-book was like a bank, and when either of my friends had accumulated enough gold stars, they could ask their partner to buy them something that correlated with the dollar value they had accrued. It could be a cassette or a new jumper, depending on the amount of stars in their book.

But at some point in time the game turned very erotic. Charging market rates, they began trading their stars for sexual favours.

Delicacy prevents me from going into detail, but I can only confirm that the two of them were always busy doing good deeds. They were the goodest deed doers I had ever seen, each falling over each other to do the dishes, cook the dinner, wash the clothes, communicate their "deepest" feelings, and baby sit.

My husband and I tried the system following our stay and I can honestly report that it was the most erotically-charged Summer we had ever spent together. Sadly, as with all things, life got in the way and we let the system lapse.

But it seems to be a system that not only keeps sex fun, cheeky and naughty, but it keeps the house in order, and the relationship thriving with interesting conversation. In fact, I think awarding gold stars should be compulsory for all people in long-term unions or marriages.

READER'S LETTERS

Dear Ruth,

You wanted our tips for how to keep our marriage hot. Here they are. My husband and I put aside at least one night a week to turn the lights down low, turn off the television (one of the greatest modern disasters for a healthy sex life!) and get into some deep reconnecting. It's amazing how sexy old-fashioned intimacy can be. D. A, St Kilda, Vic

Dear Ruth,

This is the reason that affairs begin. The desire for excitement, passion, intimacy, all of which seems to get lost along the way for many women in the early years of family raising. The first affair was electric. The 10th will be my last, but by no means my least. My husband knows nothing of them; my marriage of 35 years is looked upon by my friends as being an ideally suited couple. I don't think we would be together now had I not had real life "fantasies". So Ruth, believe it! Anon. Sydney, NSW.

Dear Ruth,

I think you are a disgusting woman writing as you do, really encouraging people to be unfaithful. Do you ever stop to think of the broken homes that occur through having affairs and the sadness to wives who love their husbands and to the children of these families. It has many times caused terrible suffering, even death on many occasions. Some men have also suffered deeply. D. F, Clarence Gardens, SA.

Dear Ruth,

Thank you for revealing to others that sleeping in separate rooms does not mean the end of your sex life. I have been in my own room for 2 years, after 20 "sleep disturbed" years with a 100-decibel snorer. Now there is bliss on both sides. Peace for me after my "visits", and no more broken ribs for him! Best Thing, Elanora, QLD

Dear Ruth,

Thank God, I'm normal. I'm 39, happily married 16 years with 2 wonderful children. I want to change to single beds. I'm sick of being breathed on with beer smelling breath, being kicked with knees and having covers taken. Anita, Buderim, QLD.

Dear Ms Ostrow,

As a married mother of a two-year old toddler, I want to say that after a hard day at work or home all I want is a nice quiet place to retreat to on my own. Sex has become a weekly event like putting out the garbage. While my partner and I are unhappy about this development, thank god we are not part of the 3.7 per cent of couples who NEVER do it at all. Debbie C, Bronte NSW.

Dear Ruth,

You don't have to be single to be lonely. I'm married and have 4 children, 3 still at home, and I am so lonely that I sit and cry for hours. I'm in a loveless marriage. Why do people think just because your married and have a family you can't get lonely? Mrs S, Highpoint City, VIC.