

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS A COMPILATION OF MY BEST COLUMNS FROM MY YEARS AS A SYNDICATED SEX WRITER FOR THE NEWS LIMITED GROUP DURING THE 90'S.

THEY ALSO BECAME THE BEST SELLING BOOK 'HOT & SWEATY' (Pan Macmillan 1997) WHICH IS NO LONGER IN PRINT.

SECTION ONE: COLUMNS ABOUT WOMEN

HOT BABES: A road map to women in the 90s

IT IS a hot, smouldering night in New York City. The temperature inside one of New York's steamiest clubs is soaring up the thermometer as bodies rub too close under the grind of funk music. Suddenly the stage lights up. A host of women burst out. They are dressed in the most erotic, tantalising garments imaginable.

Flimsy lace hardly covers the voluptuous body of one black woman, another girl is in nothing but a G-string. The music starts and the women move to various poles on the stage and start performing in a way that is making the audience giddy. Dainty, frilly things and sexy, leather things are being thrown into the gasping audience as graphic pornographic images flicker on walls all over the room.

A woman dressed like a man with the appropriate plastic attachment is gesturing lewdly in time to the music as the audience screams in delight. This could be any strip club. But there is something quite extraordinary going on here. The wild cheers from the audience are not coming from men. Of the 500 or so patrons crammed into the huge, multi-level warehouse, there is not a man in sight.

This is one of New York's all-girl clubs. One of the new clubs run by women for women opening up all over the world. I have come here because I have heard about the explosion for women and I am curious about what is going on.

Some of the women here are gay, some are bi, but many of the women I talk to over the course of the evening are straight women - some married, others with kids - just out to have a fabulous evening unlocking the sexual energy that churns inside them.

It is a club where women proudly parade their fetishes and sexual bents, where women grab other women, and dance till dawn in a frenzy of sensuality and eroticism. It is a celebration of the sexual power of being female and it spits in the face of everything the so-called "feminist thought police" tried to achieve in the 80s with their cry to political correctness.

"In here we can be totally free with our sexuality," one 23-year-old woman from London in latex and leather, yells to me over the booming music. Her breasts are almost bare. "I don't want to go to a club alone and be groped by men or leered at. But I want to go out and feel really turned on and sexy, she yells before bumping off into the gyrating throng.

She is not alone in her views. The club is filled with lipstick feminists, goddess feminists, and sexy girls from the highest echelon's of corporate America who, in step with the mother of erotic sleaze, Madonna, "just wanna have fun".

The outrageous success of clubs like this and like Europe's Pussy Posse which travels around Europe attracting hundreds of women in every city, preaching fun, eroticism and safe sex - teaching women to put condoms on with their mouths before they go home - testifies to one fact.

It is a fact backed up by the burgeoning success of female sex shops all over the world, the thriving trade in erotic videos, sexy novels, books like Gina Ogden's *Women Who Love Sex*, male strip and escort services for women, and sex-toy tupperware parties all around Europe.

There is a sexpllosion erupting in the female population, the likes of which we have not see since Erica Jong lead us out of the sexual wilderness and into our erotic desires too long ago.

Tired of what one woman described to me as "the tyranny of political correctness" that hemmed women in erotically over the past decade and of growing puritanical moral values, disillusioned by a form of feminism that forced women to deny their fantasies and erotic souls, women of all ages have risen up in what is shaping up to be a powerful new sexual revolution.

In compiling this chapter I have spent many months travelling around the world, meeting the pioneers of the new feminist movement . The raunchy sex-positive activists, goddess activists or "pleasure positivists" as they describe themselves. And doing their workshops.

With my tongue firmly in my cheek and my finger on the pulse I lie on the floor with a group of naked women searching for my G-spot. But this, according to the goddess grrrls, is mandatory stuff. They say female power and creativity stems from our wombs and by unlocking our primal and sexual energy through ritual, dance and ancient breathing techniques, women will be empowered.

Although much of what I have seen does amuse me, I can't hide the fact that I am also greatly impressed by a form of feminism that does not ignore the female body. And I am inspired by the cacophony of gutsy, sassy, outspoken new voices in the chorus.

I have for a long time suffered the cold shoulder of traditional feminists because my thinking didn't toe the party line. Because I don't think its an act of betrayal to laugh at ourselves and our own erotic contradictions. Two women equals ten opinions. We are torn, confused. We are sophisticated yet primitive at the same time. We fight for the right to not be looked at sexually whilst standing in come-fuck-me shoes and blood-red lipstick which mimics the blushing baboon bum on heat. Give me a break!

Often we don't know what we want. And far too often we want the wrong things. In Section Two my hungry body overtakes my politically correct mind. Predicably, the sisterhood chucked a collective wettie when this story was first published. But as author Nancy Friday will attest, it is not uncommon for staunch feminists and strong women to fantasise about being ravaged by a Neanderthal whilst rigorously blathering about wanting the "respect" of "sensitive" men.

I amuse myself with the dangerous terrain of sexual politics throughout the book. As a rampantly hormonal woman who delighted in popping her tongue where she shouldn't have on the way up the greasy pole, I know that not all women are the victims of all men all the time. Particularly when we are forced into contact with that irresistible of all creatures, the powerful male, the leader of the pack. Me Tarzan. Full of Testosterone. Lord of the Jungle. Hubba hubba! Someone throw water on me!

Powerful men are women's Achilles heel as a recent survey into office affairs proved. I learned this when working as a finance journalist here and in New York during the 80s and early 90s. After spending years in the company of wealthy businessmen, and inside many corporations observing the psycho-sexual dance between males and

females, I can only say that before we try to legislate this treacherous and highly complicated terrain we'd better to go back to the law of the jungle, and work forwards from there.

In the same primitive vein I believe women have far more power than we lay claim to. It is an erotic power that feminism has somehow taught us to be ashamed of.

A male friend used to say: "Never, never under-estimate the power of the muff." Whenever he said this I would imagine the poster for a schlock sci-fi movie "No man is safe from The Killer Vulva" with a gigantic vagina on the rampage through the streets of New York. I loved this image. I certainly never saw myself as a victim of the male system. In fact, in the hyper-macho world of high finance, it was a definite advantaged to have pussy power instead of a big, swinging dick.

Yes, I know about "the women on the factory floor" - the feminist version of my mother's guilt trip when I wouldn't eat: "People are starving in Africa"! But to adhere to claims that all women are always victims in a patriarchal society is to vastly undermine what we have achieved. It is submitting to a clitoridectomy of the female spirit.

Not all of this chapter is about the outing of female erotic power or the insufferability of political correctness. In fact, being a hot babe, a sexually confident woman, still means a lot of pain and misery in the 90s.

For one, there's rejection to deal with. Women are now moving on men, and like men before us, we are having to deal with the harsh reality that not all objets d'amours are going to be available. Many of us are sitting around with bruised egos, licking our wounds, and trying to work out when "no" really means "no", and when it means "yes"? And why do some dicks go down when they see a strong, instigating female?

Then there is insecurity and loneliness. The chronic over-supply of available females has meant that some women can't get men. Fearing that they have become too strong and defeminised, many are reverting to classical "femme" behaviour to attract a mate. Sadly, the growing conservative backlash is gaining international momentum.

There is still the very painful internal battle for the modern girl: to breed or not to breed. And if one finds oneself suddenly "married with children" as I have, then how does one retain one's sexiness?

Back to politics and many women resent that we have been forced, largely by a de-sexing form of modern feminism, to walk, act and dress like men in order to survive in the workforce. We can't be pre-menstrual, menopausal, pregnant, lactating or ever fall victims to our hormones.

I want PMS NOW! to be the new feminist catch-cry. I want girls in bold lipstick and bad moods to be standing around with placards demanding the right to be moody and broody and bloody disgusting to deal with if we chose a few days a month the way men have always fallen victim to their hormones or been bloody disgusting to deal with when the mood has struck.

To body image. About 99 per cent of women I have talked to are not happy with their bodies. Those who are, are only happy for a short time, watching their gorgeous cheese-cake legs assume the blue-cheese lines of varicose veins. Latest studies have shown that women are at their best from the bedroom to the boardroom when we feel good about our body image. But we are never encouraged to feel too good, for too long.

I say chuck away your glossy magazines grrrls! They are causing enormous pain and suffering, and are undermining our potency and growing power. Chuck out

the tired and useless myth that says women are bitches to work for. Chuck out the one that says all women like nice emotional, intimate sex. And let's go party.

And take this along. A road map to being female in the 90s. But be warned. I reserve the right to contradict myself. I am female. And anyone using this to navigate the confusing, conflicting, contradictory maize that is female behaviour, is guaranteed to get lost. Now, move over boys, we're coming through!

BLOKES

I have a confession to make. One that is totally ideologically unsound and politically incorrect. Though I am embarrassed to admit it. I have a secret, hidden, but powerful attraction to...blokes.

Yes, blokes. That dying breed of male. The wonderfully archaic creature, almost as extinct as the dinosaur. He who eateth red meat. He would smoketh roll-your-owns. The kinda man who knows what goes on under the bonnet of your car. The kinda man who doesn't stand there rationally dealing with someone who insults you. The kinda man you can count on to break your heart.

I'm not saying I want one permanently. On the contrary. My husband is a most perfect specimen of SNAG Sensitive New Age Guy. He cooks, he reads poetry and massages oils into my weary body after a hard day's work. He is magical to talk to, fair, rational, a feminist and a vegetarian. But every now and again, I have a bad craving for a bloke type individual.

I want to be knocked out by the smell of a sweaty armpit. I want my worthy opinions to be overlooked in favour of my heady perfume. I want someone to crush me with muscles used for pouring cement or mustering cattle.

Far from being threatened, my husband is amused by this trend, which afflicts other intelligent women we both know.

He says it is the post-feminist equivalent of men wanting the odd bimbo. He reckons this secret craving is what accounts for the rise in schmalzy Mills and Boon romance novels even among politically correct women, the way that many super-intelligent men buy girlie magazines or go out with the odd tweety-bird.

He himself is given over to the occasional dribble when a leggy, busty bimchette walks into a restaurant. I've seen his eyes go glassy and his brow assume a wet, tortured look when we have visited topless beaches. I couldn't object to such lusting even if I wanted to because it is not something a wife or lover can argue with. It is a close encounter of the non-cerebral kind.

I am not implying blokes and bimbos are not intelligent but they definitely do have a different kind of wisdom. Not the bookish wisdom of the well read, the ambitious or the fair minded, but the wisdom of those who follow their gut instincts: into bed, into battle, into trouble.

Blokes are in touch with the raw, earthy, destructive, intense flow of testosterone in their bodies just as bimbos are in touch with the flow of oestrogen with all its horny, sensual side-effects. Which make them so hopelessly appealing to people who think too much, and are chronically well-behaved, reliable, decent and God-fearing.

I would now like to devote the rest of this column to three blokes I have loved over the past year - at a healthy distance of course.

My first attraction to a bloke lasted but an hour. It was while a girlfriend was renovating her apartment. He came with his electric power drill to open up her bathroom wall and put in a shower hose. Ah! What total bliss watching all that drilling and bashing as the tiles went flying off in different directions and sweat poured down from his ruffled hair. Blokes are so good at smashing things up. His hands were so strong I almost melted as he tugged at the concrete and threw it manfully on the ground. It brought to mind fond tribal memories of being bonked over the head with a club and schlepped into some barbarian's cave.

My girlfriend, a university lecturer, was obviously having the same reaction. We stood mesmerised as he explained the intricacies of pipes. It was the plumbing equivalent of reading a female T.S. Eliot. Later, as a favour (blokes will always do a lady or a "lassy" a favour) he broke up some wooden thing outside her house with his bare hands and dragged it off.

There were plenty of things at my place I could have given him to break up and smash about but I thought better of it and went home alone.

Another favourite bloke was a car mechanic in Melbourne who saved me hundreds of dollars because he liked me. He had the heroic quality that makes women swoon. He looked under my bonnet and explained how he could recondition certain things rather than replace them. And I loved him at once as he shoved his fingers into my greasy pipes and made things right. Alas, once my electrical thing had been reconditioned, I never saw him again.

But I have now met the ultimate bloke. The ultimate in politically repugnant, brutal maleness. I met him while out on the road doing an article on the out-back.

I had to go into his farmhouse to ask for directions. He was standing in the front yard, hat pulled over his eyes, looking like the Marlboro man. He was a walking cliché, with a cigarette hanging out of his arrogant mouth. He glared at me with a look that made me glad I wasn't an Aboriginal, homosexual whale.

His hands were dirty from doing something masculine with animals and you just knew you could never politely ask him to wash them if things got hot. He took me inside to see his road map. His walls were papered with guns, spears and other killing things. I felt my stomach knot with profound disapproval and my head spin from chemicals spewing up from the depth of my primordial being.

Thankfully this close encounter of the unintelligent kind was also short-lived. He gave me directions in a gruff voice and sent me on my way.

My husband always laughs at my bloke stories, before analysing the matter with me. Though something inside makes me wish he'd grow purple with jealousy and grab me passionately in a distinctly non-New Age Sensitive, irrational, kind of way.

BOOB WORSHIP

I should have had breasts. There is no denying it. My body should have come equipped with huge boobs that bulged up through my blouse and erupted into the viewers sight the way Dolly Parton's do.

I've often thought this over the years. The sex kitten look has always appealed to me. I have always fancied myself as a bit of love goddess. A Sophia Loren type. A Jewish Marilyn Monroe.

I got the curves all right, but they went into the wrong spots. To put it subtly, if I walked on my hands, back to front, I'd be perfect.

I got the sort of breasts that don't keep a girl awake on hot summer nights. The kind that don't ever sag. Ever. The kind that allow you to work your way up the corporate ladder without so much as a furtive glance from male co-workers. Good, functional breasts that tuck neatly into a business suit.

I was always the envy of my bra-burning peers in the 70s while I was growing up. But I was miserable. The big, beautiful breasts that were my destiny were robbed from me by some quirk of nature that happened in the genetic swimming pool of life, and I never had a say in it.

Then one day it happened. I was having a shower and I noticed them. Bosoms. Real women's bosoms. I was pregnant.

As the months progressed these new bosoms grew fulsome and voluptuous. At night I tossed and turned as the humungous mammories rolled all over the place and got squashed under my arm. Women without breasts don't ever realise that women with breasts have to work out where to put them, particularly in bed on hot summer nights. It's a drawback girls. A big drawback.

But though I was uncomfortable, I was blissfully delighted with my new-found fecundity. I remember the old Steve Martin joke. "If I were a woman, I'd stay home all day and play with my tits." That's all I did. I spent hours in the shower and in front of mirrors admiring my cleavage, tweaking my new nipples, jiggling them up and down, fondling the soft fleshy mounds that had miraculously appeared.

I spent far too long in lingerie departments buying over-sized bosom halters, and found myself worrying about the correct amount of mammory one should show through their shirt. In fact, my new tits were all I thought about. Whereas I used to just throw on a Tshirt and jeans with boyish indifference, I was now worrying about what tops I should wear. "Hey, if ya got it, flaunt it baby!!" I'd tell myself before deciding that it probably wasn't good to let THAT much nipple show through.

Whilst I used to just chuck on hot leather tops, tank tops, and groovy vests, I found myself wearing more shirts. And because white is a bit dull, I began wearing more floral shirts with buttons undone. My personality was slowly changing to fit my new appearance. Laura Ashley. Soft pastel. Feminine. Flouncy and light as a breast in water.

I used to be very flippant with men and competitive in a knock-about "boys club" sort of way. Working in the macho world of finance gave me this sort of relaxed relationship. Suddenly I noticed men staring at my breasts. With all this intense male sexual attention, I found that my voluptuous personality which had developed to compensate for my snack-sized breasts, suddenly became more demure, more girlie, more coy.

I had finally become a sex kitten, breathless, excited at the sight of my own body and choc-a-bloc full of pregnancy hormones like Oestrogen. But something felt very wrong. I began to miss not being able to throw myself about with tomboy glee. I knew with boobs like this I couldn't just break into a trot whilst walking along the street the way I was apt to do, or I would have knocked my front teeth out.

I began to miss myself. As my boobs grew and my hips widened into the lactating Marilyn Monroe of my dreams, I felt out of sorts. And one day I suddenly realised that I was trapped by my own titties. My boobs had me by the balls.

When I finally stopped breast feeding and went back to work I watched those lovely breasts vanish like a special effects scene in a sci-fi movie. But the truth was I

was relieved to have my old self back and I wondered why I had spent the best part of the my life since puberty in a state of torment about who I wasn't.

I had been in the right body all along. Or perhaps I had grown my into my body over time. At any rate we were right for each other. We had had a fabulous time together. It was great fit. A love match. Till death us do part.

I think it is ironic that therapists rooms are full of people trying to resolve crises with mothers, fathers and lovers. But no one is focusing on the worst, most traumatic and unfulfilling relationship men and women seem to have: the relationship between our minds and our imperfect bodies.

SEXPLOSION

The sun is shining brilliantly on the water, as a group of 20 women gather in a big room over-looking Bondi beach. We are all there to rediscover our sexuality. We are responding to an advertisement challenging us to "unlock the sexual energy" we have all been repressing in the day-to-day grind of life.

We are not alone. All over the world women are responding to the same call. All over the world women are rising up to unleash the "wild woman" within through courses, workshops, books and membership in exclusive clubs. A quiet revolution is brewing and those largely female entrepreneurs who are spear-heading the movement are making millions of dollars out of the new-wave of post-feminist sexuality.

New-York-based Barbara Carrellas is one such entrepreneur. Best buddies with post-feminist porn star and multi-media sexpert, Annie Sprinkle, and the self-professed mother-of-masturbation, California's Betty Dodson, she has started coming regularly to Australia to spread the word.

The word is that if the 70s were about sexual liberation, and "zipless" escapades for women, the 80s and early 90s have been about political correctness and putting the lid on all that bubbling sexuality and eroticism. But we are coming out of the sexual dark ages again, according to the sexperts, quite literally if this "self-loving" workshop is anything to go by.

The group of women sit trembling with fear, wondering what "new level of orgasmic heights" they are going to reach and if they really wish to reach them in public. I have enough trouble finding my G-spot in the privacy of my bedroom let alone in the discomfort of a sexual-ecstasy production line.

But I am desperate to unleash "the wild woman within". The only screams coming from my bedroom late at night over the past year have been from my new baby. I've forgotten what a vagina is used for other than a baby carry bag. And don't talk to me about breasts. I'm tired of being a human milk bottle. One woman puts it very eloquently: "To be a mother and a sexual being is very difficult. To be a mother, hold down a busy career and be a sexual creature is near impossible."

Carrellas gently explains that she will help us reconnect with "the source of our feminine power." It all sounds a little too "New Age" for me. I nearly die laughing at the sight of the vibrators: politically correct sex toys shaped like dolphins, whales and butterflies so you can have an environmentally-friendly climax. All toys have condoms on. In New Age thinking, even tampons should wear them.

But I'm here because I am impressed with what I have witnessed overseas. The revolution in female power is hotting up. But what has really baffled older feminists is

that the entrepreneurs behind the revolution, the once-called sexploiters of women, are women themselves, and staunchly feminist at that.

Madonna was only one of the new wave of women sex entrepreneurs who are making a mint out of the burgeoning new female sexual conscience they are promoting. There is a tribe of women who are sexpert buddies operating internationally as a powerful network, linked by one outstanding factor: they love sex.

Annie Sprinkle is perhaps the most outspoken. She recently caused a fracas in Australia when she presented her controversial Post-Porn Modernist stage performance at the Adelaide festival where she turns her body into an artform and masturbates for the audience.

I spent many wonderful hours dangling out a hotel window with Annie watching the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and discussing her extraordinary creation, the workshop "Sluts and Goddesses" being run around the world. The workshop in Annie's words "helps women get back in touch with their rampant sexual desires" by encouraging women to dress up as their favourite sexual fantasy.

Annie helped Jo-Anne Baker set up The Pleasure Spot in Sydney. It is a shop which markets sex toys to women and runs courses for women on G-spots orgasms, total body orgasms and other fascinating variations on the theme. It was Baker who brought Carrellas to Australia for the workshop we are now doing.

These girls are all buddies with Veronica Vera, Wall Street stock-broker turned porn star, and now sex activist who is famous for lobbying Congress on freedom of speech. Still in America is the powerful and hugely successful film-maker Candida Royalle who is packaging porn with a more egalitarian bent.

Meanwhile in Europe the tribe includes Tuppy Owens, outspoken London-based sex therapist and activist who publishes the Sex Maniac's Diary which scientifically catalogue every sleazy and erotic club in every city of the world and Cora or "Hard Cora" as she calls herself, who helped pioneer phone sex in Europe.

Owens says she is quite amused at how she has suddenly become the "darling" of feminists after years of being accused of the heinous crime of siding with male sexploiters. She says the younger generation of feminists are far more sexually courageous, citing the resurgence of female interest in porn and erotica.

The Pleasure Spot's Jo-Anne Baker says: "We are a mighty force." She shows me some of her sex aids for women that she has brought to Carrellas' workshop. There are vibrating eggs, condoms with flowers on top in case you go off to a 70s-style love-in, chocolate flavoured lubricants, erotic videos, S&M harnesses and sexy lingerie.

She says the female market is where the growth in sex aids is, as evidenced by the huge appetite for product in Europe, particularly as women gain economic power.

"It's a tired old argument we've been hearing over the past decade that all women are the victims of the sex industry and all women are victims of male lust and that our sexuality is purely emotional blah, blah, blah. Women are enormously sexual, sensuous beings. Blocking this energy disempowers us."

She says, "By learning to pleasure ourselves we can teach our partners what we want."

After my little chat with Jo-Anne, Barbara Carrellas announces: "We are going to work naked for the next two days," I read in the brochure that this was a workshop conducted in the nuddy. I hoped there had been a printing mistake although after 30

hours of gruelling labour I wonder how there could be any modesty left in my body. In fact, I finally gave birth while two burly Italian blokes with mops busily cleaned the floor around me.

Nevertheless I feel odd about disrobing. And I am clearly not alone in my modesty. The women all glare at each other apprehensively. This is out of our comfort zones. Women are taught to be competitive with each other. To be forever assessing other women's bodies and comparing them with our own inadequacies.

Carrellas explains the philosophy behind the work: "In ancient times women were together in harems, in tribes, in covens. We nurtured and supported each other while the men were away. Now women are taught to compete with each other, to fear each other. We are here to recapture the lost ritual of trust and support."

It is the same rhetoric I have heard in the men's movement. The call to ritual, to same-sex bonding. She says that the need to play too many roles has left women confused and feeling inadequate. The workshop will help women reconnect with pleasure so they can feel rejuvenated by giving to themselves for a change.

Each woman in the circle is asked to talk about her view of her body, her sexuality. I am anticipating a rather up-beat horny sort of discussion. Instead there are stories more revealing and naked than any physical nakedness around us.

Rose is close to 70 years old. She is the oldest member of the group. Her skin is draped over her like a crepe curtain full of folds and dips and yet she is the most uninhibited woman in the room. She has not had an orgasm in over 30 years. The reason is that her child was forcibly taken away from her when she was a young girl. He was illegitimate in a time that had no tolerance for such things. She has never recovered from the grief.

There are some very beautiful women in the circle, women who by any standard are shapely and sensuous. These women hate their bodies in a world where so-called women's magazines have perpetuated a negative body image. They are all sexually blocked and several can't orgasm. Others are tired and guilty from having to balance career with family obligations.

"I just don't have any energy or time for sex any more," one woman complains as the women in the group nod. Others just feel guilty all the time about everything. It is a common theme in the room. The exhaustion felt by women. Feelings of not matching up. The sense of having to give, give and give all the time to husbands, lovers, children, bosses, businesses, girlfriends, sick or dying parents. The sense of always being judged harshly by others, and by ourselves.

The question hangs in the air as the stories intensify. What has feminism achieved over the past decade? Where is the sexual and social freedom we were promised? We are no more at peace with our bodies, our sexuality and our growing power than we were before. In fact, there seems to be enormous pain and guilt.

"We have to deal with all this anger and grief before we can move into pleasure," says Carrellas. The morning is spent dealing with it. The nakedness is forgotten. The reason we are here is forgotten until Jo-Anne Baker opens a large bag and places on the floor 20 of the most enormous vibrators I have ever seen. Vibrators that look like they could be used on construction sites. "God! I want to discover my vagina not excavate it," jokes one woman as we gather around waiting for a crane to lift them into our hands

But as I watch the women working with their bodies, as I watch Rose exploring herself and looking transformed by the pleasure she is experiencing, I want to raise my

glass to the feminist sex entrepreneurs who are challenging the old notions of political correctness and religious repression and are bravely bringing us back in touch with the sheer pleasure and joy of being a woman.

PARTY TIME

I am sitting here in feeling mighty depressed because sexual harassment legislation has done irreparable damage to the office Christmas party.

Office Christmas parties can be such good value for many reasons. Firstly because you get to vomit or watch others you respect vomit - a great social leveller and a symbolic purging of the old and a hailing in of the new. You get to cry. But most importantly, you get to look into the souls of your colleagues, the people who have surrounded you all year whose behaviour has hitherto been a mystery.

All is revealed under the hypnotic influence of demon drink. For those sober enough to see anything that is. Facades fall away, people's true selves and their true feelings emerge for you in full color.

In years gone by, before sexual harassment legislation, I gained some very interesting and invaluable insights into my colleagues.

One year in Manhattan, when I leant over to get some food, a drunk female journalist who shared the desk next to mine, prodded me in the hand with her fork, and told me she had always hated me.

A male writer called me an imperialist pig and told me he hated me. Another colleague groped me and confessed his deepest love for me.

A female colleague discovered our boss's tongue in her mouth during a heated discussion. She ran away crying. He then came and tried to share his tongue with me. As there were seven of him I didn't know what to do, so I started crying too. We were all very confused, so we all had a few more drinks.

One colleague sat down in a chair that wasn't there. I helped him up and he groped me.

We drunk some more and then I got a migraine and went home in taxi and lay in bed crying until I fell asleep.

But this year I will miss out on such valuable insights that hold one in good stead throughout the coming year.

Admittedly some office parties were more informative than others. One of the most useful parties occurred a few years ago and taught me that with work partners, things are often more complex than may appear.

We all were sitting around a large table. The journalist in question - a most senior and respected man - was cheerfully knocking back the grog and spinning yarns worthy of his raconteurial skills. Suddenly he was gone.

We were all surprised. No one saw him leave. He wasn't on the floor. He wasn't in the bathroom. We searched for ten minutes mystified. Did someone offend him?

For half an hour we discussed the strange phenomenon and then finally continued with the meal. I was in the middle of eating when I felt two hands clutch my ankles and a human form trying to climb under my skirt. I screamed and we all looked under the table. There he was, naked (except for his undies) with his shirt tied around

his head and chin, smiling sheepishly up at me. He then took flight around the restaurant, amorously bellowing my name and causing a mighty fracas until tamed, dressed and placed back in his chair to a diet of black coffee. He claims no knowledge of such behaviour to this day.

Another Christmas party taught me the true intelligence of my journalistic colleagues.

On this occasion, the leading and much-respected writers of our country's news decided to conduct an worthy experiment: to see how many potent green drinks called dive bombers (composed of spirits and sweet liqueurs) they could consume before going unconscious.

Things got heated when a rather brutal argument erupted as to whether vomiting was or wasn't considered cheating. The matter was not resolved until the judge vomited and then we agreed it was mandatory to the achievement of the goal. I left around midnight with other of my esteemed intoxicated colleagues watching in fascination. The next day it was reported in a rival newspaper that an ambulance was later summonsed to collect the poisoned bodies.

One day-time office Christmas party gave me a staggering insight into a girlfriend who invited me to Bondi beach for a swim (to help us both chill out) and then disappeared.

She "got lost" somewhere between our two towels which were next to each other. I was too tired and emotional to work out that she was not coming back to collect me and spent several hours in the dark, sitting in the sand crying until I realised I lived around the corner and I walked home.

Now we have "the rules" we will all have to be good, decent and well-behaved at office Christmas parties lest some male offends some female. But it does have it's benefits. Post Christmas party trauma is greatly reduced. I always found it hard and very unproductive to have to walk around avoiding people's eyes for the next three months and hiding behind office pillars.

THE RULES

- 1. Any man seen with an erection in an office setting will go directly to jail.**
- 2. Any man who thinks lustful thoughts in an office setting, will receive twenty lashes lest this thought lead to spontaneous groping of a female staff member.**
- 3. Men are to be monitored by a strobe light attached to the penis each morning as they enter the building. If the male brain receives an illicit in-coming thought the devise will ring and light up thus alerting the roaming Officers for the Protection of Women.**
- 4. If a man is seen touching a female staff member for any reason whatsoever, he will be doused with petrol and set on fire in front of the entire office by the roaming Officers for the Protection of Women.**
- 5. Absolutely no drinking or tongue kissing at office Christmas parties. Men must sit separate from women and refrain from looking at women below the neck in-case this leads to spontaneous breast groping of a female staff member.**
- 6. No more dashing into the dark-room, lunging at protruding naughty bits, staring at cleavages or pressing genitals on the Xerox machine to photocopy them for loved ones around the office.**

7. Women will be forbidden from wearing come-fuck-me high heeled shoes or red lipstick in case they incite lust. Dressing in potato sacks would be greatly helpful in discouraging any unwanted "up-risings".
8. Chocolate is to be banned from the office canteen owing to a recent report out of America that 97 per cent of people think about sex whilst eating chocolates.
9. Definitely no more cunnilingus under the table during work hours. This has already contributed to the steep trend to home offices.
10. To prevent employees getting into trouble out of working hours there are to be no more night erections without signed permission from the female bed-partner witnessed by two people. Where possible penises should be hooked up to a car or house alarm for easy erection detection by the penis police.

OFFICE SEX

Whilst on the topic of office sex, a recent survey apparently discovered that men in offices think about sex approximately once every half-an-hour. If they are under 40 they think about having sex even more frequently.

This was reported in one of the women's magazines I picked up in the hairdressing salon recently.

The article told women not to be overly concerned by the fact their bosses and colleagues wanted to take them in the lift shaft, up against the wall in the office library, on the filing cabinet (ouch!) or - most frequent of all - pushed against the Xerox machine. It claimed these beastly thoughts never lasted for long and rarely translated into reality.

It said the wives of these office love-machines shouldn't fret either. Unlike the female sexual fantasy, the male fantasy was superficial and transient. It had no romance to it. Men were not yearning for intimacy and warm candle-lit dinners with their co-workers. A momentary mental flash of naked thigh against desk followed by a quick mental grope was about the extent of it.

What I want to ask the author of this article and, indeed, of the survey that inspired it is: Where? Where are all these highly potent males with bulging projectiles running around in business suits? Where are all these hot, throbbing, love-beasts with their minds full of wonderfully lusty, creative thoughts? Where are the heavy breathers with their sweaty palms who, at the very sight of a female co-worker, think immediately of 101 things to do with a Xerox? Tell me, because I'm gonna pack my briefcase and head over.

I have never in fact seen one of these creatures. Neither, I'm sure, have most of the working female population. Because, quite frankly, my experience with the male species in the workforce is that no matter how sexy and sexual a man is, the moment you put him near a desk or a computer, you've lost him.

Men get hard at the smell of ink. You can stand stark naked in front of him and do a tap dance on his desk, or do erotic eastern things with his balance sheet. But he isn't going to take the slightest bit of notice. In reality, you'd be hard pressed to find a man who had a sexual thought in the office every half-year, let alone every half-hour.

Putting a man in a business suit is like putting him in a tweed chastity belt. In all my years as a finance journalist working in various offices here and abroad and spending much time in the company of the button-and-tie brigade on Wall Street and in

other business centres, I have noticed men to be looking at anything other than their own performances.

Men in offices have but one thing on their minds: success. Sumptuous, heaving-breasted women don't even rate a mention during working hours. After hours, after the thrust and grind of nine-to-five, over a few drinks, at the office Christmas party, men are more than accommodating of a woman's thrusting bosom. Indeed, they are apt to reflect most fondly on such delicacies.

But the male is an extremely competitive creature and when in a competitive environment like an office, will not allow himself the luxury - consciously or not - of being distracted from the pressing task ahead.

Which brings me to my next point. It is a female fantasy that men sit back and contemplate the wonderment of us all - anatomical or otherwise. Because, in my experience, it is females who sit around and think about being swept off to exotic places like the Xerox room or the lift. It is women who dream of moments of intense passion, not all of which include a preceding candle-lit dinner.

I know plenty of women in senior positions who have this fantasy. They yearn for the romance of a passionate embrace, for the danger of an illicit moment. One woman I know recently took the upper hand, so to speak, and threw herself against a co worker in the office library. Apparently he was so shocked and so unable to handle the situation that he didn't come into work the next day.

Far from having a sexual thought every half-hour, he claimed later he never noticed her seductive advances. He never even noticed her, and she is one hell of a sexy, provocative lady.

When he was hovering over her looking "longingly" at her, he was actually wondering whether or not she had prepared the research material he was using. At a party recently, I told a female journalist that she should try working for my newspaper for a while. Her response was: "Are there any hot, heterosexual men in your office?"

It is an absolute myth that women are the perpetual victims of male lust. Modern women are equally in touch with their sexual urges, if not even more so than men. Or at least they allow themselves more time to indulge in the wonderful world of fantasy.

Nor is it true that women's fantasies are necessarily "romantic" while men think only lascivious and transient thoughts. I think the author of the article better get out more, or at least read Nancy Friday.

Last week I went to a female "bucks" night. The girls sat around all evening talking about men and sex. In stark contrast, the bride-to-be told us the next day that her fiancé and his merry band of men sat about discussing something equally exciting: the economy.

BAD MEN

My husband is appalled. I have parked myself in front of the television again to worship and ogle at TV's newest bad guy Sheriff Lucas Buck from the series American Gothic.

"How can you find him attractive," my husband laments as Buck performs a host of dastardly deeds. "He's a pig, a monster", he says to no avail. Seems the more

piggy and monstrous Lucas Buck is each week the more I am growing attracted to him. It is beyond my control and my husband's comprehension.

"Why do women love bastards?" he asks dolefully. It is the eternal question.

He is only just getting over the confusion of *Pride and Prejudice* where each week I would drop everything from work responsibilities to the baby, to watch the arrogant Darcy sulk, pout at the camera, sulk and then sulk some more. "But he just sneers all the time and looks really depressed!" said husband trying to fathom the weird phenomenon of female logic.

It is pointless trying to be logical with a woman on heat. The more Darcy sneered and bared his teeth like a wild dog, the more I swooned and sweated.

Similarly I went all gooey in the movie *Dangerous Liaisons* when actor John Malkovich flashed his tongue lasciviously and malevolently at sighing virgins. As he grew wicked, so too did I find myself sinking into the pits of lust. Sheriff Buck like a modern-day Heathcliff is possessed by demons and full of the horror of a tormented soul. And therein lies his profound and irresistible attraction to women.

"Why is it so?" my husband mutters "that women like bad men?" Quite regularly I get letters from men asking the same thing. One poor fellow recently wrote: "I thought women wanted nice men but I keep getting dumped for some bastard."

I agree that women get besotted with anti-heroes. Certainly my girlfriends have not failed to notice the sexual charisma of Lucas, Darcy or the recent smouldering eroticism of traditional clean boy Tom Cruise in *Interviews With a Vampire*.

One theory touted by psychologists is that modern women are inherently masochistic. Growing up with absent fathers who were always working and never available, we were weaned on deprivation. Hence we continue to struggle for daddy's attention and get hooked on the sexual appeal of depriving or unattainable male figures. Even strong women fall prey to this common childhood pattern which is compounded by the fact that nearly all of our childhood authority figures - from postmen to policemen - were male.

Sociologists reckon that this was reinforced by a generation of TV shows and movies where the heroes - whether good or evil - remained emotionally distant and absent. Even the goody-two-shoes Captain James Kirk was a remote and dysfunctional workaholic who could love nothing but his ship. I recently watched an episode where he was splashed with the most potent elixir in the galaxy, the tear of some beautiful alien woman. No man had ever been able to resist its power, falling immediately in love with the women. But Kirk was already consumed by a far greater love: *The Enterprise*.

Women have learned to be forever attracted to men who cannot make emotional connections or deal with intimacy. It's the *Sleeping Beauty* fairy-tale: we are in a state of perpetual waiting for the elusive prince to kiss us and awaken us from our sleep. The impact of this on female sexuality is profound with many women I know continually needing mind games, romantic and erotic dramas associated with the unattainable male, to fuel their libidos.

Whilst acknowledging the profound effect social forces like absent fathers, and remote heroes, had on my generation of women (and men for that matter) I think another plausible answer can be found in the animal kingdom.

It is not "bad" men that women fall for so much as that bad men are often powerful men. And power is the ultimate aphrodisiac. Sheriff Lucas Buck has

supernatural powers, Darcy was rich enough and elite enough to wear the sneer of arrogance. Heathcliff had risen through ill-begotten gains to rule over a large estate.

Hollywood has decided to churn out more movies and TV shows with anti-heroes in the power seat and it is very prevalently casting attractive male leads like Tom Cruise and Antonio Banderas in these "bad guy" roles to manipulate female hormonal desires.

So now we are attracted to power but have the added pleasure of battling internally with good and evil, and yielding pitifully to primordial lust.

I hasten to add that Sensitive New Age Guys should take heart. We women have wizened up over the decades. It isn't that we want to marry it or even spend an undue amount of time with powerful, bastard men or our absent fathers.

In fact it is impossible to imagine what sort of conversation one could expect with any of these heavy, remote dudes. Hard to enjoy chatting with Heathcliff about the puppy litter he just drowned, or with Sheriff Lucas Buck about the men he just hung. Even trying to talk to good old Captain Kirk - my childhood passion - about anything other than his ship's engine, would certainly draw a blank.

No boys, it is merely the sexual encounter we yearn for. The hormonal hit. We pine subconsciously to procreate with the most powerful beast in the jungle so we can make super children who will seek out new worlds and boldly go where no man has gone before. It's our biological imperative telling our personal needs to go jump.

For any bloke who doesn't get what I'm saying let me put it this way. What we feel is precisely the same instinct that makes you guys produce sperm when you set eyes on Pammy Anderson's mammories. But would you want to marry them?

CATCH THAT MAN

The million dollar question in the 90s for women seems to be how do you get a man and keep him. I say million dollar because there's a plethora of new books and courses available to concerned women all over the world offering the so-called "answer" to modern-day man troubles. And those writing them are reaping in the cash.

It seems women are in the grips of a global identity crisis unsure of how to attract men any more, unsure of how to get a man to play for keeps and to stop him from straying once you have him, in this age of ever-changing roles and new rules. Therapists and sexperts are claiming that so bad has the problem gotten that anyone coming up with pat answers is instantly becoming a marketing success.

The solution to the male-female dilemma may indeed be complex but that hasn't stopped thirtysomething American authors Sherrie Schneider and Ellen Fein putting out a book of mind-numbing simplicity: 'The Rules'.

Based on the wisdom of someone's grandmother, it preaches a return to 1950s behaviour - play hard to get, never call him or accept a date without three days notice, make him the centre of conversation. Despite critics complaints that the book is the greatest backward step for feminism since the wonderbra, and a complete backlash against strong women, it is fast becoming an international best seller.

Just reading The Rules is enough to give anyone with even the slightest feminist leanings a heart attack.

Rule 3. Don't stare at men or talk too much. Rule 5. Don't call him and rarely return his calls. Rule 6. Always end phone calls first. Rule 16. Don't tell him what to do.

Rule 17. Let him take the lead. Rule 12. Stop dating him if he doesn't buy you a romantic gift.... Rule 4. Don't meet him half-way or go dutch on a date. My favourite tells a woman no more than a casual kiss on the first date.

The authors write that 90s women have not been schooled in the basics of finding a husband or at least being very popular with men. This book promises to make women irresistible and desirable by teaching women how to give men the challenge of the chase.

Notions like coming on to a man, and equality, are definitely passé in this little bible of nostalgia. It is like stepping into *Pride and Prejudice* or another Jane Austen novel, and definitely indicates a harking back to the dark ages.

What no one has told all the lonely women who have bought the new myth hook, line, and sinker, or who are ringing up the authors at \$315-an-hour for a phone consultation, is that a big-mouth like me who stares at men's crotches, has always taken men to lunch and bed when it suited me, who always returns men's phone calls and who would drop everything at the drop of a hat for a good time, was never short of a date or a lover. And ended up most happily married. The challenge for men is in a woman's personality not behaviour.

The other how-to book that most caught my eye is the hot seller "Just Between Us Girls" co-authored by Sydney Biddle Barrows. The subtitle is: secrets about men from the Madame who made it her business to know.

Sydney Biddle Barrows was the 1980s version of infamous Hollywood Madame Heidi Fleiss. She once ran an up-market call-girl service in Manhattan which catered to the needs of the richest, most powerful men in the world: moguls, sheikhs, politicians. Now she has become mentor to middle-class women all over the country teaching them how to prevent their husbands from straying or going to call girls by - get ready for it - acting like call girls.

She is harking back to that old 50s wisdom: "A woman should be a whore in the bedroom, a chef in the kitchen...." I forgot the rest but I don't think it is "and a dynamo in the boardroom".

According to a contact of mine in the USA, it was rumoured that Barrows was recently invited to Los Angeles by the wives and girlfriends of several prominent film makers and entertainment industry moguls to take a course teaching them the sexual secrets of their men. These Hollywood wives were apparently so shaken by the Heidi Fleiss saga, they desperately wanted to know how to keep their men interested.

Like 'The Rules', Barrows' world is a very simple place. Basically it boils down to a few golden principals including letting your man be the centre of attention. She says let him be totally selfish every now and again. That's why men go to call girls.

She reinforces that a man falls in love through his eyes. She says good grooming is a source of real power and eroticism for women. Big turn offs include: hairspray, grey hair, too much makeup, clunky shoes, too much jewellery, outdated glasses, ratty underwear, red, "dragon lady" fingernails, heavy perfume, nasal, high-pitched or grating voices.

Reading through all this I had a terrible sense that Ms Barrows hadn't heard of the women's movement at all. But she redeems herself by adding that most men do like sexual self-confidence in a woman. She devotes lots of room to encouraging women to stop seeing themselves only as "wives" and find within themselves a sense of erotic adventure, a zest for the unpredictable.

She says men love a woman who will experiment with fantasy, and her body, and new experiences. But before feminists get too over-joyed, Barrows reminds us that men prefer blondes, in kitten-heels, who moan in bed.

I don't know how these books will line up in feminist history. I know one thing. I'm going to take Barrows' advice and moan more in bed. "God? Why god didn't you make me a blonde? Why, why..why?"

BITCHES

It is a commonly held view that women can never be trusted by other women. Your female friend will take your man the moment your back is turned. She will leer jealously at your hair, body and wardrobe as you stroll into the room. She will wish you well and secretly plot your downfall. Television shows, ads, pulp-fiction and songs continue to push this view of female-female relationships.

Watch your average soap opera and the message is clear. The moment Bliss's back is turned, Caress will run off with boyfriend Brick or ex-lover Clock (yes, these are real names given to characters from day-time television). October will do some dastardly deed to undermine the happiness of sister April. Sisters are always scheming to bring misery to each other.

There are countless ways to ensure a friend's demise. A favourite in soapie land is to undo the saddle strap on the girlfriend's horse so she will fall and smash her head or lose "his" baby. Women also tend push each other down the staircase ad nauseam. There are mud-wrestles, hair pulling, face slapping battles and, of course, fingernail fights. Betrayal being the name of the game.

I used to find TV portrayals of women amusing but when men started to express shock at my stable of female friends, warning me that I'd be back-stabbed or de-saddled, and women starting expressing fear about working for female bosses, I realised that the myth was seriously out of control. That the natural trust and empathy that I believe exists amongst women is being seriously undermined by false messages.

The "bitchy girlfriend" is a myth that won't go away. And although it is a widely held truism that women will talk, chat, gossip and be matey with women around them at work or play, deep and lasting friendships between women are generally portrayed as the exception not the rule. And god-forbid you should end up working for a woman.

The odd buddy movies like *Thelma and Louise* do little to debunk the myth because the lead characters are often portrayed as dysfunctional.

Recently there was a rather offensive ad on television which showed a woman talking to her girlfriend about her latest boyfriend. When she goes into the other room, the friend takes the boyfriend's phone number, intending to call him and steal him away.

For what it's worth, I have always found intimacy and trust between women to be the norm not the exception. My girlfriends are, and have always been, my pillars of strength. My female bosses have been supportive and inspirational.

Some say I have been lucky, or just chosen well. I disagree. Linguist Deborah Tannen describes a great leveling process in woman-woman relationships called "trouble talk" where women are apt to share the most visceral problems and details of their lives in order to create a form of bonding and intimacy.

This she says harks back to primitive times where women lived together in communities and nurtured and protected each other and the children, whilst the males were away killing beasts or making war.

Tannen says that most women work this way, and that even women at the top echelons of corporations or professions cannot resist the lure to meld with their sisters through the sharing of problems and perceptions. She says "trouble talk" is a wonderful female ability to cut through rank and to level the playing field, as opposed to male talk which is usually aimed at making the talker appear one rung higher on the greasy pole.

For every woman who has tried to block another woman's rise, there are men manipulating and contriving to keep younger talent at bay. For every unpleasant, pre-menstrual female boss or colleague there are ten mid-life crisis men lunging and plunging at anything they see, and throwing emotional wetties around the place.

I for one refuse to buy into any myth that destabilise women's natural attraction to the warmth, friendship, support and safety offered by our own sex.

TAKING IT LIKE A MAN

A few years ago, when I was a single lass, I had a very demeaning experience. The mother of all demeaning experiences in my strange, discordant life.

I met a beautiful man. A heart stopper. This was the sort of man whose female equivalent was the innocent Botticelli beauty or the ancient Greek goddess. He had both a gentle naivety and an awesome wisdom. More importantly he had long, long legs. They were always wrapped in torn jeans. He would flash those legs as provocatively as any woman, crossing and uncrossing them in front of females, slinking around the room, bending down to reveal a tight, muscle-bound tush at any excuse. And I fell desperately in lust with him.

In retrospect, the longing I felt for this man had more to do with the length of time between courses than anything else. I wanted to be in love so badly that I projected a lot of my own fantasies on to him. Reality ceased to exist. But at the time I was consumed with unrequited, uncontrollable adoration, lustful yearnings and a continual state of distraction at the mere mention of his name.

He was a close friend of my room-mate and had just broken up with his girl which meant that he often dropped in unannounced. I would rush around in makeup and stilettos from breakfast time to 2am in case he popped over.

Of course the Universe always loves to put it's finger in our little pies, so the guy would always, always drop by when I was just coming out of the shower with wet stringy hair and red, blotchy cheeks, or as I came puffing up the driveway in daggy tracksuit bottoms after a little trot round the block to keep in shape for the impending glorious union I was expecting.

Clip-clop, clip-clop, around the kitchen for eighteen hours and then the minute I was flopping around in "ugly" mode, presto! The door-bell would ring.

But despite the general inequity of Fate in the universal scheme of things he was obviously becoming attracted to me. He began flirting with me and popping in even when he knew my room-mate was not there. He said he loved my writing, and we spent hours pouring over my scribbles. Finally he asked me out.

Oh the dreams, the dreams and fantasies the thought of that date provoked. I stopped sleeping, tossing instead in a fitful frenzy. He would say: "Blah, blah, blah," then I would say: "Blah, blah, blah, blah," Then he would corner me against the wall and say: " Blah, blah, blah."

I would be blushing and demure as he held me in his strong arms and wrapped around me with his long legs.

There were other scenarios. Scores in fact. I went through every one of them from start to finish and then back again, through the long nights, so that when he made his move I'd be prepared. I did what so many girls secretly do behind the closed doors of their bedrooms. I kissed my own arm. I pashed on with my upper arm and rolled around creating the excitement that the anticipated event would bring.

It must be noted here for the record that women who haven't had sex for a while grow increasingly deranged. Even grown women. Specially grown women. It is because we are desperately hungry not just for sexual release but for something far more complex. We get a sort of skin hunger. A yearning to be held and touched and made whole.

In my dreams I always imagined my objet d'amour begging. I was always a little reticent. Holding back, provocatively as he was driven to fits of passionate despair. "Please, please," he would weep as I casually closed the front door.

Anyway, to cut a long, tragic story short, the date was nothing like I expected. It was a pleasant enough evening, but there were none of those long, smouldering glances that I had written into the script. And the crescendo - the last act - also did not conform to written requirements. I stood begging him to come in for coffee after he dropped me off at the front door, while he casually explained that he had to get up early for work.

Far from being discouraged, I used that as evidence of his burning passion for me. He was playing hard to get. I awarded each move of the evening with profound significance so as to keep the dream alive. By morning I felt fabulous because next time he popped in he'd say: "Blah, blah, blah," then attempt to "take" me somewhere between the laundry and the front room.

He must have popped in another twenty times. He never attempted to take me at all. So one terrible, terrible day which burns like a cancer in my memory, while he was walking towards the front door, I went charging down the hall with all the fury that delusionary behaviour and unrequited love inspires and threw myself at him. I jumped with such force he was actually flung against the front door which slammed shut. I attempted date rape.

I did it because I knew he needed assistance to get over his shyness with me.

I even kept telling myself this as he began peeling my wet hands off his shoulders and saying kindly: "Ummmm. I've patched things up with my ex. Let's be friends."

Let's be friends. Let's be friends. The cruellest three words in the English language. You're very attractive but... Oh, be still my burning cheeks! I used those words heartlessly for 20 years and the Universe had sent them back to haunt me. Karma without the Sutra.

I am telling this horrid tale for a reason. The same thing happened last week to a stunning girlfriend of mine who in anticipation of a night of love, wore the sexiest garter belt I'd ever seen and rang me up sobbing the next day.

It happened a month ago to another lovely girlfriend who was lead far further up the garden path before her partner zipped himself up and said that he didn't want to have to be forced to make a commitment so he'd rather abstain,

It's a new epidemic. Women moving on men. And having to suffer the consequences of their new-found power. Because in this exciting "take what you want" climate for sassy women comes the painful realisation that not everything is available.

In fact, many men are saying no to horny, sexually liberated women - because of fear of commitment, because of huge availability of stock, or simply because some conventional dick's don't respond well to strong, raunchy women taking control.

And it's a hard pill for women to swallow. More responsibility, more assertiveness and instigating, means more rejection, as it has always meant for men.

Some women claim it has made them stronger. Like men there are those with a competitive spirit who welcome brick walls. It makes them climb higher and harder. But others who are a little frailer in the ego department, talk of shattered morale, of feeling blinded by pain. Because women of my generation were not socialised to be rejected we are still floundering with the taking-it-on-the-chin mentality.

In fact in the treacherous new terrain we are conquering, I think it is going to be a long time before women fully understand the meaning and impact of those ever-brutal words: Take it Like a Man.

MACHO BABES

Something intriguing is happening to our cushier suburbs. These havens of opulence, these haunts of the rich and famous with their fabulous harbour views, boutiques, and women in haute couture, are rapidly turning into wild, uncharted, bushland. Smooth bitumen is turning into rugged dirt track. Harmless suburban trees are transmogrifying into dangerous, man-eating plants.

Well, it's a theory. How else does a normal, logical-thinking person explain the sudden epidemic of four wheel drives and jeeps with names like "Cherokee" and "Warrior" that have taken over the roads in the exclusive eastern suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne and the wealthier parts of other national cities.

Move over the Leyland Brothers. It seems it is no longer safe to sit outside a school at home-time unless you are barricaded in a vehicle more intimidating than the Pope-mobile. At 3pm, the streets outside Sydney's private schools are clogged with range rovers and monster jeeps with huge tyres. I know that children can become extremely hungry by the end of school but have they turned savage? Is this Lord of the Flies revisited? Do we need protection from untamed kids brandishing note pads and biro's like Zulu warriors descending on a village?

Parents will often claim that it is for the children's safety that they buy these huge, throbbing machines. But independent assessments have found jeeps no safer on the roads than ordinary cars, in fact they can more easily roll.

Perhaps parents are worried about what dangers lie in the 5-kilometre stretch along the harbour-side from school to home: tigers, wild game, a herd of wilder-beasts on the charge? Maybe a few terrorist gangs ready to turn Australia's inner suburbs into a new Bosnia. Perhaps mothers may have to drive through deadly swamps? Or navigate deftly over sand dunes?

Clearly these creatures are the new yuppie equivalent to the long fronted car. Now you are big, big vertically in these whopping, pulsating pieces of machinery. The big irony of the big car is that that it is mostly women behind the wheel of what can only be described as the most overt form of penis envy I've ever seen.

Women go tearing around in these bully mobiles, terrorising smaller cars, clogging the roads and feeling powerful and potent in their "my dick's bigger than yours" machine. This is the rich-bitch equivalent of the career grrrl. The domestic doll's answer to the briefcase or corporate shoulder-pad. The stay-at-home wife's version of pussy power.

Well-kept babes are buying well-paid women's fantasies - which are based on well-paid male fantasies - about escaping the pampered life and roughing it. But a quick peak into these bully jeeps reveal that most female drivers have never seen a dirt track in their lives. The long, red nails that clutch the over-sized steering wheel, coiffured blonde or brunette hair, thick red come-love-me lips, gold chains, haven't been wind-blown since the last blow-wave.

Suburban mums look so ridiculous trying to hoist themselves into their range rovers with their shopping bags whilst not breaking off a stiletto heel. One friend ventured that bored housewives liked bully jeeps because the height enabled them to perve on men's crotches as they drove passed.

To be fair, it is clear the massive roo bars are an advantage if you are about to encounter a rush of drought-starved kangaroos or emus running on to the road from Bondi Beach. It certainly was an advantage to a super-bitch the other day who tried to intimidate me in a car station to moving before I was ready by almost ramming me.

The fact is that many of the urban cowgirls who own these four-wheel drives can't handle their multi-functional gear sticks any more than our narrow suburban roads can handle them. But they feel fantastic dressing up in drag. They feel powerful and wild and free.

Perhaps a clever entrepreneur should open an equivalent to the car wash in the cushy suburbs - the "poser" wash. This will be a place you can drive your rich bitch jeep in to get mud thrown against the roo bar, and dead insects plastered in prominent places on the wind-screen to make it look like you've really been out the bush. Ah... boys and their toys.

THE SMELL OF SUCCESS

Of all the romantic things that can happen to a woman, having something of worth named after her by a creative man, or becoming the subject of a work of art or poem, ranks most highly.

Most women can only clench their teeth in envy at the lucky ladies whose names head-up the love songs we hear on the radio, or who - like the great Mona Lisa - have faces that adorn great paintings to peer, for eternity, out at the world.

Having a perfume named after you is possibly the most romantic of romantic things that can befall a maiden.

Well, I too have had something special named after me. It isn't quite a painting, but a work of art, nonetheless. It isn't quite a perfume but it is linked to the olfactory system. One of my former beaus, in a moment of great passion, once named a shoe after me. The Ruth Shoe.

The Ruth Shoe arose because the fellow, who designed and made shoes, commented that my feet were apt to smell in Summer. To avoid the unpleasantness that followed the removal of my shoes on hot Summer nights, he designed a shoe which had discreet holes all along the sides to act as ventilation. Basically, to help the pong escape before I arrived at his door.

The Ruth Shoe, advertised on the box as "a shoe for the elegant woman who wants to dance all night and remain elegant," did very well that season. In fact it sold out. At the time, I was delighted to have my name jealously bandied about shoe-shops around the country although in retrospect, a song or a passionate perfume called "Ruthless" would have done me better.

I was surprised the clever Ruth Shoe did not emerge the following season. I guess it had something to do with the fact that my beau had already moved on to more delicate hooves.

Which brings me to the point of this column. I was forced to think about my feet last weekend after I read an article about self loathing. An article in a women's magazine discussed how we are all prone to dislike ourselves at times and engage in rather brutal self hatred. This usually manifests itself in obsessive dwelling on a particular part of the body which one choses to blame for one's miseries or to use as the body's whipping boy.

The story told how the world's most beautiful women deeply resented parts of themselves. Jerry Hall allegedly hates her "crossed front teeth". Michelle Pfeiffer is reputed to have said that she can't understand what men see in her. "I have a face like a duck. At school I was teased so ruthlessly, I'd run home weeping."

In the article it claims that Kim Basinger hates her mouth because it is "too big" and "ugly", while Jessica Lange apparently hates her nose which was injured when she fell against a parking meter as a child. Daryl Hannah sees herself as a gangly bean-pole and hates her crooked nose, stringy hair and blotches. Even Katharine Hepburn in an old TV interview said she could not see herself as particularly attractive.

These women all blame their physical imperfections for the various sadnesses and failures that have dogged their lives.

As I was reading, my feet started tapping nervously under the table. They knew what was coming. "Shut up," I yelled down at them because my ill-shaped feet have always worn most of my inner hostility. In truth, I blame my strange feet for much of what has gone wrong with my life. They have slowed me down at each turn.

I have hated my feet since I was a child. At first everyone used to make a big fuss of me because of my "cute, fat, little feet". Later, my legs grew longer but my feet stayed the same. Which was still okay because mum didn't have to buy me new shoes every year like other mothers did, so everyone remained really happy with my cute feet.

But by 16, my feet hadn't really grown much at all. They were, and have since remained, the smallest, fattest feet of anyone I know. Because they are so small and have had to carry a substantial weight, they have completely flattened at the base. So they are short, fat, flat feet. They are as wide as they are long. "Duck feet, duck feet," they used to sneer at school.

While other teenage girls yearned for big blonde Farrah Fawsett hair, and boys yearned for huge dongs, I used to watch other people's big feet with envy. At parties, I'd secretly wear my mothers shoes, stuffing socks into the toe area to keep the shoes on. I looked good but could never walk or dance.

And why my feet began to pong in Summer was because I could never find a shoe that fitted properly. Any shoe small enough to fit length-wise, was always too narrow and squashed my foot to death in the sweltering mini-coffins I wore.

I spent my youth shuffling about in cramped shoes until one happy day. Just as Destiny brought the big-teethed Jerry Hall the impossibly bigger-teethed Mick Jagger to make her feel better, Fate brought a beau who knew about shoes. He told me I could have lasts made to fit my own foot size - which changed, if nothing else, the speed at which I moved through life.

As I now read the article on hated body parts something dawns on me. Perhaps my feet, rather than slowing me down in life, have actually carried me on to success in the same way the plethora of insecurities seem to have driven these starlets forward.

After all, I was always so worried people would look at and laugh at my feet, I worked very hard to keep their attention focused on everything above the knee, spending much time on the art of conversation and humour. I developed my personality, and social skills figuring that if anyone had time to get down to my feet, I wasn't doing my job.

Do I owe it all to you, my fat, little, squashed dumplings? My Achilles heels? And could it be our impediments are, indeed, always our advantages, because they drive us on to better things?

PMS NOW!

"Women are strange mysterious creatures," my husband mutters as he wanders around from room to room. "So, so irrational. So unpredictable. All that stuff going on inside them," he moans under his breath.

It is not the first time I have heard him bleating. It's that time of month again and he knows that his beautiful, gentle wife so warm and fluffy, his "little butter-ball" as he likes to call me suddenly becomes the three-eyed monster from the black lagoon, the horned beast, a grizzly, foul-tempered little troll - horrible one minute, deranged the next.

He ruminates loudly about the time I rammed my car into another car just because the driver was attempting to back into a parking spot I had seen first. He mumbles about the time he had to pick lumps of food off one of our treasured paintings after the roast chicken flew across the room during one of my PMS (Pre-Menstrual Syndrome) turns.

He knows too well the tell tale signs, those puffy eyes, swollen and aching limbs, everything being done in slow motion with lots of moaning and complaining. He knows well the frustration of glaring into the vacant eyes of a pea head who can no longer tell left from right, the depressions, hyper-sensitivity followed ultimately by the emotional avalanche from hell.

"My goodness, could it be that time of month already butter-ball?" he says sweetly, whilst running to find cover.

My fellow sisters hate me talking this way. True feminists are not allowed to admit we get PMS in case men find out that we are female and hence hormonally different to them. They will then use it against us in the work-force to put up glass ceilings, wooden doors, concrete road blocks, ten tonne mountains. mile high fortresses and a banana skin. But girls, girls, girls - let's get real!

It doesn't affect your career progress to have the occasional "off" day or two every month any more than it affects a bloke to have his mid-life crisis very publicly or fall victim to his testosterone urges of aggression or passion - to come back from lunch every other week sloshed to the eyeballs. But it certainly does affect your relationships at home.

And it's high time we started telling the truth. Pre-menstrual women are yucky, yucky creatures who bark like wild beasts one minute and weep uncontrollably the next. The only mitigating factor is that the cocktail of hormones gone wild does something fantastic to the female libido. Hot sex is on the cards - for the man brave enough to risk mating with a tarantula, that is.

As a gift to my long suffering husband, and all the confused husbands and boyfriends of the world, I am going to try and explain why so many of us become hateful little trolls before our periods.

From speaking to my gynaecologist I have discovered that the answer lies in understanding women's hormonal cycles. Recent studies into Menopause have been particularly useful in unlocking the mysteries of female behaviour.

It is now widely believed that Menopausal women become deficient in oestrogen. As a result, feelings of well-being and energy can disappear and many women can become mighty grumpy, particularly those having regular hot flushes. Others say they feel permanently confused, especially in relation to maths or direction.

Let me give an example. Last year I was picked up from the airport in Melbourne by an older female friend of mine. We travelled swiftly down the Tullamarine Freeway without a hitch. But when we hit town, a strange thing happened.

My friend, who has driven back and forth from the airport for many years and who has lived in Melbourne for most of her 50 years of life, suddenly turned and went the wrong way.

"Where are we going?" I asked, astonished. "I thought you were taking me to the Eastern suburbs."

"We are going to the Eastern suburbs," she assured me, continuing to drive to the outskirts of the city which lead, ultimately, to the Hume Highway and back to Sydney.

I sat pondering our fate. I started to argue, but was told to stop being bossy. So I remained silent as the streets grew foreign and the surrounding landscape more unfamiliar and confusing. Finally a sign flashed into view which indicated that we were, in fact, heading back towards Sydney.

"What's happening here?" My friend asked in shock. "They've changed the city."

"No," I said gently. "You've just lost your way." Then she pulled over, put her head in her hands and began to weep. "I'm so confused," she sobbed. "I'm going through Menopause and I've suddenly lost all sense of direction. Some days I can't make out where I am."

Apparently it is quite common for Menopausal women to experience blinding confusion due to disturbed chemical cocktails. But what has all this got to do with PMS? As with Menopause, pregnancy or breast feeding, there are huge hormonal fluctuations that occur during the menstrual cycle, with no less than seven hormones involved.

Some of the hormones that are necessary for feeling okay are in very low supply by the end of the cycle. As with Menopause, Oestrogen is apparently at its lowest ebb just before menstruation. Meanwhile it was recently argued in England that a woman who committed murder, was not producing a hormone or chemical vital for inhibiting violent impulses in humans, at this time of month.

Like my poor Menopausal friend, I too have noticed that I suffer from a similar geographical dyslexia on the roads at 'that' time of the month.

Experts in the United States and Canada have recently completed a series of tests which they claim show the direct correlation between hormones, menstrual cycles, and the ability for the human brain to negotiate spatial relationships, directions and solve numerical problems.

It is been shown that when Menopausal women are given oestrogen and other hormones in the form of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) many cheer up. The woman I just described claims that after being on HRT for a few months, the feeling of foggy headedness was replaced with clarity of vision and a sense of exuberance.

There are many in the medical and psychiatric fields who are openly sceptical that PMS exists, saying that it's all in the head. This is largely fuelled by the fact that not all women metabolise hormones at the same rate, and hence not all women suffer PMS to the same degree. Similarly, not all Menopausal women have the same symptoms.

Some lucky women don't suffer PMS at all, but most women I know have some disruption and are simply too frightened to own up to it.

Those more enlightened researchers and thinkers such as my gynaecologist look at the treatment of menopausal women and make the connection. It is increasingly evident that many women are the victim of their hormones as many men are now believed to be.

Does this information help anyone? It can and will when women are prepared to stop hiding from the feminist thought police and start demanding more medical and scientific investigation into what it means to be a woman - in the fullest hormonal sense of the word.

WHEN MOTHER COMES TO STAY

PS. This story was written just before I met my husband.

A week before my mother comes to stay I have a recurring nightmare. She walks into the apartment I have just bought and stands in the middle of the room with a disapproving look on her face. The apartment isn't much to look at inside - your standard small flat, basic furniture. But the view is something quite stunning. Overwhelming, in fact.

I drag her over to the windows to show off the panorama but heavy curtains have suddenly appeared. And they won't open. I am desperately trying to explain the view of the ocean and cliffs outside the window as I yank at the rigid material, but she continues to look around the average flat, disappointed.

Eventually she walks away.

I know the dream is about trying to justify to her what I have become, and the decisions I've made in my life. I know it's about wanting her approval. I know also that with our parents, those curtains never really open, no matter how hard we try to reveal the beauty and success behind them.

Before mum arrives I do everything she has taught me to do. I do a thorough shop, I vacuum and dust till every last speck is removed. I clean behind the stove and the toilet. No hairs on the floor. No dirt behind the sink (or my ears). My flat is "so clean you could eat off the floor" - the boast of my family. Normally you could eat off my floor all right, so much food about.

It has taken me all of my thirtysomething years to break away from mother. To learn that I am not her. That I don't have to have the same feelings, values, ideas. It has taken me all that time to stop feeling guilty that I'm not her.

And so she lands, and the tour of my life begins. No heavy curtains mysteriously appear on the windows of my flat. The sun has turned on a glorious treat and the views are sparkling as she makes the appropriate "wow" type noises.

For an hour she is forced to watch all my TV appearances on tape and make the appropriate "wow" noises, and look at every acquisition of mine and make the appropriate "wow" noises. And only when I am content that she is truly, undoubtedly, impressed with what I have done with my life, and that my career has exceeded all of her wildest expectations, and that everyone back home is suitably impressed, do I settle back onto the couch relaxed.

But while the waves crash loudly outside my open window the mysterious curtain starts creeping down, down....

"Did you know your old friend Shelly got married last week?" mum asks innocuously.

I feel my gut tense up. "I haven't spoken to Shelly for twelve years, mum. She's not a friend."

"Well, anyway she got married."

"That's nice mum."

"And your cousin Sam just got engaged. Did you know?"

"No mum. But that's very nice."

That curtain is beginning to stick to the window. "And your friend from school, Kathy. Well she just had a baby." I begin pulling at the curtains. In my head I'm crying: "Look at my view. Look at my achievement. Mum, can't you see it?"

Instead I say: "Mum. I don't remember Kathy. I'm not really interested in these people."

"Well, I thought you may like to know. Oh, by the way, my friend Betty's daughter just had a baby girl. I'd gone to their wedding. It was lovely."

You can clean your cupboards. You can clean your floors. But you can never sweep away the truth. It sits like a large stain in the centre of the room. In the centre of my life. In the centre of my relationship with my mother.

At my age she already had more children than I've had hot breakfasts. There is a home-movie of mum, aged twenty-something, with several fat babies hanging from her arms. She would have had more if she had the strength.

"You work so hard," she says, turning over the pages of a magazine I recently appeared in. "You seem....well, I don't mean to be critical, but... obsessed with your career."

"Yes mum," I sigh. "I am obsessed with my career."

"Will it make you happy in the end?"

"It makes me happy now."

"But what about love?"

"I am in love. I love my life, my work, my writing, the creativity, the independence that comes from it, my friends."

"But it's not healthy. It's dangerous to be so obsessed with your career. It's not balanced. If you lose your job you'll be devastated."

"If women lose their husbands or get divorced they are devastated too. But you wouldn't tell me it's dangerous if I loved my husband or child to the point of obsession."

Silence.

"But you don't have a child and a husband, so it's a mute point isn't it?" she snaps, turning away from me.

The ocean continues to lap against the cliff outside my window. The window in the apartment I bought and renovated by myself from the fruits of my work. Every column is like a child for me created and nursed and worried about. Every TV segment, every speech is born from my labour. I don't feel empty for not having had a baby. And yet I feel guilty for not feeling empty.

I look at mum's face - the confusion, the sadness, her love for me, her worry - and I feel an overwhelming need to placate her. "I will get married and have children. I do want those things. But not just yet. I'm so young. There's plenty of time. There are so many things I want to do first, to learn, to experience. Today, women can have everything."

For a moment I think she sees the vista from the window - the great expanse of my life stretched out before me. But the words: "Downes Syndrome" suddenly emerge from her lips, along with "higher risk... old eggs...tired body...biological clock..." She says sadly: "You'll be a very unfulfilled woman..."

Like my dream, she walks off towards my tiny kitchen as I stand tugging desperately at the heavy curtain that is suddenly descending on my life.

30 NOT OUT

My husband has carted me off to the doctor. He is really worried. Something serious had started to happen to my hormones over the past 12 months. Something really serious, indeed.

Despite the sleep deprivation that comes with having a small child, despite the endless hours of work, despite discussions about bills and cars breaking down and leaking pipes, my libido is shining through. In fact, it is shining through like a flood light.

To put it delicately, I have loving on the brain. Probably 24 hours a day. "Your are turning into a sex addict," my husband quivers as he reads an article on the topic in a woman's magazine. Sex addict is the new hip term for the terminally excited.

In the old days when you got too horny they called you a stud, a nympho, promiscuous or just plain old lucky. Now people who think about sex too much or who want it too much are locked away in an institution and forced to confess: "I loved five women today," or "I loved only one man, but I loved him every fifteen minutes for two years solid." Sort of like an Alcoholics Anonymous for the sexually deranged.

The doctor is very amused by my anxious husband. He grins at me as he answers. "No, your wife is not a sex addict or abnormal in any way. I am happy to announce that you are the proud owner of a regular female in her 30s."

"Females in their 30s," he says laughing, "are at their sexual peak. They are like 18 year old boys. Bombarded with libidinous urges, overcome with hormones. Flushed with excitement all day, every day. They're terrific," he said beaming from ear to ear. "I wish I had one..."

He is right. Females in their 30s are everywhere, running riot around the streets. Bizarre hormone cocktails swirling in their bodies like adolescent school boys. Like smouldering volcanoes always threatening to explode in a gush of molten lava.

They are the girls with breasts sprouting out of tight vests. They are the lunatic people who go to Chippendale's and bark sexual obscenities at the toy boys on stage. They are the women who crotch-watch men from cafe windows, who run off from marriages into the waiting arms of illicit lovers or to buy huge, plug-in vibrators. They are my friends.

Indeed if you hear the hum of an electronic devise for more than an hour at a time from next door, and your TV goes crazy from the static, you can be certain a female in her 30s lives there.

Females in their 30s are the burgeoning new class of females going to male escort agencies. They are not revolutionary. They can't think straight enough to be making a political statement about sexual freedom.

Most men don't know what to do being married to a female in her 30s. My husband tries tactfully to ignore me when I spontaneously wolf-whistle out of the car window. He describes it as "hell on earth." But the sex doctor consoles him by telling him that he only has to put up with this for a few more years then I will plunge headlong into that dank, dark state called menopause.

Why is there such a surge in females in their 30s? Or if there has always existed this rampant species, then why have they suddenly become so visible? Where are they all coming from? my husband wants to know.

Indeed, there have been females in their 30s since the dawn of time. But in the 90s they are not stuck at home with thirteen children, too tired to even realise they have a libido. They are in the workforce with kids in day-care when it hits. When the truck of love runs over their heads. They have all their options open so to speak, looking great well into their 40s, many with economic freedom.

By why now? my husband laments. Why from ages 30 to 40 not at a better time suited to men? The doctor explains that this is the female body's last hurrah before menopause. Nature's last attempt to get women out and procreating on mass before the final capacity dries up.

According to some therapists, this fuzzy-headed hormonal time may well account for the huge swing in infidelity amongst married women. The 30s are a very vulnerable time for married women and can be likened to the male's mid-life crisis.

Recent statistics confirmed the degree of the problem. Only last month a major survey presented to the Association of European Psychiatrists in London confirmed that women's libidos were on the rise as men's were declining. From ages 28 to 35 men's libido dropped 11 per cent whilst women interviewed showed far more sexual desire at ages 30 to 40 than at age 20.

The session is over. But my husband won't leave. "Please don't make me go home doctor....I can't take any more," he says, clinging to the chair, just another desperate male voice crying out for mercy and understanding in a world suddenly brimming with females in their 30s.

READER'S LETTERS

Dear Ruth,

If, as a woman in her thirties, you are finding the constant urge to have sex a bit overwhelming, just wait till you hit forty! Mrs S, Brisbane, QLD

Dear Ruth,

Forget about plunging into "dank, dark menopause". What about HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy)? No more fear of pregnancies or children popping unexpected into bedrooms. Sex is great, better than it has ever been. I thought I was frigid until I reached this age. Avid Reader, NSW

Dear Ruth,

I am now in my late forties and the great majority of my friends the same age, all agree that this is the most sexual time of our lives. My husband, middle fifties, pretended to be impotent, but was having an affair with a woman who was also in her fifties (and had gone through menopause). So I guess there is no end to this sexual drive for women. I am sure you will receive a lot of mail from older women who will assure you that you don't have a monopoly on sex in the thirties. J., Shailer Park, QLD

Dear Ruth,

I believe there is one real reason why men stray. Because females seduce them. In my 60 odd years of my sexual activity, I had sex with 69 separate women. In all these, not once was I the hunter. In each case, the females seduced me to have sex with them. And I co-operated, for after all, I am human. Anon, Renmark, SA

Dear Ruth,

I'm sick of women saying to me "all men want is sex". I'm in my forties, and after three relationships I'm still looking for that man who only wants sex. None so far can keep up with me. All I want is a man who can respect me and have fun - and whatever the time of the day, enjoy sex. Ms K., QLD

Ruth Ostrow,

When are you girls going to wake up and realise that most men do not like assertive and/or feminist women. No real man is going to put up with being told what to do and be continually criticised by any woman. While I agree women are entitled to equal pay and equal rights, we are not going to tolerate outspoken loudmouth women. Try being

more like your mothers, waving goodbye to your men when they go to work and greeting them at the door when they come home. John, Mosman, NSW

Dear Ruth,

Of course there is a very sensible reason for all adolescent females to learn to "pleasure" oneself. The fastest most effective way to relieve ovulation and period pain as well as PMS is orgasm. Also great for insomnia! It is faster acting than Panadol, no chance of allergic reaction, without the need of a man to operate the mechanics and is the epitome of self-empowerment. Anon., Mundingburra, QLD.

Dear Ruth,

I had been a faithful wife for 27 years. During this time not once did I have an orgasm. Then I met a wonderful man who treats me like a delicate flower. Every time we have made love I have orgasmed, and oh, how I have orgasmed. Pure bliss! Ladies, don't ever think that sex is a waste of time and that the man should get all the enjoyment! Contented, Mackay, QLD.

Dear Ruth,

You asked us to share our fantasies. As a feminist and career woman, I have always felt uncomfortable about my fantasies to be dominated, tied up and forced to submit. In reality, I am disgusted by such acts, yet privately they excite me. I am interested to hear if other women have the same conflict. Anon.

Dear Ruth,

I was one who did all the special things for my man, but I now feel uncomfortable about being naked in front of him. Since breast-feeding my bust size has gone right down, and when your partner says things like, "your tits aren't big enough", it can really hurt and make you feel quite inadequate. If it weren't for men being so paranoid over women's bodies, then we'd all feel a little more comfortable with the way we look. Kerry, Banksia Park, SA.

Dear Ruth,

A year or so after my husband passed away, a concerned girlfriend of mine - knowing I was frustrated with normal sexual urges, but not wanting me to be with another man - introduced me to a Japanese vibrator. The pleasures and enormous satisfaction are unbelievable, enabling me to at last get on with my life. There must be thousands of women out there in similar situations as myself. Anon, Burleigh Heads, QLD.