



SARAH BARMAK

CLOSER

NOTES FROM THE ORGASMIC
FRONTIER OF FEMALE SEXUALITY



SARAH BARMAN

CLOSER

NOTES FROM THE ORGASMIC
FRONTIER OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

COACH HOUSE BOOKS, TORONTO

Well you see like a woman has a few things going for her, not very many but she has a few things going for her and one of them is uh, dare I mention it, a clit-clitoris and uh, whooo, a clitoris, yes. And what happens is that this old, this old clitoris of hers, it starts to thumpin. It starts to thumpin and it starts to humpin, and it starts to throbbin and it starts to sobbin, and this old !%6* %4*& %*?&! \$;//1 WHOOOOO! Well what happens is that you lie there and you get sort of helpless see, and like you get, it's kinda freeze it's kinda like a coke freeze if you know what I'm talkin about. Okay so you get this freeze and like you feel kind of helpless and you're lying there and it's like this little tiny part of you starts to scream this really really fine, exquisite, high pitched scream and it's, it's like a wire, it's kind of like a wire that leads out into the sun that you find yourself being flung along arbitrarily and you don't mind in the least, you know you just go whoo-oo, you just go up there and um, it's good sheet, yeh coming is good sheet.

– 'Georgiana,' interviewed by A.S.A. Harrison in *Twenty-Two Women Talk Frankly about Their Orgasms* (Coach House Press, 1974)

Fear of Pleasure

In a sex-obsessed culture, not all of us feel at home.

There was something mysterious the matter with me, something that could not be put right like bad breath or over-looked like pimples, and everybody knew it, and I knew it; I had known it all along.

– Alice Munro, ‘Red Dress’

The ladies trickle, slowly and tentatively, into the sex shop. Rather than turning right through the main door toward the sales floor’s hot-pink vibrators and tattooed staff, they keep left, climbing a narrow staircase into a little carpeted attic. They shake rainwater off their umbrellas and find seats in the circle of chairs, scooting around each other and mumbling *excuse mes* and *sorrys*. They look shyly at their laps, poke at their phones. One floor above the array of silicone toys promising advanced pleasure to the adventurous, these fifteen or so women aged twenty to sixty are here on a much braver quest: to learn how to have an orgasm. For nearly all, it will be their first one.

In contrast to the riotous main floor of Good For Her, Toronto’s sex store built for women, the quiet attic is solemn, its lights soft. The five-hour workshop, held on a drizzly Sunday morning in April, isn’t meant for drop-ins. Participants have planned many weeks in advance, driving in from surrounding suburbs, leaving kids with grandparents or husbands.

The store’s founder, Carlyle Jansen, stands, tall and self-contained. ‘This is probably the first time you’ve been around people who understand you,’ she says softly. She asks everyone to say their name, a little about why they’re here and, lastly, to share something they have recently learned.

The room is quiet. Someone clears her throat.

'Hi, I'm Sherry. I've never had an orgasm,' begins one woman, with a mix of reluctance and relief. 'Um ... and I'm learning to salsa dance.'

'Thank you, Sherry,' says Jansen.

'My name's Maya,' says a young woman (names and identifying details of participants have been changed). 'I've never had an orgasm. Growing up I never masturbated or anything. I didn't find it pleasurable. I just felt really like, why am I doing this? Anyway. And juicing's my new thing.'

Like alcoholics at an AA meeting, they each make their admission. There is Denise, who says apologetically that she's 'from the suburbs.' She laughs, then blurts out a story. 'I was sexually molested by my cousin when I was seven. Messed up, right? I only lost my virginity when I was twenty-eight. I faked it.' Tears well up in her eyes.

The women are married, divorced, single. They're all straight - except, perhaps, for one who keeps asking how she'd know if she was a lesbian. Dressed in sensible sweaters and jeans, they cross their ankles under their chairs. Most seem as though they have deliberately avoided the topic of whether they're satisfied with their sex lives until now.

'I'm forty-seven,' says a woman named Jill. 'Three weeks ago I went on OkCupid. And I made out with a bartender. I thought my vagina was dead. When I talked to this guy, my vagina started *tingling*.' Laughter ripples around the room. 'I'm like, what is that? It's never happened in my life. And it's kind of scary because I don't want -' Jill's voice cracks. 'I don't want to be addicted to this guy. I don't want him to have that kind of power.'

'You won't,' says Jansen, gently. 'It's *your* power.'

'I'm married,' says one woman. 'We have a really loving marriage now, but for a while we had a pretty bad sex life. I remember after my son was born they didn't stitch me up

properly so it was very, very painful. And it didn't matter to my husband, so I had to have sex a lot ...'

'I was molested by my cousin when I was about thirteen,' says a participant named Kathleen. 'I don't think I knew I had a vagina until I was an undergrad. I thought I was frigid. And I don't know if it's because of what happened to me as a child or not, but I've never been - like, I can get myself to a precipice, but I can never ... right?'

'Yeah, uh-huh,' says someone.

'Like it becomes too intense, and I can't,' says another.

'Anybody feel like they get stuck on that edge, that precipice?' asks Jansen. There are muttered yeses.

'I feel it's that my body might be ready to, but I'm not,' offers one woman.

'Anybody ever have the experience, you're having sex but you're just there, you're not noticing what's going on?' asks Jansen. 'You're not feeling what's going on down there when you're in your head thinking about "Am I going to have an orgasm? Am I not? Am I wet enough? Do I look sexy?"'

'And those *noises*,' offers Jill. 'When you're self-conscious, you're like, "Oh, that sounds weird." How do you stop thinking? *How do you stop thinking?*'

'It was my birthday last week,' says a woman named Michelle. 'I'm fifty-six. I don't want to be single anymore. And I think I use this as an excuse. Because you can have relationships even though you don't have orgasms, right? But I can't. Or I've set up that block for myself, right?'

'I finally want to have a real orgasm. I think I deserve that. That's why I'm here.'

'For me there's a lot of shame wrapped up in this topic.'

'I'm excited and I'm also terrified.'

'I've spent my whole life running the other way. And I'm ready to stop doing that.'

'I signed up for this course, okay?' says Denise, wiping tears off her cheeks. 'I drove here. I'm proud of myself. This is all very scary for me.'

'Can anyone else relate?' asks Jansen. There are murmured yeses.

The women in the room don't come from especially repressive households. For the most part, they hail from Toronto, Etobicoke, Guelph – in a province governed by a lesbian premier, surely among the most progressive places in the world for girls to grow up. Some have suffered trauma and molestation, but not all. What they share is a secret. This special thing that is supposed to happen in the bodies of 'normal' women – ideally in a shower of stars and rainbows and *wow* – refuses to happen, and they don't know why. Some can't touch themselves. Some won't let anyone perform oral sex on them because they think their privates are 'weird' and 'dirty.' A couple of them have 'gotten there' – but only if their partners aren't in the room.

There is no pill they can take, no doctor they can see. The secret compounds with age: the older they get, the more some figure they should just let the whole thing go. To some, too, it feels self-indulgent to even complain about such a thing. What's an orgasm, anyway? Just a momentary *pop* that disappears as soon as it's begun. It's not a *real* problem. Yet all these busy, seemingly practical women are here.

'I am *afraid* to have an orgasm,' says Denise. She leans forward, her bangs hanging over reddened eyes. 'I'm afraid of losing control ... I think I've come close, maybe. But I stop myself, because I'm *afraid*.'

'Yup. Anybody else?' asks Jansen.

Hands go up around the room.

A half-century ago, the story goes, there was a sexual revolution. Skirts got shorter, rock 'n' roll got louder and sexuality was freed from its chains. We could pinpoint the exact moment,

if we like, to 1956, when Elvis Presley caused a ruckus by gyrating his pelvis on black-and-white television: his hip-thrusting was so dangerous that the cameramen on *The Ed Sullivan Show* were instructed to film him from the waist up. Or maybe the revolution really happened in the sixties, when the birth-control pill was approved in the U.S. (and eventually Canada), permanently disentangling the act of intercourse from its most common hazard – pregnancy. In theory, it freed millions of women to do the thing men had always felt free to do.

From that decade onward, human sexuality was set loose to do its freaky, funky thing. Freudian psychology and the collective hormones of young baby boomers combined to liberate sex from the repressive jail it had been held in throughout history. It was all Ursula Andress in a wet bikini on the beach and copies of *Playboy* in the dentist's office and Alfred Kinsey and Woody Allen telling us everything about which we were once, but no longer, afraid to ask.

Cut to a couple generations later, and our modern world is pure sex. Images of graphic coupling (or tripling, or quintupling) are instantly available at the touch of a smartphone. The average music video has more high-definition close-ups of glistening, naked glutes than porn had in the seventies. Indeed, porn has become our mainstream aesthetic. Our ideal body is one that is sculpted, tanned and hairless – ready for nudity at a moment's notice, as if a tripod, some Klieg lights and a mustachioed director are always lurking around the next corner. In other words, the world couldn't get any more liberated than it already is, and if it could, one wouldn't want it to.

Reality, however, is more complicated. Although we appear liberated on the surface – our clothing, our language and our media are more explicit than ever before – many of us feel overwhelmed, struggling to make space for our individual sexuality among so many idealized images. And if the person you ask is a woman, it may not be clear what the sexual revolution did for her.

A striking number of women today have a sexual complaint. Over half report some kind of difficulty with sex, according to Britain's 2013 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, and more than one in ten are distressed about their sex life. Up to 40 percent of women aged sixteen to forty-four say they lack motivation to have sex. Dyspareunia, persistent pain during vaginal penetration, affects 8 percent of women, particularly those under thirty-five. The 2013 survey also found 16 percent of women complained of anorgasmia, the difficulty with or inability to orgasm, and 12 percent said they just don't enjoy sex. Many more women have never climaxed, or aren't sure – about 16 percent of women aged twenty-eight or younger, in fact. Amid the mainstream women's magazines spurring us on to *Bigger! Longer! and Multiples!*, it's an issue that must feel invisible.

Most striking is the so-called 'orgasm gap': a mere 57 percent of women aged eighteen to forty usually climax during sex with a male partner, while their partners come 95 percent of the time, according to a 2015 *Cosmopolitan* survey of over 2,300 women, conducted by Anna Breslaw and others. Keep in mind that these numbers come from cultures we think of as relatively sexually liberated – Canada, the U.S. and Great Britain.

In other words, a lot of ordinary women have a bad time in bed. But because we've avoided studying women's sexuality for so long, we don't have much of an understanding of why this is. Despite the rise of sexuality studies in the sixties and seventies and the eruption of new research on men's sexual issues following the 1998 U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval of sildenafil (Viagra) to treat erectile dysfunction, comparatively little research has been done into women's sexuality (and even less has addressed the experiences of gay and trans men and women). A 2006 search of the U.S. National Library of Medicine found it held 14,000 publications on male sexual disorders, but only 5,000 on those affecting women,

according to the book *The Science of Orgasm*. That's almost three times as many studies of male sexual problems than of those experienced by women, even though many experts characterize women's sexuality as more complex.

Drug companies have been eyeing the ranks of unfulfilled women as a potential marketer's bonanza. For years, a race has been on to develop a miracle treatment for women's sexual ills – a pill, cream, injection or even surgery that could give women the ability to feel urgent desire or to have bigger, more satisfying climaxes on demand. Dissatisfaction has made some women desperate for medical solutions. Some even risk painful and dangerous procedures such as clitoral-hood surgery, where tissue is cut away to increase sensitivity, as well as to try and emulate the neat, tidy genitalia seen in porn – a designer vulva. At stake in this medical push are untold profits: annual sales of Viagra stand at around US\$2 billion. Its main developer, Dr. Simon Campbell, got a knighthood in 2014 for services rendered to science and mankind.

Despite nearly two decades of searching for a 'pink Viagra,' however, drug companies have failed. Women's sexual systems have proven reluctant to being jump-started by drugs. This is partly due to the greater complexity of women's anatomical and nervous systems. But there is also the inconvenient fact that sexuality in women tends to involve our *whole selves*, not just our anatomy. How does one synthesize the intoxicating state of mind-body excitement so key to female arousal, or the feeling of safety and trust that is often essential for it? The answer is beyond the scope of pharmacology. The only medication approved so far for the treatment of low desire in women, flibanserin (brand name Addyi) in 2015, is controversial. Doctors and researchers have criticized it as ineffective – women who took it had just one more 'sexually satisfying event' per month than those on a placebo – and even dangerous, with a risk of side effects such as low blood pressure and fainting. Vancouver

sex therapist David McKenzie worries the drug will result in yet higher expectations on women. '[It] puts more pressure now on women, probably from male partners, to step up to the plate,' he told the *Globe and Mail*. Alongside drugs, a cottage industry of technology to artificially turbo-charge female sexuality has sprung up in recent years, including wired Kegel exerciser gadgets women can insert in their vaginas to gather data about the tightness of their vaginal walls (*Still too loose – better do another hundred squeezes!*), and the 'G-shot,' an injection that purports to boost G-spot sensation.

Something is off about this picture. Being dysfunctional is so common that it's the new normal. If women are as likely to have some kind of complaint as they are of being 'functional,' do we need to rewrite our definition of 'functional'? What if female sexuality is not the problem – what if our idea of 'normal' is the problem?

'I demand that I climax.' In 2015, rapper Nicki Minaj made headlines when she told *Cosmopolitan* that women should demand pleasure. 'I have a friend who's never had an orgasm in her life. In her life! That hurts my heart. It's cuckoo to me.' She says she and her friends 'always have orgasm interventions where we, like, show her how to do stuff. We'll straddle each other, saying, "You gotta get on him like that and do it like this."'

She and comedian Amy Schumer must be comparing notes. 'Make sure he knows that you're entitled to an orgasm,' said Schumer in an interview with *Glamour* one month later, just one of several times she's brought female pleasure to the fore. 'I like to say it. I'll be like, "Hey, there are two people here,"' Schumer continued. 'I'll be like, "Oh my God, have you met my clit?" Don't be self-conscious.' These appearances of the clitoris in mainstream media helped get 2015 declared the 'year of the female orgasm' by news site *Mic*.

There's a reason two of the biggest female entertainers in America are speaking up about female pleasure, and it's not to shock. It's because they know ordinary women are speaking more and more like this already.

And they aren't just talking amongst themselves. Surrounded by images of sex, yet starved of concrete information, driven by a desire for alternatives to pills or superficial sex tips, women are seeking out facts, experimenting with a wider range of activities and, in the process, transforming their relationship to their sexuality. Medicalizing sexual issues can often make women feel *worse* – being labelled 'abnormal' isn't exactly a recipe for feeling sexy. This interest is propelling sales of a crop of female-focused sex guides, such as Emily Nagoski's *Come As You Are*, Ian Kerner's *She Comes First* and Allison Moon's queer- and trans-friendly *Girl Sex 101*. Diverse women – therapists, mothers, neuroscientists and orgasmic cult members – are all asking, in their own ways, whether the complexity of female sexuality is a quality worth celebrating rather than a dysfunction to be cured.

As a journalist, I wanted to look at the myriad cultural undercurrents that are challenging old beliefs about women's sexuality, even as stereotypes persist and reappear in other ways. I was curious about why female sexuality seems more on the radar now than ever – yet it often seems no closer to being well understood. I can't remember when I first encountered the idea that female sexuality was a big *mystery* – that men have simple, straightforward equipment, but women have tricky puzzles, fleshy Rubik's cubes. I seem to have always been aware of it. But I found it underscored by a popular *New York Times Magazine* psychology story in 2009, 'What Do Women Want?' that I wore out with rereading, its unsettling question – famously posed by Freud to one of his female patients – embedding itself in my head like a burr in a sweater. *What do we want?* I explored this question with women from

varied backgrounds, and it became clear that they wanted to know the answer, too. They gave me clues: read this sex book, talk to this therapist, go to this meetup, take this tantra course. So I did. I gradually uncovered networks of sex-loving women answering that question for themselves in highly individual ways. This little book is the result.

Closer delves into the cutting-edge science of sex that's being done in fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) machines and in labs, where we'll meet researchers striving to understand the matrix of female sexuality as a whole – the complex nerves, hormones, neurotransmitters, neural circuitry, emotions, cultural pressures and expectations that all contribute to arousal, satiety and well-being – among them a Canadian psychologist who is pioneering mindfulness meditation as a sexual treatment. We'll also explore the adventurous ways some women are redefining their sexuality, whether by attending live demonstrations of orgasm at Burning Man or seeking unconventional therapists who use sensual touch to heal trauma. Inspired by the sex-positive women's movements of the 1970s and buoyed by the current popularity of yoga and holistic health, these subcultural rustlings are slowly surfacing from underground to mainstream.

This is the art and craft of women's sexuality, as opposed to the science. It is weird, wonderful and at times bizarre. This book offers a brief tour through this juicy, exciting frontier.

I was motivated to write this book by a paradox. Sex is one of the greatest things about being alive. As science journalist Zoe Cormier writes, human sexuality is unique on the planet: biologists believe we likely experience more pleasure from the dance of mating than any other organism. For most animals, copulation is nasty, brutish and short. Humans make love for fun, self-expression and emotional closeness – and we can do it for hours. The human woman possesses a clitoris and the

ability to have multiple orgasms. You'd think that for ladies, life ought to be a party. But it hasn't worked out that way.

Sex remains a polarizing topic in the Western world, and it's especially conflicted when it comes to women. Women are still shamed for expressing their sexuality, whether it's former CNN host Piers Morgan using his Twitter platform to denounce reality star Kim Kardashian for sharing her latest Instagram nude, or authorities' habit of blaming sexual assault on victims. (When a Toronto police officer told a roomful of students at York University that to protect themselves from rapists, 'women should avoid dressing like sluts,' he inadvertently sparked the worldwide SlutWalk movement in 2011, with women taking to the streets in fishnets and lingerie.) At the same time, women are pressured to be sexually attractive and orgasmic. But the omnipresence of homogeneously hypersexualized images in our daily lives has become far more oppressive than liberating.

In the vacuum left by an inadequate sex education that focuses more on preventing pregnancy and STDs than on pleasure, a new generation is coming of age learning about sex from a skewed source: porn, in which women go from zero to hardcore penetration in all orifices without a hint of foreplay. The app Tinder is transforming dating into a hyper-accelerated game, where men compete to hook up with as many women as possible. In a 2015 *Vanity Fair* story by Nancy Jo Sales, young women who have used the app said it seems to remove incentives for guys to try please them in bed, since they can always move on to a new match.

'What's a real orgasm like?' lamented one young woman. 'I wouldn't know.'

'It's a contest to see who cares less, and guys win a lot at caring less,' said another.

Women climax twice as often in committed relationships as they do in one-night stands, according to a study presented

in 2013 by Justin R. Garcia, assistant professor of gender studies at the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University and Binghamton University. This isn't a plea for monogamous values – many women like no-strings sex as much as men. Rather, it is recognition of the fact that women are simply more likely to come if their partners care about their pleasure and participants feel comfortable communicating about what they want, which seems less common in hookups. Some men questioned in the study actually said they worried less about their partners' pleasure if the sex was casual.

'We have to conclude ... that the Western sexual revolution sucks,' declared Naomi Wolf in her provocative 2012 manifesto *Vagina: A New Biography*. 'It has not worked well enough for women.'

It's not clear that our amped-up sexual culture serves men very well, either. You won't hear this from the commercials, but about half of men who are prescribed Viagra stop the treatment, most within three months, according to a 2012 study led by psychologist Ana Carvalheira. Some men are making open declarations about kicking their porn habit because it is ruining real sex; Ran Gavrieli's 2013 TED talk, 'Why I Stopped Watching Porn,' in which he opens up about the way hardcore porn warped his fantasies, has nearly 12 million views.¹

There may well be a kinder, gentler side to men's sexuality that is being erased in this culture. A male friend of mine has trouble climaxing unless he feels deeply comfortable with a woman, which could take months of dating – but you can bet he doesn't talk about it much in a society that rewards men for racking up one-night stands. Most intriguing of all are the young men flocking to join OneTaste, an organization that promotes 'orgasmic meditation,' or OM – a sex practice that focuses on women's pleasure. Men stay clothed and stroke women's genitals with a finger for fifteen minutes, and the

encounter ends there. The practice is thought to increase connection and sensation for both partners, and it's erupting in popularity as a kind of 'slow sex' – the answer to slow food.

This book isn't arguing against pornography. It's certainly not saying men's sexuality is inherently bad or harmful, or that women are from Venus and thus have different needs than men, who are from Mars. Gender and sexual difference is not a female/male binary at all, but a wide, protean spectrum, and the word *woman* can refer equally to cisgender, intersex, genderqueer and transgender women, all representing varied shades of experience. The struggle of cis women – who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth, in contrast to transgender – to blow open and redefine sexuality on their own terms is strongest when they amplify the voices of women who are most marginalized, especially trans women. Meanwhile, teens represent an emerging freedom from gender norms the rest of the world hasn't begun to imagine; according to a 2016 study by market research firm J. Walter Thompson Intelligence, 78 percent of U.S. teens aged thirteen to twenty said gender doesn't define a person as much as it used to. If this book tends to fall back on referring to women and men as two options in a binary set, that is only to enable me to look at ways women's needs and desires specifically differ from men's – differences that have been erased and vilified for thousands of years – and not, hopefully, to re-entrench them.

I titled this book *Closer* after a hard-to-describe moment that may be intimately familiar to human beings with a clitoris. It's the knotty point during sex when you realize an orgasm is just over the horizon, just within your reach. It's as if you've climbed to the top of a rollercoaster, but you're stuck in mid-air without plummeting over the edge, like a naked, sweaty Wile E. Coyote. It is a tense, often infuriating moment. You may be anxious about taking too long, about wasting your

partner's time. 'I'm getting closer,' you say hopefully. The more worry builds about reaching that goal, however, the more likely it is that the orgasm will deflate and vanish. According to the 2015 *Cosmopolitan* survey, 50 percent of women know this well – they almost get there, but can't.

That may sound like a strange rationale for naming a book, and it is. But 'closer' also refers to the way we are finally, tentatively approaching deep realizations about the female body, and about the ability of sexuality to develop closeness – to yourself, your partners, your fellow humans.

I'm not writing this book as a sex guide, or to help women have bigger, longer or multiple orgasms. There are many fine and helpful books on those subjects, and it's been a distinct pleasure to read them in the course of my research. They are listed in my Works Cited and Suggested Reading at the back of this book, and I encourage readers to help themselves to the riches therein. Instead, this book is meant simply as a taste, a provocation, food for further thought. Women are reshaping their sexuality today in wild, irrepressible ways, whether through conscious pornography, group masturbation or redefining the word *orgasm* itself, and, in a world that pressures girls to fit in, this unselfconscious weirdness is a gift.

One could ask whether all this groping for ecstasy is any more than hedonistic pleasure-seeking. Is any of it relevant to the big picture of women's lives, considering wage and other inequalities – doesn't the burden of demanding work and childcare kill much of the time we have left for sex anyway? I hope to show that the search for sexual equality is integral to the greater discussion taking place about women's rights. It intersects with well-being, self-determination and consent. However, it's important to note that this short book doesn't in any way pretend to be a comprehensive look at female sexuality all over the globe in 2016; because of research constraints, it's limited to women in what we might think of as the secular

West, particularly North America. That doesn't mean women aren't finding intriguing ways to push sexual boundaries around the world, where women's rights are threatened or nonexistent² – just that it wouldn't be my place to pronounce on them here.

At the Good For Her workshop in Toronto, more than one woman confessed they were seized with fear when they tried to orgasm. But how could anyone be afraid of pleasure? Isn't it the opposite – *not* coming – that's supposed to be intolerable?

It's been said that for women, sex is never an isolated act. Sexuality tends to affect and be affected by the rest of life. 'Pleasure is all of you,' writes Emily Nagoski, a process that results from the interaction of stress, memory, body image, nervous system, trust and even the smells in the room. That's what makes medicating it nearly impossible. If pleasure scares us, it's a sign we may want to heed rather than plow past. It may be a feature rather than a bug. Being exquisitely vulnerable while another person is witnessing your rolled-back zombie eyes and animal grunts can feel risky. If sex is worth it, writes author Mikaya Heart, it's because 'letting go of what other people think is the single most important thing you can do to improve the quality of your life in general and your sex life in particular.'

The women at the workshop spent five difficult hours learning their anatomy, hearing that what was between their legs wasn't disgusting. They learned how to ask for what they wanted in bed, laughed and confronted deep-seated fears. The most powerful thing they learned as they listened to each other was that other women were just like them. They were normal after all.