

THE
SEX LIVES
OF
ENGLISH
WOMEN

*Intimate Questions
and Unexpected
Answers*

WENDY JONES



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Some thoughts

This book is not about how to be a woman; it is about how women are. Women are always being told how to be a woman: how to be sexy/thin/fashionable/beautiful/attractive to men, how to organise a perfect wedding/decorate/cook/lose weight/dress, how to be pregnant/give birth/mother, what jobs they can do, what rape is, how to stop ageing, what colour powder to put on their eyelids, how to have good self-esteem. And so on. There is so much telling women how they should be, and so little asking them who they are and what they want. I thought someone should at least have the courtesy to ask.

This is a book of interviews with twenty-four English women talking about sex. When I began, I had no agenda, I wanted to listen to women, to give women the space to speak. And I wanted to interview English women, who so often have a reputation for being sexually repressed. I had two questions: what is it to be a woman? and, what do women want sexually? This book is my answer.

I found the women in various ways. Shirley, a feminist in

her seventies, sat next to me on the train; the Muslim teenager served me in the supermarket; a friend of a friend suggested interviewing Mary, the 94-year-old. I met Hilary, the Girl Guides leader, at a conference on domestic violence; I went to a burlesque class to find Samantha. I turned to social media, and women came forward. If I had an instinct about someone, I asked, and she invariably said yes.

I wanted experiences and stories. I didn't want statistics – such as that the average act of intercourse has three hundred thrusts, true though that may be. I didn't want to reduce women to facts and figures about orgasmic spasms, orgasmic discharges and so on: that seemed dehumanising and I was in search of the women's humanity and individuality. I wagered that through our sexuality our humanity is revealed. All names, identifying details and places, have been changed to protect the women's anonymity. Every woman had right of veto.

From my own experience I was able to understand a lot of what the women were saying. Yet, as a heterosexual woman, I didn't know other women the way an average heterosexual man – or gay or bisexual woman – would: from sleeping with them. I knew women and didn't know them. I wanted to reveal what was hidden.

The women had a lot to say – the unedited interviews came to half a million words. Beneath the armour of respectability, behind closed doors, women are full of it. When women talk about sex they talk about their bodies and their vaginas. Paula describes her vagina as fat. Gwyn's job is massaging vaginas. Mary's vagina was surgically constructed from the skin of her penis. And they talk about orgasms. Victoria describes having seven or eight in one session, Deborah, forty-one, thinks she's never had one. Helen describes womb orgasms, Pandora, a trapeze artist, likes to scream.

I was curious about women's fantasies. In fantasy, unlike in reality, there is absolute freedom. What does a woman want if you take out the restraints of monogamy, marriage, age, health, religion, social mores, and financial strictures? What does a woman choose to do when she can desire anything? May imagines the sea as her lover. Sigourney, a shop assistant, wants a threesome. Pandora wouldn't mind having her own harem. Ariel, a beauty contestant, fantasised about sex in a hot tub – so she had it. But women don't always want their fantasies to come true. Christina didn't want to be raped, despite her fantasy; Farah would like to do vampire stuff, but didn't want to be bitten too hard on her neck. There can be a gap between what a woman desires in her mind and what she wants in her life.

I had thought some women would know a lot about sex and some wouldn't. But it was more complex than that. Yvette had four children before she knew what her own vagina looked like. Charlotte, the gynaecological nurse, didn't know what an orgasm was. And Jackie, despite having slept with ten men a day, was scared to hold a man's hand. I saw it again and again in the interviews: that slice of rich experience and that space of innocence. They are interviews of innocence and experience. The sharp distinction between the virgin and the whore came to seem wholly artificial – another false construct to try to shove women into, like poorly fitted and contorting shoes.

When women talk about sex they talk about religion. Their parents' – even their ancestors' – religion and its coercive bonds often echo in their own life, decades later. Yet, if sex is not a sin any more, it is often a source of anxiety. There is a sense of unease around pornography, and differing viewpoints. While Lois is illuminated by porn, Lola, twenty-three, feels sad after she's watched it. Because of porn, Farah's boyfriend

wants her clean-shaven. Olive first watched porn when she was a nun. And women mentioned difficult sexual experiences in many interviews. Caused not only by men, but by chance, by genetics, by other children, by mothers, by family, by society. There is a sadism in our society towards female sexuality. Sometimes a woman's sexuality is a decimated landscape. Yet women survive and are full of power and life force. English women don't lie back. They don't think of England.

When women talk about good sex they say 'yes' a lot. James Joyce described yes as 'the female word', and many 'yeses' lace their way through these conversations. 'Yes' is the nearest women have to express their deepest joy, the only word left when all others fail to express what she is feeling. It is the word of the sexually happy woman. Look out for the yeses.

Thirty-two thousand years ago, men and women painted a cave in Chauvet, France, and in the middle of the cave they painted a woman's pudendum. The first humans understood that female sexuality is central to life and its creation and they honoured that in a seemingly guiltless and open way. Through writing this book I came to see the wisdom and beauty of this ancient perception from the beginning of human consciousness; that female sexuality is an intense and vital force at the centre of human experience – then and now – and that through our sexuality our humanity is revealed.

Women have borne the brunt of sexual repression. But all women have the ability to express themselves sexually. Every woman has a unique sexuality and a unique story to tell about her sexuality. If I were a man, I would be in awe of women. There is more to say. Here are the interviews.

Burlesque

Samantha, 28, Newcastle

'I was like, "Can't believe I'm going to get on that stage and take my clothes off"'

‘Burlesque is the art of striptease. It’s very, very glamorous and flashy. My act is classic showgirl burlesque, I have sequins and rhinestones and a feather fan. I dance on stage and then remove clothing to music until I’m in nipple tassels and a thong. It’s a reveal at the end for five seconds for the audience to see me and then I leave.

The nipple tassels need to cover my areola. I use double-sided sticky tape, which hurts. I can’t moisturise before I go on stage because the moisturiser makes the tassels slip off! In the summer when it gets *really* hot in the venues, they’re just not going to stay on. All the girls are like, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do.’ Everyone’s got tips, like using hairspray, and pressing their boobs first before they put the tassels on. There’s so many tips it’s hilarious! There’s wig glue that you

use to stick your wig down with. One girl uses dribble. One girl uses carpet tape, she's like, '*This* does not come off.' But I wouldn't want to use it. It's funny.

I do burlesque in clubs all over London and theatre tours in huge theatres. It doesn't ever feel like a job at all. All the women I work with are the most amazing, intelligent, strong, confident, fantastic women, and everyone is so lovely to each other. There's a real sense of community among burlesque dancers so if there's a dodgy photographer or a dodgy promoter, everybody will message, 'Watch out for this guy, don't reply to him.' We look out for each other. Most of the girls are English. Average age is probably mid to late twenties, early thirties. There's not that many younger ones; people find it a little bit uncomfortable when the girls are too young. There was one girl and she was seventeen. I know at seventeen you think you're a woman. That's a little bit too young to be doing a show; you haven't really had enough experience. I hadn't even had sex when I was seventeen so I wouldn't have been able to dance how I dance because I wouldn't have known how to do it. If you're young you don't really get that same rapport with an audience.

When I went to dance college at eighteen the main thing with me was always, 'Yeah, you're very good, you're very talented. You need to be taller, you need to lose weight.' I can't be taller. So it was always, 'If you're going to be short' – which I am – 'you need to be tiny.' I was under so much pressure all the time to lose weight. Some of my teachers – they were lovely, and they were doing it for my own good – but they thought I wasn't trying hard enough, or I was eating what I wanted. I'm just naturally *not* a size 6, or a size 8. It did get a bit on top of me, and in the last year of college I was *not* eating anything. I was eating a side salad a day, I was taking these

diet pills that I got off the Internet. And I lost *so* much weight. And they were like, 'You look amazing!' but I was *so* unhappy. I couldn't dance like I wanted to dance; I had no energy. I never got an eating disorder because I was doing it to be thin; it wasn't a mental thing. As soon as I left college I was like, 'I can't do this, I can't starve myself.' I moved to London, went to a burlesque night. I watched these girls and I was like, 'I can definitely do that because I can dance already, and I don't need to starve myself.' My friends were like, 'Yeah, go for it, you'll be so good at that.'

The first time I was like, 'Can't believe I'm going to get on that stage and take my clothes off.' I was terrified. But I've always been a bit of an exhibitionist. Despite being told all the time I need to lose weight, I've never had any hang-ups about my body. I was really nervous, but in a *good* way. As soon as I'd done it I absolutely *loved* it and I was like, I'm just going to go for this. Like anything in life there's a certain level of fate, and things started coming my way to do with burlesque. I was like, yeah, this is obviously the right path for now. It's been five years, so it accidentally became a career!

There's a lot of different types of burlesque: you have comedy burlesque, classic burlesque – which is all the feathers, Twenties burlesque, which is the older style, then there's neo-burlesque where there's tattooed girls with piercings. With burlesque, it's about the performance. It's not like modelling where you have to look a certain way. I've seen girls who are a good size 16 come on that stage and *absolutely* kill, and the audience are going *wild*. One girl's eighteen stone. It challenges people's ideas of what is aesthetically pleasing. I think that's why people love it so much.

I get so many lovely compliments from women saying it's nice to see somebody on stage who's got curves, who isn't

stick-thin and who isn't ashamed of it or embarrassed. The amount of women that stop me afterwards and say, 'It's nice to see someone with a normal body.' Sometimes the word 'normal' annoys me because I think, 'Well, what is normal? Everyone's different.' Or they'll say, 'It's nice to see a real woman.' That term annoys me because thin women aren't imaginary, they're still real. I had a bad experience once, where somebody said I had cellulite! I just couldn't stop laughing, I was, 'Yup, I do! So do most people!'

It's titillating, but it's not in the same way that a stripper would be. Sometimes people are getting turned on. I don't know if that's because on that night I'm a bit drunk! And I'm feeling a bit sexier. I've had people go afterwards, 'Oh my God, that was amazing, I think I fancy you.' Sometimes I get turned on, very rarely. Most of the time I go into autopilot. If there's someone in the audience I lock eyes with or I think's pretty hot, then I would get turned on, yeah. Young men come, but not very often. I'd say the men are late twenties, early thirties. Not that young. The older men, they're definitely the pervier ones! The groups of City workers who are in their forties and fifties can get a bit leery when I'm offstage. They'll say something like, 'You don't get many of them for the pound,' about my boobs and I'm like, 'Oh, for God's sake, I haven't heard that before.' The secret with guys like that is to banter back. As soon as you get all uppity and snooty they're going to do it more. I always try and banter back and laugh.

Over Christmas I had really bad flu and I had to put make-up on and dance and it was *awful*. But it's a performance, I've got to put a smile on and suck it up. It's not the nicest thing doing burlesque when I've got my period, I am a bit aware of it. I've known a girl who came on onstage and that was *awful*. She didn't realise she was going to come on her period. Nobody

noticed it: obviously she did. Backstage, everyone's so past that being a taboo, 'Oh, I'm on my period, has anyone got a tampon?' I never see it as a problem massively. It's like a job; you have to get on with it.

My family's all from Newcastle. My mum's family are musical. My mum knows what I do and loves it, as does my sister. My grandma used to make my costumes but I don't think she realised *quite* what I did. And my dad I'm not really in touch with. I don't think he would mind, he's a pretty open-minded fellow, but it's not really something I would discuss with him. I tell my mum *everything*. I told my mum the first time I had sex. I've always had a really good relationship with my mum and I think for that reason I've never had any hang-ups or felt guilty for doing things. She would always say, 'Respect yourself and do things because you want to and not because you feel pressured,' and I never did anything I didn't want to do. I don't think she'd be too happy if she knew how many people I'd slept with! But I'm at a stage now, I'm like, it's my life, and you only live once. I could die tomorrow.

Sometimes I get changed and come out and have a drink afterwards but people are so lovely. People say you must get hit on, but I don't really. Men are nice. They get a bit intimidated and don't really want to speak to me. I never sleep with the people in the audience. Never have. I think, keep work separate from social life. If I have a drink after a show there's a point where I think, I should go home now. Because it has a tendency to get messy so I do like to keep my work separate from my social life. I'd be quite worried if I met someone in a club like that, I don't know what they're like or who they are, and what if they kept turning up? It would be too much of a risk. I wouldn't be able to do prostitution but I sympathise with the sex industry a lot and I think it should be legalised

to protect the girls. And porn never bothers me. I'm not a very judgmental person at all.

I really got really irate about the Page 3 scandal. A lot of people – who are friends as well – are so ‘Yes! They’re going to end topless women on Page 3 in the *Sun* newspaper,’ I thought, who are you to tell a woman she can’t do that? I am really strongly feminist. For hundreds of years women have been told by men what they could and couldn’t do, and now it’s women telling other women what they can’t do. If you don’t like it, don’t look at it! If people want to do that and they’re making *good* money from it, let them do it. Nudity just *doesn’t* offend me in *any* way. Page 3 I don’t find offensive at all. I would much rather see a girl who’s a good size 12 and curvy and healthy than women in women’s magazines who are anorexic or starving, because that’s an unrealistic image of beauty. Women seem to put this pressure on themselves to be so thin and it’s really sad. It seems to be women going against other women. I think feminism’s eaten itself a bit for that reason.

My job does give me a good insight into men. Men are like children. Once you know that, you know everything about them. They want what they can’t have. They chase things to be stubborn. If you say, ‘You can’t have that, you can’t do that,’ they’re going to want to do the opposite. Women make the mistake of thinking men are more complicated than they are, whereas I think men do what they want to do when they want to do it and they’re not playing a game, they’re not overthinking, they’re just doing what they want to do! It does make me a little bit sad when my friends have all these rules. One of my best friends, I love her to bits, but she’s all about game playing. As soon as she meets a guy it would be like, ‘Well, you can’t do this until this day, and you can’t send him