

DISCOVERING SEX

**THE STORY OF THE
MEN AND WOMEN
WHO IN THE 1950s
HELPED CREATE THE
SEXUAL LANDSCAPE
WE INHABIT TODAY**

by **David Halberstam** ■ When the decade of the fifties began, sex was still something of an illicit subject in America. Nor had there been any serious modernization of the technology of birth control in more than forty years. Never mind that an event as transcending as World

War II had profoundly changed people's attitudes on many subjects, including a far greater candor about things sexual among younger adults; these changes were nowhere noticeable in American mass culture. But in the decade ahead ordinary Americans were about to become infinitely more open and sophisticated about their sexual habits and practices. Even as the 1950s progressed, a team of brilliant scientists was speeding forward on its way to discover a simple birth-control device that its developers hoped

could be taken orally each day—a kind of pill to control pregnancy. At the same time, by the middle of the decade there were the first signs of new social and political attitudes among American women that would surface in the next decade as the women's movement. In short, a revolution was beginning.

"God, what a gap!"

Alfred Kinsey was both fascinated and troubled by the vast difference between American sexual behavior the society wanted to believe existed and American sexual practices as they actually did exist. For example, at least 80 percent of successful businessmen, his interviews showed, had had extramarital affairs. "God," he noted, "what a gap between social front and reality!" And he spent the latter

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part of his career tearing away the facade that Americans used to hide their sexual selves.

Kinsey was no bohemian. He lived in the Midwest, he married the first woman he ever dated, and he stayed married to her for his entire life. Because he was an entomologist and loved to collect bugs, he and his bride went camping on their honeymoon. In his classes at the University of Indiana he always sported a bow tie and a crew cut. He drove the same old Buick for most of his lifetime and was immensely proud of the fact that he had more than a hundred thousand miles on it. On Sundays he and his wife invited faculty and graduate-student friends to their home to listen to records of classical music. They took these evenings very seriously; Kinsey was immensely proud of his record collection. When the wife of one faculty member suggested that they play some boogie-woogie, the couple was never invited back.

Kinsey's house was the only thing he had not paid hard cash for. He bought it with a small down payment and took on a mortgage of thirty-five hundred dollars. He was extremely careful about money and almost everything else. He once told a colleague, Wardell Pomeroy, to drive back from New York at thirty-five miles per hour with some large models showing the reproductive process: "Anything faster than that is not safe for such a heavy load." The mother superior, Pomeroy called him.

Kinsey did not smoke, and he rarely drank. Relatively late in his career he decided to smoke since it would make him more like the men he was interviewing and help put them at their ease. Try as he might, he never quite got it

right, and his assistants finally suggested that the prop was hurting rather than helping. With drinking it was the same. After his death Pomeroy wrote, "To see him bringing in a tray of sweet liqueurs before dinner was a wry and happy reminder that Alfred Charles Kinsey, the genius, the world figure, was a simple and unsophisticated man in the true sense of the word."

His greatest passion was his work. He approached it with an intensity that was rooted in the Calvinist zeal of his forefathers. He generally worked every day of the year except Christmas Day. He had always been, his biographer Pomeroy shrewdly noted, a collector. As a boy he collected stamps, but it was the only collection he ever made that was not designed to be useful. Sickly as a child from rheumatic fever, he had not been able to play; instead he became a student of nature. He wrote his first book in his teens, a small monograph entitled "What Do Birds Do When It Rains?" By the time he was in college at Bowdoin, he had come to love collecting plants and animals.

As a graduate student at Harvard he won a fellowship that allowed him to travel around the country. "No other occupation in the world could give me the pleasure that this job of bug-hunting is giving," he wrote, and he never failed to see the beauty in plants and in animals. Earle March, a San Francisco gynecologist, once spoke of Kinsey's rare ability to "look through the ugliness to something lovely beyond." March added, "I often thought about him as an athlete of the spirit." During the early forties he published *Edible Plants of North America*, which was voted the most important book of the year by the trustees of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society.

He seemed by this time to be the least likely candidate to become one of the most controversial figures of his generation. He was a highly respected professor of zoology in a good department at Indiana University. Esteemed by his colleagues for his collection of gall wasps, he was also popular with his students, a kind and humane teacher who was generous with his time.

Then, in 1938, a group of his students came to him and asked questions about marriage. He was touched by their innocence. At first he refrained from answering, fearing he knew too little. Then he went out and read everything he could on the subject and was appalled by the available material—in both quantity and quality. Some of the students petitioned the university to start a course on sexuality and marriage. From the start it was Kinsey's course. He was one of eight faculty members who taught it, and he gave three of the basic lectures. The course was a huge success. It soon became an obsession with him. Clara Kinsey was known on occasion to tell friends. "I hardly see him at night any more since he took up sex."

When he began his studies of human sexuality, one of his oldest friends, Edward Anderson, by then the director of Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, wrote him: "It was heartwarming to see you settling down into what I sup-

pose will be your real life work. One would never have believed that all sides of you could have found a project big enough to need them all. I was amused to see how the Scotch Presbyterian reformer in you had finally got together with the scientific fanatic with his zeal for masses of neat data in orderly boxes and drawers. The monographer Kinsey, the naturalist Kinsey, and the camp counsellor Kinsey all rolling into one at last and going full steam ahead. Well,



I am glad to have a seat for the performance. It's great to have it done, and great to know that you are doing it."

He began by taking the sexual histories of his students. He conducted the interviews in his tiny office, where he locked the door and sent his assistant elsewhere. The enrollment for the class grew every year; before long four hundred students were signing up for it. But his heart was in the research. Soon he was not only taking the sexual histories of his students but traveling out of town on weekends to find additional subjects. As the project took an increasing amount of his time, there was an inevitable conservative reaction against him in Indiana.

In 1940 Herman Wells, the president of Indiana University, who was largely sympathetic to Kinsey and his work, called him in and, citing complaints from local ministers, told him that he would have to make a choice: He could either teach the course or take his histories, but he could not do both. Wells assumed that Kinsey would give up the case histories. Kinsey resigned from the course. Those who thought he would do otherwise, he noted, "do not know me." From then on he devoted himself exclusively to his research.

The study of American sexual habits was a delicate business. Kinsey wanted a certain bland neutrality to his researchers. Though he was a generous, abidingly tolerant man, he did not hire Jews or blacks or those with names that were not distinctly Anglo-Saxon. He knew the prejudices of the time and wanted no distractions from the already sensitive job that his interviewers faced.

During the forties, while much of the rest of the country was going off to war, Alfred Kinsey and a handful of assistants set off to interview as many men and women as they could on their sexual habits. At first they had limited resources; Kinsey used part of his own small salary to hire others.

In 1941 he got his first grant from a foundation, for sixteen hundred dollars; in 1943 he received his first grant from the Medical Sciences Division of the Rockefeller Foundation, a

gift of twenty-three thousand dollars; by 1947 that figure was forty thousand dollars. The foundation thereby became the principal financial backer of his studies. By 1947 he was preparing to publish the first book of his results—a simple report on the human animal studied in one of its highest-priority biologic acts. His conclusions do not seem particularly startling today: that healthy sex led to a healthy marriage; that there was more extramarital sex on the part

of both men and women than they wanted to admit; that petting and premarital sex tended to produce better marriages; that masturbation did not cause mental problems, as superstition held; that there was more homosexuality than people wanted to admit.

President Wells had made a few minor requests of him: He asked Kinsey not to publish during the sixty-one days that the Indiana legislature was in session, and he asked him to use a medical publisher in order to minimize sensationalism. Kinsey chose W. B. Saunders, an old-line firm in Philadelphia. The original printing was slated for ten thousand but as prepublication interest grew, Saunders increased it to twenty-five thousand. The book cost \$6.50, had 804 pages, and weighed three pounds. Kinsey had received no advance against royalties, and whatever money he made, he turned back to his own think tank, which by then was known as the Institute for Sex Research of Indiana University.

Though he continued to sign himself on letters "Alfred Kinsey, professor of zoology," his days as a mere professor were behind him. His name from then on was a household word; everyone knew of him as the sex doctor. Within ten days of the book's release the publisher had to order a sixth printing, making 185,000 copies in print, a remarkable number for so scholarly a piece of work. To the astonishment of everyone, particularly Kinsey, the book roared up the best-seller lists, a fact somewhat embarrassing to *The New York Times*, which at first neither accepted advertising for Kinsey's book nor reviewed it. The early critical response was good. The first reviews saw his samples adequate, his scientific judgments modest, his tone serious. Polls taken of ordinary Americans showed that not only did they agree with his evidence but they believed such studies were helpful.

Then his critics weighed in. They furiously disagreed with almost everything: his figures on premarital sex, his figures on extramarital sex, his figures on homosexuality, and above all, his failure to condemn what he had found. Not only had he angered the traditional conservative bastions of social mores—the Protestant churches on the right,

and the Catholic Church—but to his surprise he had enraged the most powerful voices in the liberal Protestant clergy as well. Henry Pitney Van Dusen, the head of Union Theological Seminary, and Reinhold Niebuhr attacked. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the head of Riverside Church and the brother of the head of the Rockefeller Foundation, complained that the advertising for the book was not sufficiently sedate. Harold Dodds, president of Princeton, said, “Perhaps the undergraduate newspaper that likened the report to the work of small boys writing dirty words on fences touched a more profound scientific truth than is revealed in the surfeit of rather trivial graphs with which the reports are loaded.” By trying to study our sexual patterns, Kinsey was accused of trying to lower our moral standards.

Kinsey was at first stunned, then angered, but never embittered. He was appalled by the failure of other scientists

Kinsey well knew that his second book was even more explosive than the first.

and doctors to come to his defense, but what surprised him most was the absence of scientific standards in most of the assaults. His critics were, he noted, merely “exposing their emotional (not their scientific) selves in their attacks.”

The attacks wounded Kinsey, yet he refused to show it in public. Besides, there was a second book to finish. His biggest fear was that he might lose his key source of support, the Rockefeller Foundation. Unfortunately Henry Pitney Van Dusen was not just the head of Union Theological; he was also a member of the Rockefeller Foundation board.

At first the foundation stood firm. Alan Gregg, who was in effect Kinsey’s man at the foundation, congratulated Kinsey for handling himself so well in the face of such venomous criticism. But soon Gregg’s tone began to change. He started suggesting that Kinsey show more statistical evidence in the next volume, and before long he was warning that it might be harder than he had expected to sustain the funding.

The trouble, Kinsey learned, was the new head of the Rockefeller Foundation, Dean Rusk. Rusk had come over after serving as the assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs. Cautious to a fault, wary of the power of conservatives in Congress, he was not eager to take serious political risks on behalf of something that must have seemed as peripheral to him as sex research. B. Carroll Reece, a conservative Republican from Tennessee, was threatening to investigate the foundation, and one of the reasons was the Kinsey report. Kinsey sensed that Rusk was distancing himself from the institute.

The second book, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, was published in the fall of 1953. Kinsey was well aware that

it was even more explosive than the first; he was, after all, discussing wives, mothers, and daughters. As a precaution Kinsey invited journalists to come to Bloomington for several days so that he could explain the data to them and thereby help them interpret it.

Like the first book, it was a sensation. Within ten days publishers were in their sixth printing; it would eventually sell some 250,000 copies. Again the initial reception was essentially positive; some of the magazine reporting was thoughtful. Then the fire storm began. “It is impossible to estimate the damage this book will do to the already deteriorating morals of America,” Billy Graham pronounced. The worst thing about the report, Van Dusen said, was not Kinsey’s facts, if they were indeed trustworthy, but that they revealed “a prevailing degradation in American morality approximating the worst decadence of the Roman Empire. The

most disturbing thing is the absence of spontaneous ethical revulsion from the premises of the study and the inability on the part of the readers to put their fingers on the falsity of its premises. For the presuppositions of the Kinsey Report are strictly animalistic. . . .” Again Kinsey was disheartened: “I am still uncertain what the basic reason for the bitter attack on us may be. The attack is evidently much more intense with this publication of the *Female*.

Their arguments become absurd when they attempt to find specific flaws in the book and basically I think they are attacking on general principles.”

The new book was the final straw for the Rockefeller Foundation. In November 1953 Kinsey’s supporters there made passionate presentations on his behalf and put in a request for eighty thousand dollars. Rusk rejected it. It was a shattering moment. Kinsey wrote a note to Rusk pleading with him to come out to Bloomington to see what they were doing and telling of how well things looked for the future. Later, in another letter to Rusk, he noted, “To have fifteen years of accumulated data in this area fail to reach publication would constitute an indictment of the Institute, its sponsors, and all others who have contributed time and material resources to the work.”

Kinsey redoubled his efforts. If he had been driven before, now there was a manic quality to his work. His friends began to worry about his health. He suffered from insomnia, began to take sleeping pills, and started showing up groggy at work in the morning. Problems with his heart grew more serious. On several occasions he was hospitalized, and by the middle of 1956 he was forced to stay home and rest. In the summer of 1956 he conducted sex interviews number 7984 and 7985. On August 25, 1956, he died at the age of sixty-two.

“This is the magic and mystery of our time”

There had never been any doubt among those who knew him that Goody Pincus was a genius. Born in 1903, in W

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any royalty. Nor in the eyes of the Worcester people was Searle generous in later years. Despite several representations on behalf of his family and of the Worcester people, Searle paid only three hundred dollars a month in benefits to Pincus's widow after his death in 1967. When the Worcester people suggested repeatedly to Searle that the company might like to endow a chair at the Worcester Foundation in Pincus's honor, Searle not only declined but soon after donated five hundred thousand dollars to Harvard to endow a chair in reproductive studies. It was the supreme indignity: rewarding the institution that had once denied Pincus tenure with a chair in his own specialty.

"A quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex"

Marilyn Monroe was the stuff of which male fantasies were made. She was at once both lush and childlike. She knew the power of her own sexuality, knew how to turn it on and turn it off. In a way she was a photographer's dream. "The first day a photographer took a picture of her, she was a genius," said the director Billy Wilder, who understood her talent better than anyone in Hollywood. In 1949, very much down and out on her luck and still trying to crash Hollywood as a starlet, she agreed to do a nude shot for a photographer friend named Tom Kelley. He paid only fifty dollars, but she was living hand to mouth and she owed him a favor—he had lent her five dollars on an earlier occasion for cab fare. Besides, fifty dollars was precisely the amount of money she needed for the monthly payment on her secondhand car. She was not nervous about the nudity, only its potential effect on her career, and she signed the model release with the name Mona Monroe. In fact, Kelley noted that once she took her clothes off, she seemed more comfortable than before, in his words, "graceful as an otter, turning sinuously with utter naturalness. All her constraints vanished as soon as her clothes were off."

The picture Tom Kelley shot was soon hanging on the walls of thousands of barbershops, bars, and gas stations. It also helped launch a sexual empire. For in the fall of 1953 a young man named Hugh Hefner, anxious to start his own magazine, read in an advertising trade journal that a local



Midwestern company had the rights to the photo. Hefner drove out to suburban Chicago and bought the rights for five hundred dollars.

At the time Hefner felt himself a failure. He had been born in Chicago in 1926. His father worked as an accountant for a large company, and even in the worst of the Depression theirs was a comfortable home financially. However, there was little emotional warmth. His grandparents were pious Nebraska farmers, and theirs remained a God-fearing home: no drinking, no swearing, no smoking. Sunday was for church. Hefner's first wife later noted that she never saw any sign of affection or anger displayed by either parent.

Hugh Hefner was a bright, somewhat dreamy child; in terms of social skills and popularity he was always on the outside looking in. He graduated from high school in 1944, went into the Army, caught the last months of the war, although he saw no combat. When he came home, he drifted for a time, unsure of his future. Then

he entered the University of Illinois to be with his high school girl friend Millie Williams. He had been dating Millie for several years, but they still had not consummated their affair. After they were married in 1949, Hefner continued to drift, supported by Millie, who was teaching school.

The one thing he loved was cartooning, at which he was, regrettably, not particularly talented; for the next two or three years, he went back and forth between jobs, usually in the promotion departments of magazines. For much of the time he and Millie lived with his parents in order to save money. At one point in his drive to become a cartoonist, he quit work and stayed at home to draw. The results tended to be pornographic reworkings of popular comic strips. Millie Hefner was convinced this erotic sketching was a rebellion of sorts against his family's Calvinist roots and the emotional and sexual aridity of that household.

As a convert to the cause of more open sexuality, he became a crusader, taking up that cause with the passion his puritan grandparents had espoused in their religion. For all his subsequent success in terms of personal sexual freedom, there was, according to some who knew him well, a certain grimness to his pursuit of pleasure.

Hefner was only twenty-seven when he started his magazine. All of his small savings and some of his friends' were

tied up in it; if it failed, he would owe several thousand dollars. *Playboy* was not Hefner's original choice for a name. He had wanted to give it the cruder title of *Stag Party*, but a letter from the lawyers of a girly magazine in New York called *Stag* threatened legal action if he did not change it. *Playboy* it became, as an afterthought.

Hefner printed seventy thousand copies of the first issue, hoping that it would sell at least thirty thousand of them at fifty cents each. Instead, bolstered in no small part by word of mouth on the Monroe photos, it sold fifty-three thousand—a huge success. He was in business. Within a year, by December 1954, circulation had reached one hundred thousand. By early 1955 *Playboy* had \$250,000 in the bank, and Hefner had turned down an offer of \$1,000,000 for the magazine from a group in Chicago. Hefner demanded ever more glossy photos and used what he considered sophisticated

Hugh Hefner's great strength was his lack of sophistication.

writing; he was trying to make *Playboy* legitimate and stated his purpose of bringing sex out into the open.

The Calvinists, Hefner believed, thought sex was dark and furtive, and the other girly magazines of the period were so cheap and crude they seemed to confirm that judgment. It was Hefner's particular genius to know that it was now going to be permissible to have an upscale, far more sophisticated magazine of male sexual fantasies that customers might not be embarrassed to be seen buying—or even leaving out on their coffee tables.

Alfred Kinsey was his hero, and he had understood from reading the Kinsey report that he was not alone, that his sexual attitudes and fantasies were mirrored by millions of other young men. In his first issue Hefner wrote: "We like our apartment. We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d'oeuvre or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph, and inviting in a female for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex." There it was: the *Playboy* ethic, sex not only as legitimate but as a sophisticated life-style. By the end of 1956, still operating with a skeleton staff, *Playboy* was a phenomenon. Circulation was six hundred thousand. "A lot of it," said Ray Russell, a writer and editor who was one of Hefner's first hires, "was good luck, random choice, being carried on the tides of the times rather than the leader of the times. It was a matter of being the right magazine able to take advantage of a rising economy, more than any degree of conscious planning."

Hefner was pretty much living in his offices in those early days. Then as he became more successful he converted a Chicago mansion into his home; even so he remained dis-

tant and remote, a kind of latter-day Gatsby who opened this plush residence to an endless stream of people whom he did not know, and who did not know him. In some ways he was still an outsider looking in. "Hefner," said Don Gold, an editor at *Playboy* in the fifties, "is not a very complicated man. He thinks Poe is the best writer in the world. When he buys a pipe, he buys two dozen of the same pipe. He likes his mashed potatoes to have a dimple of gravy on them. He is mid-America personified. The Marquis de Sade would have told him to wait in a corner, though he is, in a healthy way, by sex possessed."

Despite the magazine's intellectual pretensions, Hefner's great strength was his lack of sophistication. He was square but longed to share in the wider, hipper world that television and movies were bringing so tantalizingly close. In that, he mirrored the longings of millions of other young men from similar backgrounds, fantasizing a faster and freer life.

His success—for he soon became the most successful magazine publisher of the decade, a millionaire who styled himself an authority on the fast-lane life for the young, monied, and restless—echoed powerful new chords in American life. The first was a more candid view of sex and sexuality. Hefner sought to abolish America's puritan past, so evident in his own background. In the broader sense *Playboy* represented the transition to the better, more affluent life that more and more Americans were enjoying as they lived decidedly better than their parents in material terms. The magazine explained how to buy a sports car and a big 6, how to order in a restaurant, what kind of wine to drink, provided an elementary tutorial on the new American affluence for newcomers to the middle class, midwifing young men who were often the first members of their families to graduate from college into a world of increasing plenty.

Ordinary Americans now wanted (and could often afford) things that in the past had been the domain only of the very wealthy, and they wanted the personal freedoms those people had enjoyed too. In the onslaught, old restraints were loosened. If religion existed only as a negative force, Hefner seemed to be saying, if it spoke only of denial of pleasure and made people feel furtive about what was natural, then it was in trouble. END

Hefner's colleague Frank Gibney believed he had worked for two of the most important magazine publishers of the era, first Henry Luce and then Hugh Hefner, and he thought there was an interesting comparison to be made between the two. Luce was idiosyncratic, on occasion authoritarian, and overbearing, but he was driven by a curiosity that made him a man of breadth almost in spite of himself; Hefner, thought Gibney, had very little curiosity at all. He was essentially a narrow man, but he knew what he liked and he trusted it. "That magazine," said Jack Kessie, an early editor, "was written and edited for Hugh M. Hefner." Hefner w