

'Joy of Sex'? Real Intimacy Was Too Close for Comfort.

By DAVID FRUM

"The day may come when we regard chastity as no more a virtue than malnutrition."
—ALEX COMFORT

Alex Comfort, who died last week at the age of 80, was the sort of man of whom it is said that he was ahead of his time. In this case, the tribute is not a compliment. Demographically, Comfort belonged to the World War II generation; he was born in England in February 1920. Spiritually, though, he was a man of the 1970s from the very start: a pacifist, a pop psychologist, a promoter of "non-Western" substitutes for objective knowledge, a sexual hedonist and (inevitably, one supposes) a resident of California.

Nowadays, when every newsstand bristles with magazines offering advice on achieving and prolonging sexual bliss, it is hard to convey what was startling and shocking about Comfort's most famous book, "The Joy of Sex," when it exploded onto the bestseller lists in 1972. There had of course been sex manuals before. But those earlier sex manuals, even the explicit ones, had always tipped their hats to older notions of propriety. They took care to presuppose that their readers were married, and they always made sure to devote much or most of their attention to the mechanics of reproduction. They looked more like biology textbooks than like the Kama Sutra.

Alex Comfort blasted away all these antique conventions. He was interested in the mechanics of pleasure, not the zygote. He catalogued with almost obsessive zeal every mode and means by which the male and female bodies could be brought into contact. As his title suggested, "The Joy of Sex" was intended to be used like a cookbook. Just as "The Joy of Cooking" showed how one could turn meat juices into gravy or *jus* depending on whether or not one mixed in flour, so Comfort pointed out that by inserting tab A into slot B at an obtuse rather than an acute angle, one could experience this sensation rather than that.

Truth be told, Comfort's representation of the possibilities of human intimacy was never a very attractive one, and it was

rendered less attractive still by the drawings he chose to illustrate the early editions. Comfort was one of those who took the view that modern society's excessive emphasis on hygiene and grooming detracts from sexual pleasure. He disapproved of deodorants, hairspray and shaving, and the imaginary couple who sprawl across the pages of the 1972 "Joy of Sex" were drawn to suit his shaggy vision of the uninhibited man and woman.

The drawings gave a nasty jolt to many curious prepubescents in the early 1970s, but Comfort—a physician whose academic speciality had been the study of sex and aging—had little truck with idealized visions of the human body or, for that matter, the human spirit. Romantic desire was almost as alien to his conception of sexuality as moral scruple. You don't forgo a taco today because you've been invited to dinner at a three-star restaurant in the Burgundian countryside next Saturday; why would you spurn a tumble merely because True Love hadn't shown up yet?

Comfort owed much of his enormous success to perfect timing. His book appeared at a historical moment when women were about to take the plunge of substituting this quintessentially male view of sex for the traditional female view. For all the talk of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, that revolution did not come to most women in most places until after 1970. As late as 1972, 56% of American women agreed that premarital sex was always or almost always wrong. Two years later, 51% held that it was only sometimes or never wrong.

This was not merely the expression of a theoretical opinion. In the decade from 1971 to 1980 the sexual behavior of American women was transmogrified. More

than two-thirds of the women who turned 18 between 1953 and 1961 had slept with only one man as of their 30th birthdays. Only one-third of the women who turned 18 between 1971 and 1980 would be able to say the same thing. Only 2% of the women who came of age in the 1950s had slept with as many as five men by their 30th birthday; 22.5% of the post-Vietnam group had carved that many notches in their bedposts. "I remember feeling really weird because I hadn't slept with more guys than were on my two hands," said Trina, one of the characters in Naomi Wolf's unwhitewashed memoir of her 1970s adolescence, "Promiscuities."

"The women agreed that girls we knew expected to have slept with anywhere from ten to thirty guys by the time we were in college. If you hadn't at least made a start, you were repressed or geeky or 'inexperienced,' a real pejorative."

Thanks at least in part to Alex Comfort, nobody will accuse modern Americans of "inexperience." They have tried more things with more people than

their parents or grandparents ever dared dream of. And along the way, they discovered something very unexpected. It turns out that if you eat enough tacos on the way to that Burgundian auberge, you actually do spoil your appetite. Ms. Wolf is by no means the only writer to suggest that sexual overindulgence may be squandering the possibilities for real connection between men and women.

This gloomy result was precisely what the more self-aware of the early sexual liberationists hoped for. In "The Female Eunuch," a book published two years before "The Joy of Sex," Germaine Greer championed promiscuity precisely be-

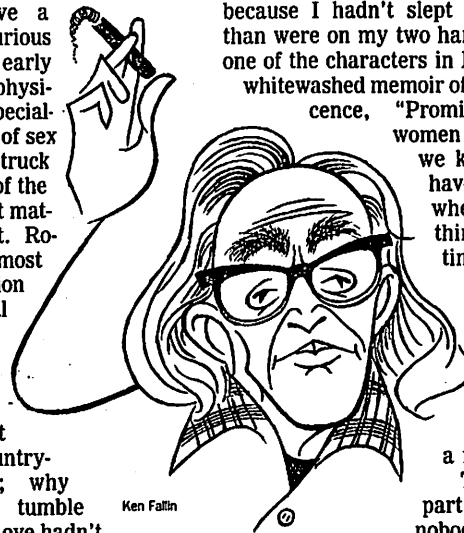
cause she felt that the more sex we had the less we would all care about it—thrusting putting to an end what she termed women's "doglike" devotion to their men. Comfort seldom expressed himself in such abstract terms. But one has to wonder whether he did not inwardly second Ms. Greer's view.

Ms. Greer's project, after all, was to use the pleasures of the body to deaden the loyalties of the soul, and that same thought may be discerned in the work that first brought Comfort to fame: his pacifist pamphleteering during World War II. His writings were sufficiently visible and effective to earn him a rebuke from George Orwell, who pointed out that every morsel of food eaten by the young conscientious objector was seasoned by the blood of the sailors and airmen who had died ferrying it over the Atlantic Ocean.

This retort does not seem to have had an impact on Comfort, and really it's hard to see how it could have. The great pacifist belief is that patriotic convictions of the sort that motivated those sailors and airmen are a threat to human happiness: People needed new, less violent rules to live by, and the surest base for those rules is a healthy regard for one's own skin. Shakespeare's Falstaff said it best: "Can honour set to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is honour? a word. What is in that word honour? What is that honour? air."

What was once a dark joke has 400 years later become the habitual outlook of a whole society. This wasn't all Alex Comfort's work, obviously, but he did his bit.

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Alex Comfort
Leaves a gloomy legacy