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Science or obsession?

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Life

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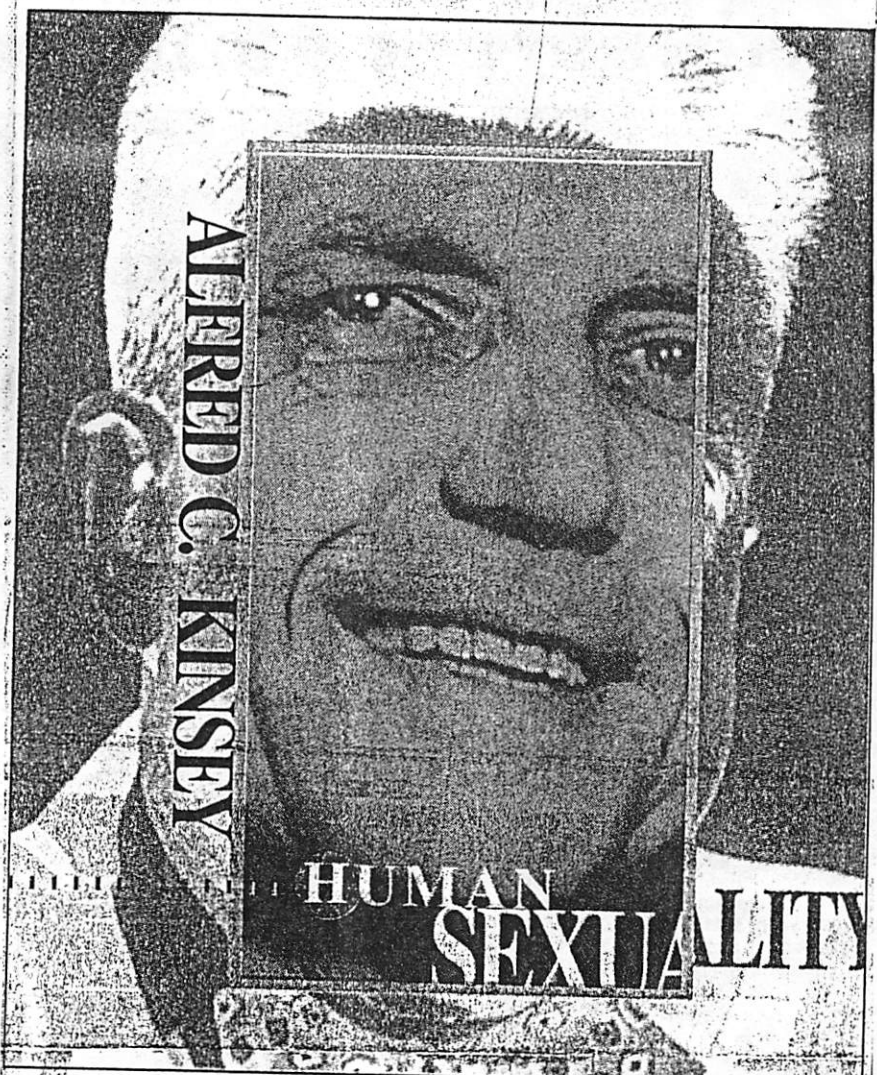


Photo resource: AP

By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

Biography re-examines sex researcher Kinsey

By Kim Painter
USA TODAY

Fifty years ago, *Look* magazine announced that a mild-mannered zoology professor was about to drop a "social atom bomb" on the country. In January 1948, America got its first look at *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* — "The Kinsey Report."

And a sensational blast it was. At a time when homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex were officially invisible, Alfred C. Kinsey, the Indiana academic, threw open the blinds and proclaimed that such things not only existed but were downright common.

The book on men said almost all masturbated and had premarital sex, half cheated on wives and more than a third had at least one homosexual experience. A companion report on women, in 1953, produced similarly shocking results.

The fallout was immense. For better or worse, Americans never thought about sex in quite the same way again.

Now another professor, University of Houston historian James Jones, has dropped a bombshell: In a new biography, Jones says Kinsey was not the "dogged, disinterested scientist" he claimed to be. Instead, Jones says, Kinsey was a "deeply troubled man," a closeted homosexual and masochist obsessed with sex and driven by his own sexual demons to free his fellow citizens

from the grips of Victorian repression. Sexual liberation, not science, was Kinsey's guiding light, Jones claims in *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life* (W.W. Norton, \$39.95).

The book gives new ammunition to conservative critics who, despite the passage of half a century, are determined to discredit Kinsey. But it also gives Kinsey great due as a pioneer in a field where, even today, scientists with much better sampling techniques struggle to amass accurate, useful information.

"We're still talking about Kinsey today because he rewrote the sexual constitution," says one critic, Robert Knight of the Family Research Council, Washington, D.C. "His work had a profound effect on the morals and behaviors of millions. . . . People are influenced by what they believe to be normal, and Kinsey tried to change the definition of normal."

Others say Kinsey changed not what people did but what they said about sex. Before Kinsey, says University of Chicago sociologist Edward Laumann, "There was a very strong double standard for what people would admit in public and what they thought and did in private."

Jones argues that nowhere was the public/private split wider than in Kinsey's own life. Kinsey, once described by *Time* magazine as "al-

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Kinsey 'was a driven man, but he was driven by a need to find out'

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most monotonously normal," emerges from Jones' 800-plus pages as something quite different.

Working from official documents, private letters and interviews, some anonymous, Jones paints a picture of a man who, even by the standards of

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the 1990s, was a sexual outlaw.

Jones first describes a severely repressed man, one who did not even date until he met his future wife in his mid 20s, but who harbored deep guilt about his homosexual fantasies and experiences with masturbation.

Then, Jones says, Kinsey's reserve began to crack. As a young professor studying wasps, he says, Kinsey became more and more obsessed with sex, often peppering colleagues and students with intrusive sexual questions and unsolicited sexual advice — complete with masturbatory demonstrations, Jones says.

By the time his first famous sex report came out, Jones says, Kinsey was having sex with other men and arranging for wife Clara to be filmed having sex with staff members. Jones interviewed a photographer who recalled filming all sorts of sex in the Kinseys' Bloomington, Ind., attic, including scenes of Kinsey engaging in clearly painful masturbation techniques. Kinsey was not filmed having sex with partners but eagerly watched other couples, Jones says.

"I don't pretend to know with exactitude all of Kinsey's sexual history. To some extent, I'm looking through a veil, trying to put pieces together," says Jones, who previously wrote a respected account of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment.

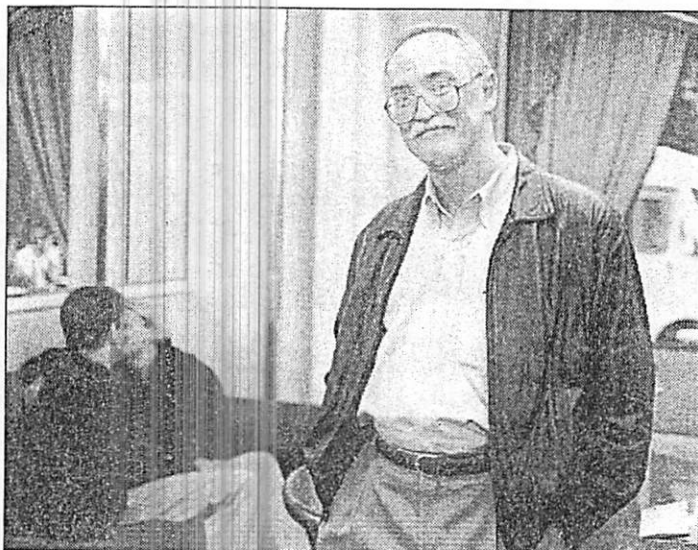
But he says he is convinced that Kinsey was obsessed with his own struggle for sexual identity and with the idea that the whole culture should be freed from the repression that had scarred his life. And that obsession, Jones says, inevitably biased Kinsey's work, work that Jones nevertheless considers important.

The current keepers of the Kinsey flame are not convinced.

"The author's description of Kinsey's private life is based largely on anonymous sources and a large amount of naive psychological theorizing," says John Bancroft, director of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, Bloomington. "The resulting picture is unconvincing and unrecognizable to people who knew Kinsey well."

One of those people is Paul Gebhard, who became director of the institute after Kinsey's 1956 death. He won't comment on Kinsey's sex life. He will say Kinsey "was a reformer at heart, but a scientist can be a reformer as long as he doesn't distort his data. And Kinsey did not."

Bancroft says it shouldn't matter how Kinsey got his own sexual pleasure, though he says Jones makes "an extraordinary error in calling him a homosexual. ... His own book clearly demonstrates that he was, at least, bisexual. ... He had a very meaningful sexual relationship (and



By Claire Holt, AP, for USA TODAY

James Jones: His biography of Alfred C. Kinsey depicts a deeply troubled man who was a closeted homosexual and masochist obsessed with sex.

four children) with his wife."

Bancroft says Jones misinterprets the attic sex films. The films, he says, were research, "not Kinsey trying to create some kind of sexual utopia." Similar filming was later done by researchers William Masters and Virginia Johnson, he notes.

Kinsey, Bancroft says, "was a driven man, but he was driven by a need to find out. He was a scientist, first and foremost."

Kinsey the scientist did make an important contribution, today's researchers say. "He opened the door to a field that had been closed be-

fore," says John Gagnon, a sociology professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Gagnon worked at the Kinsey Institute in the 1960s, after Kinsey's death and the departure of most of his colleagues.

But he says scientists today don't consider his statistical findings accurate. In fact, a 1994 study by Gagnon, Laumann and others showed much lower levels for most nonmarital sexual activities than Kinsey found in the 1940s and 1950s. For example, they found only 9% of men had ever had a homosexual experience. The 1994 study relied on the most up-to-