

CITIZEN KINSEY

a new biography detailing the private life of our greatest sex researcher misses the point

By JAMES R. PETERSEN

Alfred Kinsey was already middle-aged when he began his sex research. That he had indefatigable energy was evident—as an entomologist, he collected more than 4 million gall wasps for study. He had written more than 3000 pages of scholarly work between 1919 and 1937 alone—before he turned his eye to human sexual habits.

"I have discovered through the years that the surest way to get something done is to go ahead and do it," Kinsey noted. "I asked no one's permission to start this research. I had no one else working with me."

He took up the new subject with equal energy and drive. He began interviewing students as preparation for a marriage course he was asked to teach at Indiana University. He secured funding, founded the Institute for Sex Research and hired and trained a staff. He and his staff interviewed more than 18,000 men and women about their most intimate moments. He was aiming for 100,000 subjects but controversy, the limits of time and death cut him short.

In 1948 Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* was published, followed by *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953. The books changed the way Americans looked at sex. (For a detailed account of the public reception, see *Playboy's History of the Sexual Revolution: Part V* in the November 1997 *PLAYBOY*.)

Kinsey's approach to sex was empirical. He loathed the theories of Freudians who saw a few patients and fantasized about libidos, superegos and cultures built on sublimation and repression. He despised religious philosophers who simply condemned all behavior not sanctioned by the church. And he recoiled at laws that

punished minorities in the name of imposing one standard of sexual mores on all Americans.

In short, he despised bullshit. Kinsey was above all a descriptive scientist. Like Lewis and Clark exploring and mapping an unknown continent, Kinsey collected data about the sexual frontier, which in the public mind of 1940 was almost every aspect of sex. Knowing that you could not understand a species by visiting a zoo or looking at a few neatly preserved specimens, he interviewed all sorts of people—bootleggers and clergymen,

H. Jones, a historian who spent the past 20 years collecting material for a biography called *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life*, has written a book that has reignited the controversy surrounding America's most famous sex researcher.

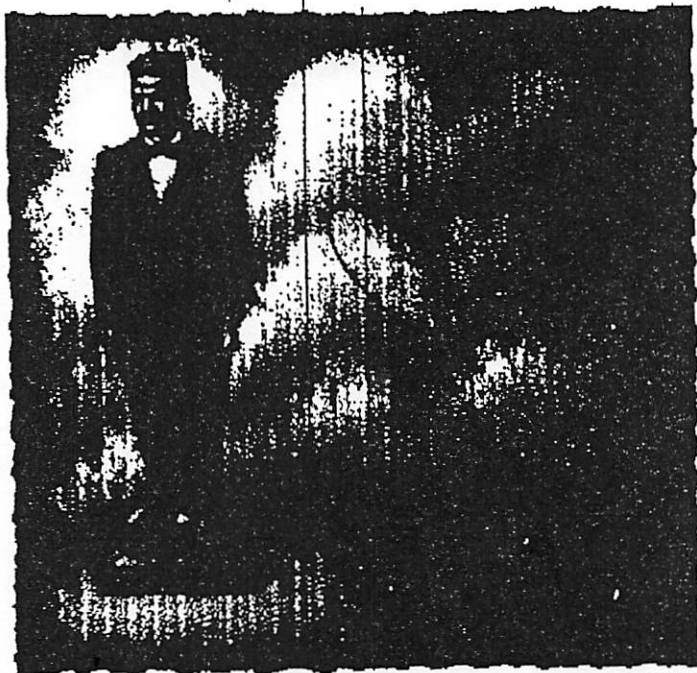
Prior to Kinsey, the party line held that all Americans aspired to be Christian gentlemen or virtuous women. There was little sex education, none of it based on fact. A best-selling book of the day claimed that for men sex was as simple as falling off a log. For women, it was "as simple as being the log." Masturbation was viewed as a symptom of mental illness. Homosexuality was not a topic to be discussed, period.

Kinsey's data destroyed such myths. He found that 92 percent of men masturbated to orgasm, that 85 percent had premarital intercourse, that 69 percent had sex with prostitutes, that almost half had extramarital sex and that 37 percent had at least one homosexual experience leading to orgasm. He found that nearly half the married women he surveyed had premarital sex, that almost a third of unmarried women had lost their virginity by the age of 23 and that about one quarter of

the wives had extramarital affairs by the age of 40.

Kinsey's data shattered the notion that there was a single sexual blueprint—the puritan model of chastity before marriage, virtuous restraint after. He revealed the sexual rainbow.

Here is a parlor game that shows the power certain individuals have held over the course of sexual history: If you wanted to change the quality of sex for all Americans, whom would you eliminate? Liberals would probably opt for Saint Augustine, who managed to lay his guilt trip on



college professors and gamblers, prostitutes and marriage counselors, prison officials and inmates, social workers and dancers, hatcheck girls and holdup men.

Kinsey's research was monumental. And it created a panic among those who believed in what has been called "hush and pretend." He was attacked by ministers, politicians, philosophers and felts (even J. Edgar Hoover considered Kinsey a public enemy). The attacks have continued for 50 years.

The battle is far from over. James

generations of Christians. However, as we near the end of this century, a surprising number of fundamentalist types would point to Kinsey.

According to one typical critic, Kinsey brought on "the pill, free love, open marriages, swingers' clubs, gay liberation and generations of increasingly radical feminist authors and groups—Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, lipstick lesbians—all of whom chorused Kinsey's buzzword 'freedom' and chanted his mantra: 'If it feels good, do it.' It is advice that, of course, far from bringing about happiness, has wrecked millions of lives, especially those of women. What Kinsey neglected to mention was that 'feeling good' has consequences, like rocketing divorce rates, teenage pregnancies and the AIDS epidemic."

Many people who want to burn Kinsey at the stake have never read his work. He never, for example, said, "If it feels good, do it." His message was more subtle: If it feels good, chances are somebody is already doing it. He celebrated diversity, and in doing so validated those on the fringe.

A subversive act? You bet. Kinsey forced Americans to confront a hypocrisy that punished the different. In the era ushered in by his work, many states moved to decriminalize fornication, sodomy and adultery. Psychologists began to remove diagnoses that branded gay sex as "pathological."

Biographer Jones has claimed that Kinsey was a sexual outsider. "Kinsey was both a homosexual and, from childhood on, a masochist who, as he grew older, pursued an interest in extreme sexuality with increasing compulsiveness." Jones wrote in a *New Yorker* piece that was drawn from material in his book. "His secret life was shared with a small circle of intimates, a few of whom became his sexual partners, sometimes in the name of 'research.'"

Jones says Kinsey's secret life must be taken into account when we consider his research and conclusions about sex. "Remarkably, his activities did not prevent him from being a devoted husband and a caring, successful father. But they almost certainly did affect the

objectivity and detachment of his work as a scientist: His celebrated findings, I now believe, may well have been skewed. From the very beginnings of his research into sexual behavior, the Americans who most persistently engaged Kinsey's attention were people who were either on the margins or beyond the pale: homosexuals, sadomasochists, voyeurs, exhibitionists, pedophiles, transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists."

Jones charges that Kinsey "placed a thumb on the scale—that his methodology and his sampling technique virtually guaranteed that he would find what he was looking for."

When Jones' article appeared in *The New Yorker*, it sparked outrage among the self-proclaimed virtuous. KINSEY REPORT HAD AUTHORS' KINKINESS read the headline on an editorial in the *Rocky*

(or ones more telling). For example, in 1983 the *Playboy Readers' Sex Survey* tabulated responses from 65,000 men. Approximately 35 percent reported having had at least one homosexual experience during adolescence, and about 10 percent said they had engaged in such activity as adults, though barely one percent labeled themselves "gay."

The attempts to kill the messenger have varied. Reisman wrote a scurrilous little broadside called *Kinsey: Sex and Fraud* in which she suggests Kinsey was party to the sexual abuse of children for his research. In 1995 Representative Steve Stockman (R. Tex.) introduced legislation that called for an investigation of Reisman's charges and would have denied funds to sex education based on Kinsey's research. There is no evidence to support the charges of child abuse.

James Jones launches a more circuitous attack. He does not shed any new light on Kinsey's research or methodology. Instead, he attacks Kinsey's private life, or, rather, what he imagines that life to have been.

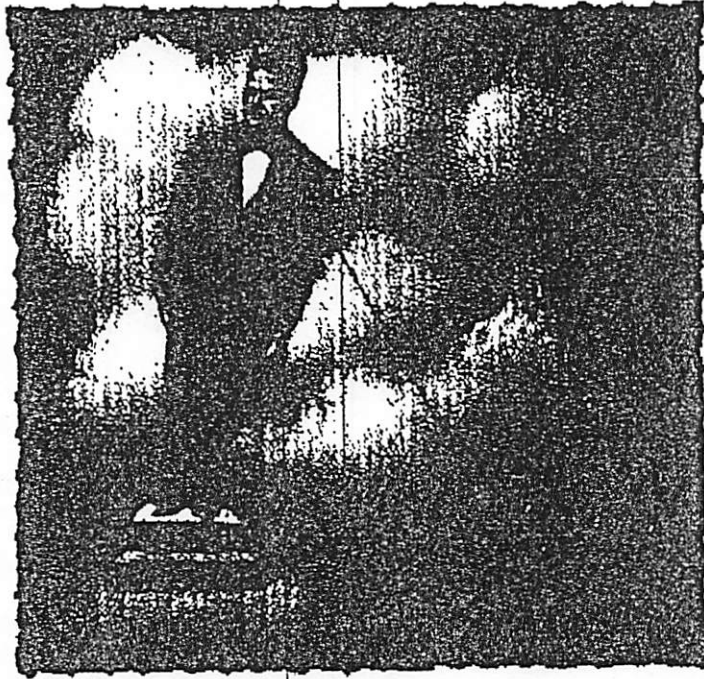
You have probably heard the most salacious charges. During a year in which we have learned the sexual preferences of broadcasters, sports heroes, politicians and actors, these are the alleged distinguishing marks on Kinsey's record.

- Kinsey was an exhibitionist who walked around campsites buck naked on field trips collecting gall wasps. Around the house, he shaved in the nude in view of his children. On

vacations, the family went skinny-dipping together.

- Trying to create his own sexual utopia, Kinsey encouraged or at least condoned extramarital affairs among members of his staff and their spouses. His own wife slept with others, with Kinsey's consent.

- Kinsey filmed friends, his wife and fellow members of the institute having sex or masturbating in an attic studio. He invited homosexuals and sadomasochists to perform. His staff once filmed men ejaculating (one at a time) to determine if males spurt or dribble. (The answer: More than 70 percent dribble. Medical literature at the time



Mountain News.

For the past decade, professional blowhard Patrick Buchanan and former *Captain Kangaroo* songwriter Judith Reisman have attacked the Kinsey statistic that ten percent of American men are homosexual. Both Buchanan and Reisman believe the true figure is closer to one percent—which, to a bully, justifies persecution.

The "say it isn't so" crowd flatly states that Kinsey lied, that he cooked the books, that he talked to the wrong people (i.e., People Not Like Us). But the behavior Kinsey recorded existed before he started his interviews, and later surveys have produced similar figures

claimed the force of ejaculation was responsible for impregnation.)

By the time conservative columnists got hold of these nuggets, Kinsey's home was a "personal porn studio" and his project a "sexual playground." Obsessed with sex, he "pressured" his co-workers into adulterous behavior. Are we to assume that members of an English department never slept with one another?

Much of the sexual gossip in Jones' book rests on the recollections of unnamed sources—those he cites as Anonymous A and Anonymous B.

More than 30 years after Kinsey's death, these supposed friends of the researcher divulged an array of sordid tales. Anon B (dubbed Mr. Y in later parts of the text, perhaps to give the illusion of a new source) said he copulated with Mrs. Kinsey and the wife of one of Kinsey's co-workers.

He said he had sex with their husbands, too, claiming, "We all sucked one another." Anon A claimed that Kinsey had once tied a rope around his own scrotum and, throwing the end over a pipe, had jumped off a chair to hang by his testicles in midair.

Anon B is the source of an unusual anecdote that attributes major significance to a wooden brush back found in Kinsey's childhood home: it is the masturbatory "Rosebud" to Citizen Kinsey.

Anon A crowed that Kinsey had "very large genitalia, and that means both penis and balls." Anon B volunteered that Kinsey got "a long-suffering look on his face when he was having sex" that looked "gross."

"He was kind of a punk when it came to S&M," complained Anon B. "He liked me to beat him with a cat-o'-nine-tails, but not very hard."

Kinsey, he noted, "didn't dress up in clothes and he didn't establish scenes, you know."

When Jones has little direct evidence, he resorts to dubious logic. He cites an obscure book on the Fifties that describes circle jerks at summer camp, then postulates that since Kinsey went to summer camp, he must have seen or been aware of "overt sexual behavior."

He relates that Kinsey was chaste until his wedding night, and that he most

likely did not try to have sex with his fiancée, Clara, for their entire courtship. "Recent studies show that gay men who become engaged often fail to make any efforts at seduction. This is especially true of men with little or no prior experience with women."

Jones then makes this leap: "Because of his lack of experience with women, his intense moral inhibitions and his confusion about his sexual identity, he probably shared the ambivalence many homosexuals feel about having intercourse with their fiancées."

Run that past us again. Because Kinsey did not have premarital sex, he was gay? You can't have it both ways. Kinsey was a Boy Scout. He came from a repressive home, with a father who refused to allow his children to dance or date. Should he have forced his fiancée to have sex in the name of good, old-

scribers of nature. His effect on the gay community was profound: He validated its existence, took confessions without condemnation—exactly as he did with people who masturbated or had premarital sex or extramarital sex.

The Kinsey findings inspired gay liberation and sparked a major panic over homosexuality in the Fifties. For years, people have speculated that Kinsey was gay, but the evidence was lacking. Members of the institute, who took one another's sexual histories, know the answer but have never told. They pledged confidentiality to all subjects, even themselves. That Jones was frustrated by this silence is obvious.

Not one of the hundreds of gay men Kinsey interviewed has publicly admitted to sleeping with him. That news would have traveled through the community immediately. How does Jones get around this fact? He speculates that Kinsey would go from the company of the men he interviewed to anonymous encounters in public toilets where he would not be recognized.

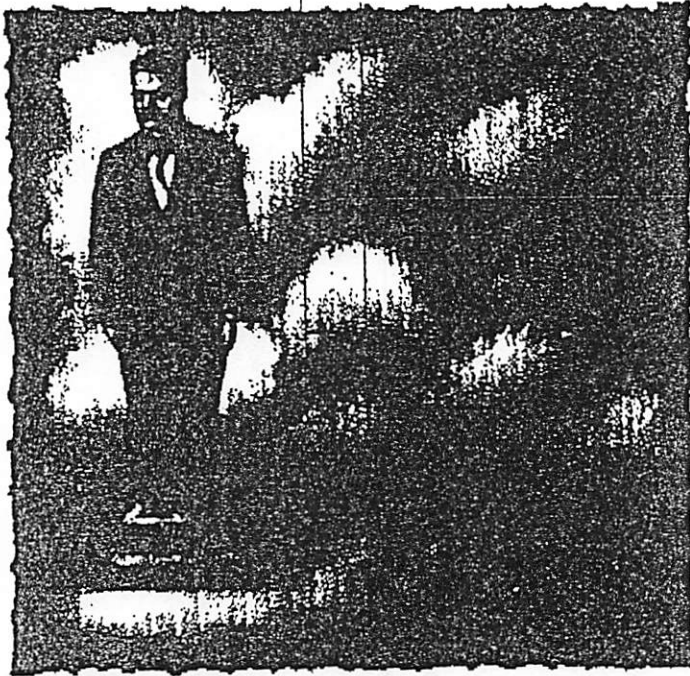
Paul Gebhard, a Kinsey colleague, told Jones that "the only homosexual thing Kinsey ever mentioned from the early part of his life was that in his childhood there was pre-adolescent sex play with a neighborhood group. There was a somewhat older girl and there was Kinsey, and I got the impression there were about six kids, and they would go into the basement and look at one another, poke straws in various apertures." So playing doctor means you're gay?

In the end, what does it matter? Jones simply presents a prejudice that a gay man cannot be an effective social scientist. Kinsey labored mightily to do away with such simpleminded bias. He knew the power of labels to destroy lives.

Jones' book is a memorable effort to pigeonhole Kinsey, one that completely misses the point of Kinsey's life.

Kinsey was a pioneer in his public life, a true rebel who changed the way we view sex. And he was a pioneer in his private life, a scientist who experimented on himself.

Citizen Kinsey had balls. Big ones. That much we know is true.



fashioned heterosexuality?

Kinsey did immerse himself in gay culture. And he was a topic of much conversation. Jones recounts the recollections of Samuel Steward, an English professor at a university in Chicago who was one of Kinsey's friends and subjects. "Many of Steward's friends asked point-blank if Kinsey was queer. When Kinsey learned about this, he asked Steward what he told them. Steward replied that he always said, 'Yes he is—but not in the same way we are. He is a voyeur and an *auditeur*. He likes to look and listen.'"

Kinsey was an observer, in a period when the great scientists were de-