Houston Chronicle

12:31 PM 12/24/1997

Sex subtext

Biographer deftly argues motives of Kinsey's work

By BARBARA LISS

ALFRED C. KINSEY: A Public/Private Life. By James H. Jones. Norton, $39.95.

NOT every revolution begins with the drama of a Robespierre in a cosmopolitan city like Paris. A revolution can start quietly, with an unknown scientist asking questions on a quiet campus in the Midwest. Alfred Kinsey was such a man, and from Indiana University, in mid-20th-century America, he changed the way a society thought about sex.

Surprisingly, *Alfred C. Kinsey* is only the second full-scale account of the researcher who opened the great dialogue on sexual behavior with his groundbreaking volumes *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953).

Kinsey (1894-1956) collected 18,000 sexual histories for the books -- he wanted 100,000 -- recording a diversity of sex practices in the American population. If people knew how varied sexual behavior actually was, he believed, they would reject society's repressive Victorian mores and embrace a healthier view of sexuality.

It is hard to imagine any future Kinsey books trumping this one for sheer wealth of material. Like Kinsey himself, Jones, a professor of history at the University of Houston, intends to bowl us over with details.

This book weighs almost four pounds and includes 119 pages of notes -- a compilation only an academic could love. (Big chunks of the book, especially about Rockefeller Foundation funding for Kinsey's Institute for Sex Research, are written with earnest, dissertation-mode aridity.)

Different kinds of truth struggle to be heard in a biography. Here, the biographer's and the subject's politely take turns. The work is part Reign of Terror, part encomium. To read it is to marvel at Jones' dexterity in giving with one hand and taking away with the other.

While acknowledging Kinsey's influential role in freeing Americans from a rigid Victorian sexual code, Jones finds pathology and manipulation in every move Kinsey makes. We are bombarded with images of a risk-taking, guilt-ridden man who used his research as a cover to support his homosexual and masochistic practices.

If Kinsey's samples were unrepresentative (and this argument is ready for enshrinement, even though Kinsey never claimed or believed that random samples were possible in sex research), it is not simply poor technique. Jones thinks Kinsey was most interested in sex at the margins: What did prison populations do? Prostitutes? If females were underrepresented in the study, it was because Kinsey was more comfortable interviewing males. "The beauty of sex research," writes Jones, "was that it allowed Kinsey to transform his voyeurism into science."

What troubles Jones more than Kinsey's statistics is the researcher's lack of objectivity. For a historian, Jones worries more than most about value-free social science. He is irritated Kinsey came to the study of sexual behavior not as a disinterested scientist but as a zealous "crypto-reformer" determined "to use science to strip human sexuality of its guilt and repression."

In describing Kinsey's boyhood, Jones sets the scene for the man's later sexual agenda. Growing up in the atmosphere of the new century's reform-minded progressivism, Kinsey burned with ambition. Defying his authoritarian father, he left home to study biology at Bowdoin College. By this age Kinsey had discovered his sexuality and the practice of masturbation, Jones tells us.

Fair enough, but Jones goes on to explain that Kinsey was "a youth with punishing secret"; he was attracted to males. This observation is built on Kinsey's belief that early sexual experiences, more than biology, shape one's sex orientation, and Jones belief that Kinsey's limited contact with girls and summers spent with boys in camp resulted in the latter's taking his opportunities where he found them.

At Indiana University, Kinsey married Clara McMillen, a gifted chemistry student, and settled into a 20-year career studying the gall wasp (his subject from graduate school at Harvard). His method for doing science -- whether with insects or humans -- never varied: Collect vast quantities of data by direct observation to make your proof.

Although Kinsey fathered four children, Jones tells us little about his relationship with them, only that he was a good family man.

Clara is another story. Jones presents the marriage as "companionate," the model of the time, but Clara comes across as unencumbered by independent thought, dominated by Kinsey much as his mother had been ruled by her husband.

Clara, the perfect faculty wife, echoed her husband's pronouncements, fed wonderful meals to his colleagues, and, at his direction, participated with them in group sex.

The distance from entomologist to sex researcher was short and direct. Kinsey maintained his involvement in sexual research came in response to his biology classes' search for sex information. A disingenuous claim, Jones argues. Kinsey prodded his students for information about their sex lives and encouraged them to confide their secrets.

With his colleagues at the Institute for Sex Research, he went further: He promoted uninhibited sexuality by orchestrating sex encounters.

Kinsey's shrewd campaign to construct his modest, self-confident image and to control press accounts when his books came out (a writer's true fantasy) disturbs Jones' sense of fair play. This was, after all, Science. What was he doing collecting sexual histories of the reporters covering his work?

Still, for all of Kinsey's manipulations, his critics found him. Mostly, these were social scientists who saw the study of interpersonal relationships as their special territory. Margaret Mead famously complained of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* that the book "suggests no way of choosing between a woman and a sheep." But Mead misread Kinsey when she maintained he offered young people no guidance. Like a true revolutionary, he showed the way to a new world. And in spite of himself, Jones gives Kinsey credit for this achievement.

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