



# A case of hot monogamy

With a bit of effort, a tired marriage can get an erotic boost.

## RELATIONSHIPS ANNA JOHNSON

ONE CAN GAUGE the heat of an issue by the level of discomfort it generates at a dinner party. Asking if there is sex after marriage is about as bad as asking if there is life after death. I broached the question of conjugal passion after reading *Mating in Captivity*, the unnerving new book by Esther Perel.

I might as well have thrown a grenade on the table: "Sex!" an older gentleman almost vomited the word. "Sexy sex is the stuff of affairs, NOT marriage."

His wife, bejewelled, beautifully dressed, intelligent, sat opposite him, unblinking. "Frilly black knickers!" he bellowed. "They're just not going to cut it after you've been ringside for the C-section."

My husband shifted in his chair. Married for just four years and with a 17-month-old baby, we felt the chill wind of marital mortality gust through the room.

"Adultery!" the veteran cynic exploded. "That's your only chance at erotic bliss, preferably in the rain in the back seat of a car."

The spectre of infidelity haunts many couples. I turned my mind to the 21st-century alternative: sex within marriage, or what Americans call "hot monogamy".

On paper it looks good. In her book, Perel's main point is that a happy marriage is a sexy one. To keep the heat up, Perel proposes not more closeness but a little more distance. Space between husband and wife, space between mother and child and, most challenging of all, space between a kitchen table covered in bills and a steaming hot boudoir.

Perel claims that the closer a couple bind together in emotional, verbal and domestic intimacy (compounded by the stress of parenting), the less chance they have of remaining lovers.

But how does one become more mysterious to the man who has seen you in labour or on the loo? And how can a husband feel like Colin Firth in a cashmere coat when he looks like Ray Winstone in trackpants? And when is the right time when there seems to be no time?

BE NO TIME:

Applying Perel's ideas was a challenge I set myself for six weeks. Defiant, perhaps faintly desperate, I was determined to unearth and indulge my sensuality, excavating its shattered remains from the accumulated layers of 17 months of sleep deprivation, three years of petty domestic squabbles and 10 kilograms of baby weight.

I started by interviewing Perel, a coolly seductive 47-year-old married mother of two sons, realised early on that pleasure in her marriage (as well as complicity, privacy and a dash of pursuit) would ensure its survival.

As a New York sex therapist, she seems to prod her clients (and readers) most with the question of why not. "Why not stop

breastfeeding?" she asked me over tea. "The hormones pumping through your body are flatlining your libido." I choked on my baguette. "Why not have a night away from your son, or several nights?"

Once a year, Perel takes a 10-day holiday with her husband. Just the two of them. She has been doing so since each baby was a year old and her marriage is still steaming after 20 years.

Far from being smug, Perel's position on the matter is almost survivalist. If you are in any doubt about the impact on a marriage of long stretches without sex, Perel will quickly share some sobering statistics with you. "In

Britain, 50 per cent of couples divorce within the first three years of marriage and in the first year of their child's life. A lack of pleasure kills love."

Despite these numbers, all I can feel is compassion for the women who choose sleep over sex, their mojo in deep coma.

Perel herself revs along on four hours a night, yet she does have empathy, tinged with impatience, for erotic sloths: "I understand exhaustion and (as a mother) I am the last one to trivialise this. I was tired too, but I also know that lovers at the beginning of an affair are able to stay up all night. I think

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the parents dictates the stability of the whole family." High on oxytocin (the love hormone of lactation), I stagger back to bed after a midnight feed feeling both ravaged and strangely sated. Perel pulls no punches about mothers like me who claim they are "touched out" by the end of a day.

"You say there is nothing more you can give at the end of the day with your baby," she interjects, "but perhaps, sensually and emotionally, there is nothing more that you need!" Striking a compromise, I begin to night-wean.

**Week 2: sexy old mummy.** Standing before the mirror I lift two handfuls of limp hair on top of my head and twist them like a croissant. "What would Esther do?" I muse while scraping scrambled eggs off a pan.

I splash some Opium behind both knees, serve dinner in an Issa dress and wait for him to sense the frisson. Noticing that we are eating breakfast for dinner he frowns at my cleavage: "You look odd, are you having an affair?"

**Week 3: leopard-skin knickers.** I propose a trip to the beach with another couple and their baby. On the first night the children wake each other like car alarms. On the second night the husbands drink too much Chilean red. On the third night I go swimming in the moonlight in a pair of leopard-print knickers. Finally, my husband and I share a pleasure that is not measured, or thoughtful, or planned, but genuinely hungry.

**Week 4: It's all right for Anals Nin.** In America, fidelity is sacrosanct and divorce is common. In old Europe, the opposite was true. Perel's counsel on what she calls "the shadow of the third" is that extramarital flirting is healthy and an affair can be survived; indeed, in some cases it can benefit a marriage.

I invite an ex-lover to dinner. I am seven years older than when we last met and his new girlfriend is 15 years younger. I am at pains not to wear too much lipstick or laugh too loudly.

Afterwards, I realise that jealousy is more suffocating than housework and wish I had stuck to the internet, where married people go to flirt.

**Week 5: is anyone else out there doing it?** In the playground I scan the faces of mothers I know, looking for signs of erotic electricity. The idea of married sex becoming a source of pressure rather than pleasure is common among working mothers. They are being asked to perform on three fronts, and they are overwhelmed.

"I remember," one lawyer mum told me, "when sex became a THING. That was the point where

we literally had to bang away at it till the tension left us. Even mediocre sex can be relaxing."

In Perel's pursuit of the erotic she pushes women to explore what they want in bed, in their fantasies and in their lives. But most women I know are so busy treading water that any sex feels like a victory. Eroticism, to me, seems very much like the tattered risotto recipe in the bottom of my handbag. It requires time and special ingredients. I resolve to seize both. Next week.

**Week 6: love in the afternoon.** After much mulling over my erotic core, I realise that I want to simply play dress-ups and run away. Just waiting for the mood to strike isn't happening and Perel knows why: "Spontaneity is a fabulous idea, but in an ongoing relationship whatever is going to 'just happen' already has. Now they have to make it happen." This notion of planning, she says, is just what new lovers do: the mood, the motel, the bottle of Moet.

Unable to afford a five-star room, I attack our bedroom like a set-dresser for a silent film. Heavy blood-coloured drapes, a faintly Bedouin bedspread. Sandlewood incense, black eyeliner and a plate of strawberries. It's 3pm and our son is at the library. I drape a silk scarf around my husband's throat and imagine he's Rudolph Valentino in *The Sheik*. As we play Kidnapped Princess, Perel's little red book, full of contradictory, difficult and good ideas, is finally cast aside. *The Guardian*

*Mating in Captivity* by Esther Perel is published in March by Hodder, \$35.

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desire in marriage is about getting over the hump and knowing it will feel good, it will be good for us."

The "hump" can look more like a mountain to many women. Too tired, too busy, too angry – the three main excuses that converge into one bloody-minded block – especially where domestic chores are concerned. Perel's book in hand, I resolve to get out of the nursery and back into bed.

**Week 1: nappies v desire.** In Perel's view, many mothers have lost a sense of proportion over their children, giving them the lion's share of sensuality, humour, affection and even designer clothing, while dad subsists on "a few brief pecks on the cheek".

Perel refutes the now fashionable child-centred model of family life, arguing: "The happiness of

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