



A flirtation with desire

A therapist prescribes fantasy, mystery and even adultery to help put the fire into lust-less relationships.

SEXUALITY

Mating in Captivity

By Esther Perel

Hodder & Stoughton, 244 pp,
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Reviewed by Linda Jaivin

ZOOKEEPERS AND LONG-term lovers know that not all creatures mate well in captivity. With time and confinement, randy tomcats into lazy fatcats grow. Old couples still love to go to bed together but it's more often to sleep.

How real or big a problem this is depends on the couple, the context of their lives and the culture they live in. Judging from Esther Perel's *Mating in Captivity*, in the context of middle-class American society, it is a big problem indeed.

Perel is a New York "couples therapist". Over the years, the ranks of the sexually anxious have streamed through her door in search of the Grail of Everlasting Eros. Some tell her they lost interest in sex once children arrived on the scene, others can't say what quelled the fire. Perel listened carefully, read widely, wrote an article for what she describes as the "on-the-cusp" magazine *The Psychotherapy Networker* and expanded the article into *Mating in Captivity*.

Some passages of *Mating in Captivity* have the dull familiarity of a thousand articles in a thousand women's magazines before it.

These read like a pop-psych melange of pre-chewed theory and take-home therapy. "Jed and Coral", "Joni and Ray", "Nat and Amanda" and the other conveniently articulate Barbies and Kens (and the occasional Barbie and Barbie or Ken and Ken) who populate the anecdotes have a creepily plastic feel; they seem to have been moulded for the purpose of our edification.

So far, so dozy. But I nearly choked on my Horlicks at Perel's assertion that "until recently, sexual fantasy has gotten a bad rap". On which planet would that be? Nancy Friday's pathbreaking work on the subject, *My Secret Garden*, after all, was a bestseller in the English-

speaking world back in 1973. Perel admits she was a "late convert" to the notion that fantasies could be healthy, having "been taught to regard them as a symptom of neurosis or immaturity". We can all appreciate her honesty. But it doesn't necessarily make us want to leap into bed with her.

For all that, Perel presents some seductive arguments. Her central point is that there exists a contradiction between intimacy, which closes

the space between two individuals, and desire, which grows from the challenges and insecurities engendered by that space. We desire to close the gap but, once we do, desire has nowhere left to go.

Part of the solution, Perel says, is to recognise the "persistent mystery" in one's lover. "Even in the dulllest marriages," she sensibly asserts, "predictability is a mirage."

Perel invites her readers "to think about ways you might introduce risk to safety, mystery to the familiar and novelty to the enduring". There is no magic, one-size-fits-all formula. "Modern relationships," she notes, "are cauldrons of contradictory longings." She encourages couples to dig into their past and confront their present in order to find their unique path into the future.

Some of the advice Perel gives is surprisingly simple: she tells a couple who are forever cuddling but no longer have sex to stop it immediately. She recognises that for them, touch has become too familiar, too constant, to generate either spark or need. In other cases, the solution is more complex.

Perel promotes a concept she describes as "inviting the third". She



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argues that this doesn't need to involve actual infidelity so much as introducing the notion that it is possible. This can take the shape of role play or flirtation but she doesn't rule out the potential usefulness of extramarital sex, including swinging, in certain circumstances.

If you set the bed on fire, of course, the house might just burn down. "The tension between security and adventure is a paradox to manage," Perel insists, "not a problem to solve."

Herein lies a central conundrum. Perel seems to want it both ways. As

an intellectual, she resists the notion of a "can-do" solution to what is essentially an existential dilemma. As a therapist, she is bound to help her patients find "will-do" answers to their concrete problems.

So, on the one hand, she confronts the goal-oriented, upbeat US mindset which "encourages us to assume that dwindling desire is an operational problem that can be fixed". On the other, she praises couples who "become industrious and make intentional, diligent attempts to resuscitate [desire]". Even playfulness, cousin to eroticism,

becomes a regime to "cultivate".

It's all about perception and expectation, really. If you think you've got a Magic Pudding, then the day your spoon finally clinks against the bottom of the basin, you're going to feel deprived, even if you weren't, in fact, all that hungry.

Linda Jaivin is the author of seven books including *Eat Me* and *The Eternal Optimist*.

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No sex please, we're a couple ... to bed, perchance to dream.