



Domestic duties in an erotic world

Different attitudes from separate countries spurred Esther Perel on in her search for marriage's lost libido, writes **Mark Coultan**.

In 2002 Esther Perel was at a professional gathering of psychologists speaking about the difficulties of a couple whose sex life had involved mild sado-masochism. After the birth of their second child, the woman had decided she wanted a more conventional sex life.

The husband was still interested in S&M. The result was a sharp decline in their sexual activities.

In the discussion that followed it became obvious that the psychologists' preoccupation was sado-masochism, not the couple's relationship. What pathology drove the man to want to objectify his wife? Perhaps motherhood had restored the woman's dignity.

Someone suggested that the couple needed to work on a more empathic connection to counteract their tendency to engage in an implicitly abusive, power-driven relationship.

This went on for two hours. Finally, Perel felt the need to speak up. After all, it had been a consensual relationship. What they had not discussed was pleasure or eroticism. The assumption was that the S&M was too kinky for the serious business of a married couple with children.

Perel is a couples therapist in Manhattan who has lived in America for more than 20 years. But talking to colleagues from Europe, Brazil and Israel after the conference, she realised their assumptions about sexuality were very different from those of her American colleagues.

Conventional wisdom is that sex is a metaphor for the state of a relationship. Trouble in the bedroom meant trouble with the relationship. The way to treat it was to fix the relationship, and the sex would naturally follow.

But in her practice she was seeing many

couples who reported they were still very much in love. It was just that their sex life was dull, or non-existent.

Her fix was counterintuitive. Often the problem was not lack of intimacy in the relationship, it was too much intimacy. One of the central tenets of modern marriage is intimacy, but she says that many couples confuse love with a merging of two people, something which is a bad omen for their sex life.

Once, marriage was considered an arrangement – love was a bonus.

At the heart of Perel's book is the dilemma of modern marriage in a society in which advertising suggests everybody can have almost everything: how do you desire what you already have?

Her experience among her professional colleagues eventually led to the writing of a magazine article called "Erotic Intelligence" and eventually the book: *Mating in Captivity, Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*.

Although the book is full of examples of couples she has counselled at her Manhattan practice, anyone looking for titillation, or a sex manual, is bound to be disappointed.

It's part self-help book, part an intellectual exploration of the pressures of modern life, baby boomer expectations, and the basic nature of sexual desire.

The book is part of a growing movement looking at a paradoxical outcome of the sexual revolution: in these days of contraception, empowerment of women, a society saturated with sex, where pornography is almost mainstream, couples are having less sex – at least, says Perel with a laugh, with each other.

After the British press started writing stories about her, publishers fell over each other to get the rights to her book; the sexless



marriage is apparently good business. She writes that she sees couples “who believe that intimacy means knowing everything about each other. They abdicate any sense of separateness, then are left wondering where the mystery has gone.”

Many therapists advise couples to rekindle their relationships by reconnecting through being open and frank – “by getting to know each other”. But she says that knowing isn’t everything. Many couples do nothing but talk to each other every day.

To create more passion, she suggests, they work on ambiguity. “Eroticism can draw its powerful pleasure from fascination with the hidden, the mysterious, and the suggestive.” Perel writes about the nature of sexual desire. Eroticism, she says, requires separateness. The caring that fosters love can block erotic pleasure. Love is selfless, desire is selfish.

At a talk in New York’s SoHo district, full of the art gallery crowd that typifies the area, one of the first questions comes from a woman: what’s the solution?

She describes such questions as particularly American; they always want solutions, particularly quick ones. This issue, she says, is not one with a solution, it’s something which is managed. But one bit of advice is to plan. The hot sex of paperback novels and the movies is always spontaneous. But she says that in a long-term relationship, whatever “is just going to happen” almost certainly already has.

A common assumption is that it is women who lose desire as marriages mature. But Perel says she sees many men who find it hard to eroticise the mother of their children.

She has tried to reach a male audience, but the majority of the people who turn up at her talks are women, and the majority of journalists who write about her book are women. (For some reason, they tend to

write about their own sex lives.)

Sometimes Perel’s writings buck social ideals so that they almost sound blasphemous.

Erotic desire, she says, does not necessarily play by the rules of good citizenship – it is not politically correct. While women have spent half a century seeking equality, often sexual relationships thrive on inequalities of power.

Such ideas are open to misinterpretation. During our interview she is furious and appalled that a British female journalist wrote that she was advocating that couples should treat each other as trash; another wrote that Perel’s theory was that sex and marriage are not compatible.

Perel lists some of the misinterpretations that have been put on her work. One of her sayings is: “Monogamy needs to be negotiated.” She says people, whether they realise it or not, negotiate it, but often not explicitly. But that does not mean Perel advocates adultery.

Or because she says not all affairs are signs of trouble in the marriage; Perel says that affairs are good for the marriage.

Born in Belgium to parents who were Holocaust survivors, Perel describes herself a cross-cultural psychologist. (She speaks eight languages, and has worked in six of them.) She used to think that what she was describing was an American phenomenon. However, on a book tour in Europe she found journalists starting their stories: “No sex please. We’re British.”

And in Italy the first question was about the marital betrayals of Silvio Berlusconi.

She has come to think about the death of passion in marriages as a Western trend.

The fact that her book has been published, or is about to be published in 16 countries (including Australia), suggests that society’s collective libido is alive and kicking, just lost in the everyday humdrum of life.



Work on ambiguity ... Esther Perel says instead of getting to know each other, couples should keep parts of themselves hidden. Photo: Lisa Carpenter

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