

SEA CHANGE
A NEW THEORY
PROMOTES MYSTERY
AND UNCERTAINTY
AS A CURE FOR
SEXUAL BOREDOM.



rules of attraction

arrived at Esther Perel's SoHo loft to find her in a state of benign frenzy. That night, she was hosting a dinner party for her husband's fifty-fourth birthday; galleys of her new book, *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*, due out this month

from HarperCollins, were being messengered over; and she was leaving the next day for a trip to Turkey, where the 48-year-old therapist was expected to give a talk on cultural differences when it comes to sex and marriage.

Perel, an attractive mother of two prepubescent boys, was wearing tight jeans, high heels, and a neo-Victorian, vaguely hippie cotton blouse. When she pressed the PLAY button on her answering machine, my ears perked up. I hadn't seen the man speaking on the tape, a prominent journalist who has published several books, in years, but a decade ago a good friend of mine had briefly dated him. It had been one of those train-wreck relationships that lasted all of three months and required that both

What does therapist Esther Perel prescribe for couples with a sagging sex life? Less talk. Be more distant. Rebecca Johnson investigates a dangerous idea.

my friend and all of her friends play haruspex to the mysteries of his behavior. Whatever did he mean when he said that? Why didn't he call when he said he would? And, more important, why was he still a bachelor at 45?

When I mentioned to Perel that I knew the man, her eyes lit up. "Did you date him?" she asked. I shook my head. Even I could see he was a bad bet—one of those finicky men constantly in and out of relationships, always searching for the perfect woman, the one who was going to make all his years of waiting worth it. Indeed, it was men like him who sent me scurrying into the safety of marriage and, at least partly, inspired Perel to write the book, an entertaining exegesis on the many ways relationships falter when it comes

to the seemingly inevitable fizzle of sex in a committed, long-term relationship.

It's not a new idea, Freud himself said it somewhere—"Where they love, they cannot desire." "Yes," Perel agreed over Caesar salad at the SoHo Grand hotel,

"but Freud pathologized it. He made it sound like there was something wrong with those people. Another way of looking at it is to say these two things pull us in different directions." When men feel sexually bored by the mother of their children, it is sometimes called the Madonna/whore complex, but Perel rejects that stereotype, largely because she sees the dynamic just as often in women. It just looks a little different when we do it. "They have a list," she says. "They want someone who is financially sound, ambitious, gentlemanly, masculine, caring, hip, mannered, but those qualities don't go together in the same person. It's like they're looking for four different people rolled into one." *health* > 592

BEAUTY HEALTH & FITNESS

erotic intelligence

I cringed a little at her description. I never went so far as writing anything down, but I definitely remember looking for somebody who fit her description. Then again, being torn between what she calls “security and adventure” is the human condition. We want excitement, which thrives on danger and the unknown, but we also want stability and safety. We want what we can’t have, but once we get it, we’re not so interested. It’s like the journalist on her answering machine, who was always seeking setups or asking women out, but as soon as a relationship became established, he lost interest. Or, perhaps unconsciously, he’d act like a jerk to keep things interesting.

When people reach the point in their relationship when the sex goes flat or disappears, despite a strong feeling of love and commitment, they often go see a therapist, but Perel doesn’t think the American therapeutic establishment has done a great job in this department. For one thing, traditional couples therapists rarely talk about sex, and sex therapists rarely talk about relationships. “People get together because of sex and they split up because of it, but you can be in therapy for years without talking about it,” she says. “I know therapists who sit there silently hoping their patients won’t bring it up.”

Even when therapists do finally talk about it, she thinks, they often get it wrong. “I was taught,” says Perel, “that sex was a metaphor for the relationship. The greater the intimacy, the better the sex. Improve a relationship and the sex will follow—but in my practice, I didn’t see that. I saw plenty of couples who came in with loving relationships where there was no sex. I mean, I also saw terrible relationships where there was no sex, but that made sense.”

“Or couples where the relationship was terrible but the sex was good?” I added, thinking of those men of my youth who made my knees weak and my parents hyperventilate.

It was during a national psychology conference that the seed of the book was planted. “We were discussing a couple

where the man was into S&M and the woman was not,” she says. “In all the discussion about sex, no one once mentioned pleasure. They all talked about the man as if he had a problem. I was sitting there with this feeling growing inside of me until, finally, I had to say something.” Fantasy, she pointed out to the crowd, is rarely politically correct. Indeed, its transgressive nature is exactly what makes it



AGENT PROVOCATEUR
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hot. But just because the man wanted to act out domination and submission fantasies with his wife in bed did not mean that he wanted to treat his wife like a doormat in life. Didn’t anyone in the room have some forbidden fantasies? “The body,” she says, “wants experiences that are very different from what the mind wants. Psychology is so focused on the talking cure that it disrespects the body, but in the end, it is our mother tongue.” The discussion that followed was so lively, Perel knew she was onto something.

I should probably mention here that Perel is European, a Belgian whose parents survived the Holocaust and went

on to run a fashionable clothing store in Antwerp. She speaks eight languages, has lived all around the world, spent many years as an actress in avant-garde theater and came of age sexually after the pill and before AIDS, though she admits she didn’t get a lot of this stuff right when she was younger, either. “I wish,” she says, “I knew what I know now when I looked like I did then.”

A lot of what she has to say about the state of American relationships is, inevitably, a reaction against the puritanical streak that runs right through the heart (and crotch) of American culture. I know because I

am one of those puritans. In order to get a firsthand feel for Perel and her methods, I persuaded my husband, a conservative investment banker on Wall Street, to go with me to see Perel for a session. I don’t mean to brag (and thank God my children are not old enough to read this), but before my husband and I got married, we had a pretty great sex life. Morning, noon, night, in the bed, on the—oh, never mind, you get the idea. Now that we’ve been married a few years and have a few kids, let’s just say things have cooled off. Not to the once-a-year or once-a-month level, but enough to be noticeable. I can remember a time in my life when sex was at the top of the day’s list, but between the kids, work, managing two households, stepkids, vacations, vaccinations, trying to get back to pre-pregnancy shape, trying to finish the book, trying, trying, trying to get everything done, sex has tended to fall somewhere in between “Pay car insurance” and “Book summer vacation.” I am not alone—when I compare notes with friends who have small children, they all say the same thing: Sex is nice in theory, but practically speaking. . . .

I’ve been through years of therapy (mostly because I couldn’t figure out why I wasn’t meeting the man of my “list”); my husband has had none, so I assumed he’d be an uptight wreck in our session while I’d be a seasoned pro. But as I sat listening to him openly *health* >601

discuss sex, masturbation, and fantasy, I squirmed in my seat, an embarrassed smile on my face. Perel was right. In all my years of therapy, I don't think I ever discussed sex beyond the minimal "It's fine" or "It's not so fine." And my shrink, an elderly man on the Upper West Side who sometimes smoked a pipe during our sessions, never asked. But my husband, like Perel, spent his formative years in Europe, where things are a lot looser and tolerance for deviation is much wider (I think America is still in a state of shock over François Mitterrand's mistress attending his funeral).

Yet for all America's self-righteousness about the sanctity of marriage (see this year's proposed constitutional amendment banning gay marriage), we continue to have one of the highest rates of divorce in the world. It's not, says Perel, that we expect too little from our partners. Rather, we expect too much. In a time when extended families live far apart and community can seem like an anachronistic ideal, we expect our partner to salve our existential loneliness, excite us in bed, and take out the garbage when it's full. Other cultures tolerate compartmentalization—a wife for society, a mistress for sex—a lot better than we do.

Given that America is not likely to turn its back on monogamy anytime soon—*Big Love* notwithstanding—the question inevitably arises, What is the cure for dull sex in marriage? Here Perel is in dangerous territory, as evidenced by the difficulty she had in finding a good title. For a long time the working title was *Erotic Intelligence*, which seemed a little too how-to; then *Wild Things in Captivity* (which made me think of the naughty boy in Maurice Sendak's classic children's book), until, finally, she persuaded the publisher to go with *Mating in Captivity*, a phrase that recalls the D. H. Lawrence poem that opens the book ("The great cage of our domesticity/kills sex in a man, the simplicity/of desire is distorted and twisted awry").

There's nothing lonelier than a bad marriage, which is why there will always be best-selling *Men Are from Mars* advice books or cheesy manuals on ways to ramp up the romance—make a sex date! Rent a dirty movie! It's no coincidence that nine publishing houses got into a heated auction for Perel's book

proposal—virtually unheard of for a first-time author whose only credentials are academic (she taught for many years at NYU and is now at Columbia)—but the last thing in the world she wants is to be seen as someone telling people what to do. "I don't want to be the new thing," she says with a shudder. "I want to say that things aren't linear. They don't always go the way we were told."

She probably doesn't need to worry. The distinctly counterintuitive nature of her advice—talk less, be more distant—is not likely to get her booked on *Oprah*, but it is a charmingly fresh way to view an old problem.

"When a finger comes close like this," she leaned forward, middle finger pressed

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against her nose, "you no longer see the contours. Privacy seems to destroy intimacy but actually enhances it."

Healthy distance, the kind that creates mystery and revives a relationship, occurs when people look outside the marriage for stimulation—intellectually, emotionally, even sexually, though Perel acknowledges that few of us can handle the latter. "Mystery can be nothing more than a shift in perception, but couples often go wrong by groping for greater closeness when, in fact, it's autonomy that produces the magic bond. People need friends of their own and activities they do by themselves. We need to cultivate our private gardens. Not everything should be shared." (In other words, I should have let my husband go on that weeklong bike trip through France with his college friends when I was 26 weeks pregnant.)

Ideally, we could solve all these problems by hooking up with the perfect mate. For Perel, that means someone

who complements both our strengths and weaknesses. Extroverts should marry introverts. Slobs, neat freaks. The anxious should marry the calm. Pessimists, optimists, et cetera. On the surface, these relationships can sometimes look baffling—what could an insecure writer have in common with a self-confident investment banker? But by finding what we lack in another, we create a whole. There's a reason everyone remembers the sappy "You complete me" from *Jerry Maguire*. It hit a nerve.

In her own marriage of 21 years, Perel seems to have found the perfect complement in her husband, Jack Saul, a fellow therapist who runs the International Trauma Studies Program at Columbia University. They're both Jewish, but he's from the American South; she's from the north of Europe. He's reserved, thoughtful, a bit cool. She's warm and effusive, but things weren't always smooth. "Relationships take work. They are always changing," she says. "I married my mentor, but at some point you no longer want to be the student. Or maybe your mentor no longer wants to be a teacher. So you either gasp and say, 'You've abandoned me!' or you move on and change. Things became better when I no longer wanted my husband to be everything. OK, I said, so you're not this, I'll go look for it elsewhere; but people don't think that way. Most of us marry two or three times. In my case, I married the same man three times."

At four o'clock Perel's boys came home from school, threw themselves into their mother's arms, and regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and hostility. Who was this stranger taking up their beloved mother's time and attention? It was time to go.

Standing next to the elevator, I asked about the journalist on the answering machine. Had he ever married?

"No." She shook her head. "But he's an example of what I am talking about. We say he has a problem because he didn't follow the model—he didn't marry and have children—but what we should really do is widen the model. Not everyone has to follow the same path."

"True," I nodded, feeling utterly chastised. Not only a puritan but conventional to boot!

"Why?" she asked. "Do you know anyone to set him up with?" □