

## Sex and the Single Woman Today

Not Hard to Get:

By Jonah Raskin

Parents and peers tell them to be assertive but not aggressive, feminine but not fiercely feminist, sexually alluring but not sluttish. They're 20-something women and they're caught in the crossfire of the Double Standard that pins them down to invisible rules that don't apply to men in the same generation. Targeted by ads and apps, catered to by TV shows such as "Girls," they're intensely studied, analyzed, and packaged.

They're the subjects of a new book, *Hard to Get: 20-Something Women and the Paradox of Sexual Freedom* (University of California Press; \$29.95) by Leslie C. Bell, a psychotherapist in Berkeley, the college town that boasts more therapists per capita than any other place in the country. Bell, 42, specializes in issues that hit women especially hard — from low-self esteem to eating disorders, and that great bugaboo, personal relationships. Twenty-something women flock to her office.

"Hard to Get" offers compelling narratives from the North, East, and South Bay, and from women who are gay, straight, Latino, Asian, white, Catholic, Buddhist, wealthy, and poor. Bell tells their stories, in their own words, about dating, oral sex, hooking up, good girls and bad girls. With so much to say about sex, she has trouble getting a handle on the subject. Still, her book opens a rich and fascinating Pandora's Box that will be useful to therapists and young women in therapy — or eager for psychological help.

"In recent years, it has become unclear what it means to be a woman, especially a liberated woman," Bell writes. Still, she places 20-something females in three clear categories: the "sexual woman"; the "relational woman"; and the "desiring woman" who manages to have both meaningful sex and a meaningful relationship.

In a recent interview, Bell tells me that she didn't mean her title to suggest that young women "play hard to get" or that they're hard to understand. "They're hard to get," she explains, "in the sense that they're unable to reach their own goals for personal fulfillment."

Like Arlie Hochschild, the renowned Berkeley sociologist and one of her intellectual mentors, Bell acknowledges the force of the marketplace and the power of technology. "In our culture, there's the expectation that you'll be on the job 24-hours a day," she tells me.

“With cell phones and laptops, people work crazy hours. Under conditions like these, it’s increasingly hard to have a career and to enjoy a meaningful personal relationship.”

Bell finds fault with parents, teachers, and the culture-at-large. “Young women don’t have role models and they don’t have frank conversations with mothers and fathers about how to take the initiative, expose themselves, and be vulnerable sexually,” she tells me. “As a society we’re not teaching these essential skills and young women are befuddled.”

Bell insists that we don’t really know what goes on behind bedroom doors and that the sexual activity of “ordinary” women is little known and understood. Indeed, Bay Area therapists say that clients are unreliable sources when it comes to their own sexual activity. Still, young women are often willing to provide clues about their adventures in the erogenous zone, if not lurid details themselves. After all, it’s the age of the Vagina Monologues and 20-something women love to talk about sex.

At a packed bar on Fourth Street in Santa Rosa, Camille, 23, nurses a beer with close friends, all in their 20s, all sharing intimacies. What’s noticeable — to me — about Camille’s circle of friends is that they’re bi-cultural and interracial. Blue-eyed blond guys are engaged to Asian women, and blue-eyed blonde women are with dark complexioned men. They may not have broken every sexual barrier, but they’ve knocked down walls that once divided members of ethnic groups.

Camille insists that she wants sex, intimacy, and creative work. A recent college graduate, she has a job, but she’s not in a relationship now. She wants, she says, “to be the most attractive woman in the room so when I denounce a man as sexist I won’t be dismissed as just another unhappy women’s libber.”

Bell might find Camille as protective of her emotions, and as unwilling to be vulnerable, as the dazed and confused women who populated “Hard to Get.”

“I don’t want the men that I like to know that I like them,” Camille tells me. “I’ve pioneered new ways to be rude to guys.”

Sonoma State University (SSU) professor Deborah Kindy, 65, teaches Nursing 480, “Health, Society, and Human Sexuality.” In the last decade, 2,000 or so undergraduates have learned, she hopes, “to be comfortable with themselves as innately sexual beings.”

Kindy follows in the pioneering footsteps of Professor Bernie Goldstein, a showman in the classroom who taught legendary courses for decades about human sexuality at San Francisco State

University and SSU. Her own teaching methods have been informed by the surveys she's conducted with thousands of students, all of whom sign an agreement that they'll respect others and their opinions.

On a campus where girls outnumber guys three to one the competition for men is fierce, though women students tend to be more sexually repressed and less sexually adventurous than Bell's cohort.

"A lot of students enter the class naïve about sex," Kindy tells me. "They come from conservative families and they've been told that they ought to abstain from sex until after their wedding night. Some women insist that they're virgins, even though they've had oral and anal sex with boyfriends."

Kindy's class serves as a kind of group therapy session in which students make startling discoveries about their sexuality and understand that gender roles aren't as limited and limiting as parents and teachers tell them. If there's one single lesson that they learn in Nursing 480 it's that they can create and recreate their own sexual identities.

The college environment is, of course, imperfect. Dorms provide fertile grounds for casual sex that leaves participants feeling empty. Rapes occur too often on campuses and are hushed up too often. There's sexual harassment, and after all these years still prejudice against students who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, or in doubt about their sexual identity. Classes like Kindy's provide opportunities for undergraduates to learn about real sex and sexuality, and not the ersatz varieties on TV and the Internet that Bell finds troubling, if not downright harmful.

"TV shows send a message that careers come first and love and marriage come afterwards," she tells me. "That division of personal life from professional life doesn't help."

Decades after the advent of women's liberation, women have indeed come a long way, but books such as "Hard to Get" suggest that the journey has only just begun.