

Sex

We live under a cheerful delusion that sex might nowadays be easy – because we have been ‘liberated’ from the hang-ups and taboos of the olden days. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Despite a veneer of openness, sex remains an extraordinarily complicated business, hard to discuss and surrounded by shame and unspoken desires. This book provides a relief from the loneliness and confusion, explaining how sex truly operates and what it aims at. The book demonstrates that far from thinking about sex too much, we haven’t begun to think about it as deeply as we should.

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Sex

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iv. Outdoor Sex

Why should the idea of sex outside be exciting given how awkward, scratchy, sandy or muddy it can be on a beach, halfway up a hillside or in the shady bushes of a park, compared with the comfort of cotton sheets and a sprung mattress?

It's easy to think of orgasms as just physiological phenomena, but really these are manifestations of extreme psychological delight at certain deeply exciting ideas. With outdoor sex, the pleasing, almost utopian, concept driving our pleasure forward is that we could be in a public place where others might see us but that this wouldn't – as it so often does – matter any more. Wrapped up in the throes of passion, protected by the other's desire, the promise is that we could lose self-consciousness and inhibition and entirely reconcile the private and the public sides of ourselves. As we strip each other off in a glade or by the side of a supermarket, there's a refusal to give way to the normal pulses of debilitating shame and embarrassment. Since early adolescence, we have learned to lock doors and keep curtains shut. We have blushed at the threat of exposure. And yet now we're no longer bothered by the sounds of passing traffic or the call of an insistent flock of starlings overhead. Emboldened by another's affection, we are empowered to think that the erotic parts of ourselves don't need to be sheltered and repressed. The outdoor orgasm that culminates signals our pleasure at finally evading our usual self-consciousness.



It should be no surprise that many artists have been alive to the pleasures of sex outdoors. Think of the works of the 18th-century French artists Fragonard and Boucher. To view their canvases is a chance to turn over in our imagination the luxury and ease of the Garden of Eden, for which each one of us may still deep down hanker. The story of our banishment from paradise and the birth of physical shame isn't – we can see – just a Biblical story; it is an account of how we travelled painfully from uninhibited toddlerhood to embarrassed adulthood.

To make love outdoors is a temporary reversal of the Fall. It is the greatest expression of confidence in the wider world; it symbolises that we have tamed the landscape and we are not going to be attacked by wolves or harmed by the mockery of others. For most of our lives, we may have to cower behind double glazing and heating systems, lock our doors and wrap ourselves in padded coats, but now we can delight in a contrastive vision of the landscape as kindly, generous and on our side; the place where we are, for a time, totally at home. As we penetrate one another in the grass, we aren't being turned on primarily by our bodies (we could do the same bodily acts just as easily, and more comfortably, at home); we're being excited by our yearning to feel a little more natural around sex in what is normally an all-too-scary and untamed world.

We may think it's a bit weird to get turned on by the idea of having sex in a neighbour's garden or in the alleyway behind a bar. It can feel squalid. But more generously and accurately understood, the excitement is far from mysterious and not ridiculous or shameful at all. It springs from a noble and deeply honourable instinct that we easily lose sight of: namely, civilising nature. Sometimes that instinct is expressed via a desire to plant an apple tree and pick the fruit in the autumn; it might lead us to lay out parklands or build sea walls. In a less recognised but equally valid guise, this impulse pushes us to seek orgasm in the open air and thereby to demonstrate that the wider world is our home.