

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

THE FEMALE ORGASM HAS BEEN DISCUSSED AND ANALYSED FOR DECADES. RUBY WARRINGTON MEETS ONE WOMAN WHO CONDUCTED HER OWN RESEARCH – AND HAS WRITTEN A BOOK ABOUT HER SEXUAL AWAKENING

When it comes to healthy living, meditation is the new black. Orgasmic meditation, in particular, is the hot new thing: a practice in which a dedicated “stroker” stimulates his partner’s clitoris for 15 blissful minutes using a specific and meticulously-taught technique. Credited with a wide range of health benefits, it has emerged in the mainstream thanks to a raft

of new books and studies, including Linda Troeller and Marion Schneider’s *Orgasms: Photographs & Interviews*, which features real women and their experience of orgasm, and now, Betsy Blankenbaker’s *Autobiography of an Orgasm*.

A discreet, slender volume that’s part erotica and part refreshingly sincere road map for the orgasmically challenged, *Autobiography of an Orgasm* is a sort of anti-50 *Shades of Grey* – apt, as the film is about to land, meaning the subject of female sexuality will once again be up for debate. For Blankenbaker, the overall message of her book is that to experience orgasm fully, we need to “slow down, take away the toys, and really look into each other’s eyes and ask for what your body wants”.

She was 36 when she “felt” her first orgasm (with a man who she had an affair with during her second marriage), and that was almost a decade before she began the extensive research that would become her memoir. Now in her early 50s, she says: “I definitely never planned on writing a book. I was embarrassed. When I told a few friends about my research I would make a joke about it, but they always wanted to know more.”

Blankenbaker’s story begins when she is abused by an older (female) neighbour at age six, the first in a series of early sexual assaults. She believes that not speaking up is what caused her body and sexual self to shut down to the extent that, “I could not allow myself to have an orgasm”. She was married twice in her twenties; the first lasted less than two years, the second a decade, resulting in four children. She says telling the story of her subsequent orgasmic awakening was also for her daughter, who is now 23. “Did I want her to see a mother that’s wounded, and a victim, or a mother that felt really good about every cell of my body?”

Blankenbaker’s research involved meeting sexperts and group orgasm demonstrations – so what took her furthest out of her comfort zone? “Oddly enough, and I get sad even saying this, it was the first time I actually asked a man for what I wanted in bed. When I was in the research, paying somebody, it was uncomfortable at first, but it was about becoming an expert. But I was afraid to even kiss a man for a long time, because I was so afraid of real intimacy.”

The book ends with Blankenbaker enjoying a (literal) roll in the grass with a man she meets back in her hometown of Indiana. She has been warned about sleeping with a man on the first date “if you want to get a commitment from him later”. But “then I remembered I wasn’t looking for

a commitment; I wanted to enjoy my body and to feel pleasure.” And she insists that, thanks to her committed research, sex post-menopause is actually better than ever (she is currently ‘dating’). “What happened is that my orgasm kept getting bigger and expanding. I would say that my orgasmic state now is like my climax used to be.”

According to the author, “The research continues.” She is now asking for submissions for her next book, a collection of readers’ stories entitled *Autobiography of Our Orgasms*. “And I’m really excited because I would have loved to have had a book like this to read when I was younger.”

FINDING MY VOICE – AN EXTRACT FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN ORGASM

I decided to sign up for a private extended massive orgasm (EMO) session with Steve Bodansky to continue my orgasm research. Steve was a master of orgasms. A big paradigm shift for me about orgasm was his belief (and that of many sex teachers and orgasm experts) that all pleasurable sensations during intimacy are part of orgasm. Your orgasm can begin with the first stroke, or even before someone touches you.

It can start with the kiss; just thinking about someone can throw your body into an orgasmic state. The climax, which I used to equate to orgasm, is when you actually go over the edge and get a full body release. Most of us are so focused on the outcome, the climax, that we don’t enjoy and honour all the amazing sensations of our orgasm.

Steve usually does EMO sessions with his wife, Vera, at their home in northern California. This time, though, he was working with Wendy, a woman in New York City, offering private sessions in EMO. It was a cold day in November, but as I walked to Wendy’s apartment on the Upper West Side, I was nervous. I had heard Steve speak, but I’d never met him, or Wendy, and I was about to be in bed with them.

Wendy welcomed me into her home, and we sat with Steve for a few minutes in her living room, while they briefed me on what to expect during the hour-long session. She looked familiar.

“First, you’ll watch Steve do me,” said Wendy in her soft voice. Her dark curls framed her porcelain skin and full lips. She was about my age. On the wall behind her was a poster of a recent award-winning film. I realised she was a filmmaker, like me, and it occurred to me that this would make a great scene in a Woody Allen film.

During the EMO sessions, the giver (Steve) stays fully clothed and sits in an upright position, usually on a bed. The receiver lies on the bed, undressed from the waist down. This was way beyond my comfort zone.

Steve and Wendy asked me to meet them in her bedroom when I was ready. I went into the bathroom to change into my robe. I felt like I might faint. I slowly took off my clothes, put on my robe and then looked at my face in the mirror. Who was I? Why was I doing this? I felt such disapproval for the woman looking back at me in the mirror. ❖

THE HISTORY OF O

The elusive female orgasm has had a troubled history, from women’s sexual frustration being labelled “hysteria” in Victorian times to it being the focus of the sexual revolution in the mid 20th century. Most notably William Masters and Virginia Johnson pioneered research into sexual responses from 1957, dispelling many long-standing misconceptions. More recently, the sex-positive feminist movement has sought to reclaim the big O from the clutches of the porn industry, where women are often depicted as being able to climax from penetrative sex alone, when in reality studies have shown that this is the case for as few as 7% of the female population.

Meanwhile, the most recent research into female orgasm, published in scientific journal *Clinical Anatomy* last October, claims that vaginal orgasm does not, in fact, exist at all. The researchers, who used magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to scan the pelvic area of 30 women, aged 32 on average, claim also to have proved what Blankenbaker has come to believe – that it is possible for all women to orgasm if the female sexual organs (including the clitoris, which they call “the female penis” as it is made from the same tissue) are effectively stimulated.

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