

# THE SEX

# A D V O C A T E

**B**ETTINA ARNDT IS A WOMAN ON A MISSION. A DEFENDER OF THE downtrodden. Bringer of hope to the henpecked. Without her, who would speak up for the men of Australia? "You name a male journalist who writes about men's issues," she says. "They just aren't there."

Arndt smiles. At 61, the columnist and social commentator is svelte, well-groomed and remarkably well-preserved. In print, her tone can be combative but, in person, she is chatty and amiable, with the jaunty demeanour of one who knows she is needed. "It's really hard for men to publicly advocate the sorts of issues I've taken up on their behalf," she says.

The right to lots of sex, for instance. In *What Men Want (In Bed)*, her latest book (to be published by Melbourne University Press on Wednesday), Arndt contends that too many wives and girlfriends deprive blokes of the physical intimacy they crave. "It's interesting to look at how often we see women tut-tutting about male sexuality," she says. "You never see men getting up and saying, 'Sex is terrific.' They never talk about it." Why not? They don't dare, according to Arndt. Their libido is an embarrassment to them – "because that's the only way it plays out in our community, as a source of shame."

On a sunny winter's day in Sydney, Arndt and I are having morning tea at her house in Woollahra. "Everything to do with men and sex is negative," she says, passing the biscuits. "It's about women judging men."

Her previous book, *The Sex Diaries*, was based on 98 couples' accounts of their experiences in the sack. This time, she recruited 150 men willing to discuss their erotic adventures – from fantasies and fetishes to fumbling attempts at seduction. Each morning, she would read the bulletins they had emailed her overnight. As the months passed, she says, she grew quite fond of some in the group. By the end, "they weren't only sending me photos of their penises but photos of their wives and their dogs. I mean, I love that."

The young, the old, the straight, the kinky – she found all the participants fascinating in their own way. "Men are 20 times more likely than women to acquire unusual sexual habits, forbidden tastes that even their partners rarely know about," she writes in her introduction. "With my diarists, it all came pouring out. Who could resist the intriguing story of the pensioner who, with his wife's approval, wears her knickers under his bowling shorts?"

Bonds Cottontails, size 18/20, incidentally.

THE FIRST TIME HER FRIEND MERRI SOUTHWOOD SAW ARNDT, SHE WAS YELLING at a referee at a schoolboy rugby match. "She seemed to challenge every decision," says Southwood, whose son, like Arndt's, was playing for Sydney Grammar. "I said to somebody, 'Who on earth is that person? She couldn't be more involved unless she put on a pair of boots and actually played.'"

At a match a few years later, Arndt did end up in the thick of it. "An almighty tackle meant two boys came flying over the sideline and took me down with them," she says. "There I was in a heap of boys and rugby boots. Very undignified." Her leg had been hurt but she decided to ignore it because she was about to depart for a friend's 60th birthday celebrations in Umbria. By the time she got to Italy, her shin was black. "Turned out I had ruptured a blood vessel and the whole area was dying off."

After a week in hospital, she was flown home with her leg in the air – ambulances, wheelchairs, the full catastrophe. Still, she says, you have to laugh. "I am very famous as the only Grammar mum to sustain a rugby injury."

Arndt first came to national attention as the editor of *Forum: The Australian Journal of Interpersonal Relations*. Don't be fooled by the sober title. This was the 1970s and the mood was devil-may-care. Pages of racy letters from readers were interspersed with articles such as "Short and Thick Does the Trick" (on penis girth) and "Limbering Up For Love" (pre-sex exercises). At the back was a mail-order catalogue advertising products like

Once renowned for her liberal views, Bettina Arndt has reinvented herself as a social conservative – and a champion of the downtrodden male of the species. Jane Cadzow meets the ultimate man's woman.

Photograph Ross Coffey

"It's really hard for men to publicly advocate the sorts of issues I've taken up on their behalf": Bettina Arndt and the men she loves to champion.



Love Garden Stim-U-Lotion (available in three flavours: natural, strawberry and hot fudge).

The magazine was owned by Clyde Packer, maverick scion of the Packer publishing family, and it wasn't entirely frivolous. Arndt had trained as a psychologist specialising in sex therapy before she embarked on her media career. She believed her role was to educate as well as to entertain, so she ran informative stories on oral sex, group sex, gay sex – there was something for everyone. “She really was carving out new ground,” says author Edna Carew, who contributed articles. The *Forum* philosophy was basically, if it feels good, do it. “As long as you weren't being forced to be flogged with wet spaghetti or something,” says Carew. “You know, as long as you both enjoyed it.”

The young and attractive editor became quite a celebrity. Carew wasn't surprised: “Here was this bubbly woman with a unique ability to talk about things that would send other people blushing into the corner.”

Arndt is still very jolly about sex, never more animated than when discussing orgasms or treatments for erection problems. (“Wasn't he a hoot?” she says of the diarist who proudly sent her photos of penile constriction rings he had fashioned from the inner tubes of bicycle tyres. “How's that for innovation?”) But as her newspaper columns make clear, her attitudes on some other subjects have changed dramatically since the *Forum* days. In a piece published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* soon after Julia Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd as PM, Arndt questioned her suitability as a role model for young women. Her objection? Gillard and her partner, Tim Mathieson, were not married.

“Cohabitation produces two groups of losers,” Arndt wrote. First, there were the women who missed out on having children after “wasting precious breeding time” in dead-end relationships. The other victims were the offspring of de facto couples, many of them destined to be raised in unstable households. “Pat Rafter was made Australian of the Year just as he was about to become an unmarried father,” she noted. “What did that say to his many male fans about the importance of committed fathering?”

Arndt has copped a fair amount of flak since her reinvention as a social conservative. To some, it seems a bit rich that the publisher of “Foursomes: the Joys of the Marital Quartet” (to pluck one article from the contents pages of *Forum*) should now be lecturing us on monogamy and family values. But nothing else she has written has created such outrage as the Gillard column. “Rubbish”, “offensive”, “patronising”, “ridiculous”, fumed the hundreds who posted comments on the *Herald's* website.

She was taken aback by the reaction. “So many of them were just so nasty,” she says. And the messages sent directly to her email address were even worse. “You know, ‘Put your head in the oven, you old bag.’” She doesn't regret having taken a stand, though. People can say what they like about marriage versus living together, she tells me. “The notion that the relationship is the same – that's not what the research says.”

This seems as good a time as any to mention to Arndt that I am not married. My partner and I have two fine teenage boys, a cat and a mortgage, yet have never felt the urge to walk down an aisle. “Of course!” she says, not missing a beat. “Of course there are people who don't need the piece of paper, who are just as committed. And look, maybe I should have expressed all that more clearly.”

What she meant to say was that too many young and impoverished single mothers drift fecklessly in and out of live-in liaisons. “The increasing



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“She really was carving out new ground”: (above) editing *Forum* magazine first brought Bettina Arndt (at top right with her first husband, Dennis Minogue) to national attention.

casualisation of adult relationships in certain socio-economic groups is an issue. This is not about middle-class, educated people who choose to live together and not marry. Of course it's not.”

Emboldened, I think about putting in a good word for Rafter, who gave a sizeable chunk of his tennis winnings to charity and now helps disadvantaged kids through his Cherish the Children Foundation. Anyway, he has been married since 2004. But I figure Pat can look after himself.

**W**HEN PEOPLE CLOSE TO ARNDT ANALYSE her character, they end up talking about her parents. Heinz Arndt, who died in 2002, was a professor at the Australian National University and one of the country's most eminent economists. German-born and Oxford-educated (his family had fled the Nazis in the 1930s), he dressed elegantly, painted well and spoke several languages. As the youngest of his three children and his only daughter, Arndt grew up secure in the knowledge she was adored. “He was such a charming man,” she says. “He liked women. And I was one of the loves of his life. What more do you want?”

Her mother, Ruth, who died the year before her husband, was another escapee from Nazi Germany. She and Heinz had met at a party in London, introduced by Bloomsbury Group writer Lytton Strachey. They moved to Australia in 1946. Always a free thinker, Ruth organised for friends to smuggle in copies of banned novels. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *The Group*, *Peyton Place* – all were on her bookshelves in suburban Canberra. “She would cover them in brown paper,” says Arndt, adding that this was convenient for her and her brothers. “We all knew which were the sexy books.”

Ruth was a staunch left-winger, never able to forgive Heinz for quitting Labor and moving to the right. Arndt felt sorry for her father, who stopped writing newspaper articles and letters to editors for fear of expressing opinions that would annoy his wife. “He loved nothing more than entering the fray. But he'd get into big trouble if he did.”

Besides being a forceful character, Ruth was big-hearted, always taking lame ducks under her wing and sorting out their lives for them. Arndt

has inherited this streak. “Various friends of ours who've had crises – she comes up with 17 different ways of helping,” says medical researcher Judith Black. “She cannot do enough for you.” When psychologist Gillian Lloyd's marriage fell apart, it was her girlhood friend Arndt who took her in and helped her to recover, even lining up a man to ask her to dinner. Lloyd remembers protesting vehemently. “I said, ‘Tina, I don't want a man. I never want another one as long as I live.’”

Arndt was unmoved: “She said, ‘Absolute nonsense. It's time you got on with your life.’” Eventually, Lloyd waved the white flag and went on the date. “Tina knew what was good for me and there was no saying ‘no’. Her mum was like that, too. Ruth knew what was right for people.”

It isn't as if Arndt's own life has lacked drama. Her first husband was a journalist, Dennis Minogue, whom she met when he interviewed her for a profile in *The Age* in 1973. Years later, he wrote that “the aim was to send her up gutless, she being light relief from the normal task of writing ponderous and pompous pieces on national politics”. Instead, they fell in love. “He was a wonderful man,” Arndt says. “Extremely personable and charming. He had enormous joie de vivre.”

Minogue also had a wife and two young children but he quit his job and moved from Melbourne to Sydney to work with her on *Forum*. “I became the cause of the marriage break-up and I look back on that with a lot of regret,” says Arndt, who readily admits her present championing of the traditional family unit stems partly from guilt over her role as home-wrecker. In the 1970s, she says, “we thought about adults' needs and wants and we didn't think about the kids. We just assumed everything would be fine for them and it wasn't. It took its toll on my stepchildren.”

Minogue was only 37 when he died of a heart attack after emergency surgery to repair a ruptured bowel in 1981. Arndt was 32, with a five-month-old baby. “I remember her comment when she told me the news,” says Edna Carew. “She said, ‘I can't believe it. I always thought I'd led a lucky life.’”

Apart from anything else, her financial position was precarious. Minogue had allowed his life insurance policy to lapse, spending the renewal money on tyres for their Morgan sports car instead. Clyde Packer had made the couple a gift of *Forum* when he moved to the US but the magazine was losing circulation by the time Minogue died, and within a year Arndt was forced to close it. “I was in a real mess,” she says, but her friends still speak with awe of her pluck. “She had such get-up-and-go, such guts,” says Judith Black. “Never once did she sit in a heap saying, ‘I feel sorry for myself.’”

Arndt sold the house and the Morgan and began freelancing for magazines and newspapers. She had her own weekly talkback radio program and developed a sideline as an after-dinner speaker. Previously feminist in outlook, she gradually started focusing on men, writing and talking sympathetically about them and their problems. “There's a good chance she was doing it because nobody else was,” says a long-time friend, finance journalist Michael Pascoe. “Everyone else was bagging them. And there is another side to the story.”

ARNDT'S OWN EXPERIENCE SUPPORTS RESEARCH findings that, whereas most men are interested in sex most of the time, female appetite changes with circumstance. “I'm a classic case model for women,” she says. “There have been periods when I've lived for sex, adored sex. In certain magical relationships.” But at other times she's had to stifle a yawn.



“I’ve been in every libido category, including: ‘Totally uninterested, never want to have it again.’”

In *The Sex Diaries*, she argues that opting out is not an option: lack of action in the bedroom is putting many modern relationships under severe strain. “Just do it!” she urges the women of Australia. I ask if she follows her own advice. “I suppose I’ve long known how important it is to men,” she says. “And you’re not necessarily talking about bonking. I’m not remotely uncomfortable about masturbating a man. There’s always an easy way of ‘just doing it’ without necessarily getting too involved. People always assume that it’s about women having to get aroused. It’s not.” If you enjoy yourself, so much the better. “But you don’t have to enjoy it. You could just do it for him.”

This is the kind of thing that infuriates Arndt’s critics but she says she has had plenty of positive feedback as well. “I had a letter the other day from a female doctor saying she’d been talking to her women patients about it and she said, ‘Look, it’s not root-canal therapy. It’s not such a terrible thing to try it and see.’” Arndt’s feelings exactly. “It just amazes me the things women will do for their men – you know, three-course meals and the perfect kitchen floor. When sex is so easy. It takes so little time. A 10-minute bonk compared to cleaning an oven – I mean, give me a break!”

Domestic drudgery holds little appeal for Arndt. She once wrote a column saying housework was such a source of conflict in relationships that she wondered why more people didn’t employ cleaners. “It never occurred to me to *not* have someone come and clean the house,” she says now.

I point out that not everyone can afford hired help. “That’s obviously true,” she concedes. “Though there is always the issue of what *do* you

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spend your money on? Do you have a huge television?” She suspects the real impediment is women’s reluctance to allow others into their homes. Not only are they territorial, she says, they’re embarrassed about the mess. “Which is just madness. And it creates a rod for their back.”

**A**FTER A TESTING INTERLUDE AS A SINGLE mother, Arndt married corporate lawyer Warren Scott, an American, in 1986. By the time they returned to Sydney from New York five years later, she had two more children. They settled in the affluent eastern suburbs, buying an Italianate sandstone house in Vaucluse and mixing with the city’s rich and powerful. John Howard’s Liberal government appointed Arndt to advisory committees on family law, childcare and ageing. In her writing, the former libertine started to sound like a self-appointed guardian of public morals.

**Agony Arndt:** (above) Arndt, in 1983, giving relationship advice to 2GB listeners.

Kerryn Phelps vividly recalls that as a medical student at Sydney University in the 1970s, she attended a lecture on sexuality given by Arndt. “She was quite deliberately provocative in the way she presented herself and the way she spoke,” says Phelps, who went on to become Australian Medical Association president. “When she bounced back as a neo-conservative, I thought it was a bit of a joke.” But the doctor wasn’t laughing when Arndt wrote a piece about Phelps’s lesbian marriage to teacher Jackie Stricker.

“It was vilification,” says Phelps, who holds Arndt partly responsible for ending Stricker’s career at the exclusive eastern suburbs girls’ school Ascham. She says she understands that people’s views change. “But there’s a long way between that and somebody who positions themselves so that they can sit in judgment over others, and criticise others for their life choices.”

Arndt insists that she had no axe to grind – “I’ve never been anti-gay” – and was merely reporting the anxieties of some Ascham parents. “To not be able to voice some of those concerns I think is weird,” she says. Still, ABC-TV’s *Media Watch* gave her its “Reptile of the Week” award for failing to mention in her *Sydney Morning Herald* column that her daughter attended the school.

Arndt’s friend Merri Southwood sometimes has trouble reconciling Arndt the columnist with the warm and good-humoured woman she knows. “I’m not sure how much of it is the author seeking an audience and how much is the genuine Bettina,” Southwood says. “Because, in fact, the way she writes is sometimes a little at odds with her own personal life.”

Arndt argued for years that unless a bad marriage was truly intolerable, the signatories should



stick together for the sake of their children. Yes, that required great sacrifice on the part of the parents, she said, but wasn't that what parenthood was all about? Then, in 2007, she and Scott split up. "I think the whole divorce thing is very hard," she says now, sounding uncharacteristically subdued. At least her kids were almost grown up when it happened – only her youngest was still at school. "But I mean, who am I to tell women they should stay in an unhappy marriage?"

**W**HOO IS ARNDT TO TELL US ANYTHING? And why is she always spruiking for men? That's what author and columnist Susan Maushart would like to know. "I think men can probably speak for themselves," says Maushart. "I don't really get why a woman would feel the need to be a mouthpiece for this incredibly powerful sector of society. It's a bit like having a black spokesman for the plantation owners." Actually,

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**"There've been periods when I've lived for sex, adored sex":** (above) at 61 and divorced, Arndt now searches for love online.

Maushart does have a theory. "She seems, for whatever reason, to not like women very much."

Don Edgar, founding director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, is equally dubious. He saw some merit in Arndt's campaign to have the Family Court give men a better hearing in questions of custody and access to children, he says. But like Maushart, he thinks she unfairly portrays women as whiney and selfish. "I have no sympathy at all for the idea that men are the downtrodden ones and the poor dears need to be nurtured," he says. "For millennia it's been the other way round. And it still is." Edgar suspects Arndt's motives are at least partly commercial. "All this stuff about 'what men want' and so on, it sells books."

*The Sex Diaries* sold 20,000 copies: not a bad result for Australian non-fiction. On the other hand, sales of Shannon Lush's housework handbook *Spotless* are 750,000 and rising. Perhaps we *would* rather clean the oven.

ARNDT LIVES LESS GRANDLY THAN WHEN SHE was married. The place in Vaucluse sold for \$4.5 million and she says she doesn't miss it a bit: "Fancy houses have never really done it for me." Friends have noticed changes in her since the divorce. "She seems much more at ease with herself," says Merri Southwood. "I can see a bit of the old Bettina coming back." She has even adjusted her wardrobe, adopting a less matronly look: "You've got to get a few things that aren't frilly around the neck," Southwood told her.

Arndt certainly hasn't wasted time moping. "I always knew I'd go in for internet dating," she says. "When you sit at home, who are you going to meet? Your friends can only do so much, really. And interesting men in my age group are like hen's teeth."

She has had some disappointments, admittedly. "You have to have a thick skin. The whole business of sending an email to someone and not getting a response. Or having coffee with someone and never hearing from them again. I mean, it's tough. It's a numbers game and the men are certainly in the buyers' market. But I've had some lovely times. I've had two long relationships."

It seems to me that the whole exercise must take a lot of courage. "Not particularly," she says. "I thought it was a bit of an anthropological adventure, really. What takes *enormous* guts is to take off your clothes after a 20-year marriage. I mean, how excruciating is that?"

Her kids were appalled when they learnt she was going out with men she had met online, though she thinks they have come to terms with it now. "Probably they'd far prefer that I stayed at home and read a good book," she says cheerfully. But that won't be happening. "It would never occur to me to give up." **GW**