

Our fling with flings: a new books trend

Women are taking to the sheets in record numbers. Really?

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Can it really be true that middle-aged married women everywhere are having illicit, torrid affairs? Consider the evidence: A large study last year by the American Association of Retired Persons said that between partners over 40, women initiate two-thirds of divorces; another much-quoted survey claims that 64% of married women have had an affair.

Not convinced? Tune in the *Desperate Housewives* of Wisteria Lane. Turn on Oprah, who regularly features women of a certain age getting even, not angry. Or look at the hot new trend in books.

This season, we have a profusion of titles like *My Horizontal Life* and *To Love, Honor, and Betray: The Secret Lives of Suburban Wives*. The biggest of the lot — it's been an NBC Today Show book club pick and scored a review in *The Atlantic* — is *Undressing Infidelity: Why More Wives are Unfaithful*, by Diane Shader Smith.

Women, these books suggest, are taking to the sheets in record numbers. But are they really? Perhaps it's all wish-fulfillment by boomer women fantasizing about one last win at sexual politics. Or perhaps it's only the acclaim for cheating that's new. It wasn't long ago, after all, that adultery was a dirty word. Bergman and Rossellini; Sinatra and Gardner — celebrities like these nearly paid for their sins with their careers.

Whatever the case, proof of America's latest fling with flings isn't rigorously scientific. Shader Smith's book, for instance, sets out to explode the cheating and divorce myths that men do it more by telling the stories of just 14 women.

All sizzle, no steak, the book's a bestseller, promoted as Shader Smith's first and only. In fact, she's a veteran who's written and self-published three novels for teenagers, with titles like *Mallory's 65 Roses* and *Stevie's Secret*. She's also worked in PR in Los Angeles, and spent five years on the writing staff of the ABC soap opera *General Hospital*. It shows.

Shader Smith purports to have interviewed nearly 200 women from across the U.S., finally choosing 14. Why do each of the stories sound the same, tawdry and gussied up, seeming like soft porn in the guise of research and social science? "I slammed into a roaring orgasm that exploded like reef surf," says one interviewee. "I dropped my coat to reveal a G-string," says another.

They all have names like Chantal or Reina, and their houses are "a jumble of color... a shock of hot pink, lime and tangerine." No one made the cut with furniture from Sears — and no one has dentures or sensible shoes. Marin has "a gorgeous riot of freckles dotting her pale skin"; Leigh, "a sun-bleached ponytail."

With names like Mario, Jake, Klaus, Seth and Dusty, the men they bed seem borrowed from the cast of *Dallas* or *Dynasty*. With their "rock-hard bodies," they're as predictable as the women, and equally tiring. Even the booze feels made up. All the fine wine and champagne consumed during seductions is recalled by name, despite the years that have passed. Funny no one drank Two-Buck Chuck or even a beer.

With these tales and with her own overwrought will-she-won't-she story, which bookends the 14 others, Shader Smith fails to make good on the book's subtitle. Why do women cheat? We don't find out here. Analysis is not what the book's about. Voyeurism is, and the trappings of prurience — that's what sells.