



Tackling a taboo

By Cameron Conant

Books on sex are increasingly front-and-center at Christian retail

Once relegated to the back shelves of Christian retail stores, books about sexuality have shed their brown-bag stigma. For evidence, look no further than February's release of *Sex God* (\$19.99, Zondervan), the provocatively titled and highly anticipated second book from Rob Bell.

It's a far cry from almost a decade ago when publishers were nervous to even use the word "sex" in their book titles, according to Lyn Cryderman, vice president and publisher at Zondervan.

In 1998, Zondervan published an updated edition of *The Act of Marriage* by Tim and Beverly LaHaye, a steady seller

since its debut in the 1970s and a book Cryderman described as "explicit." Yet, the title only hinted at what the book was about.

The title "doesn't really tell you it's about sex," Cryderman said. "I'm sure the publisher at the time struggled with how to title a book about sex, while making it something people would want to take to the counter."

Until the late 1990s, there was what Cryderman called the "brown-bag factor"—that is, "no self-respecting Christian would want to walk up to the counter with a book with the word 'sex' on the cover," he said.

"But then people learned that the world had changed," Cryderman added. "The media had become much more explicit, and publishers needed to be a lot more honest and open on a subject that was important to virtually every human being."

For Lonnie Hull DuPont, director of acquisitions for Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, the content of Christian sex books hasn't changed all that much in the last 20 years, but other things have. DuPont remembers listening to an Ed Wheat record in the early '80s where he gave a lecture based on his book, *Intended for Pleasure* (Revell).

"I was blushing," DuPont said. "Today, the content of these books isn't

that different; there's just more of it. It's packaged differently, and the audience has expanded. It's not just for married people now—not that attitudes (within the Christian community) have changed in the sense that single people should now have sex—but there's more dialogue going on about sex."

Dave McShea, marketing manager for Parable Group, agreed.

"I think that the topic has always been pretty frank and open," McShea said. "Look at how long *The Act of Marriage* or *Intended for Pleasure* have been around and selling, and they are very clear and frank books."

"There probably are more authors (today) who are willing to tackle the subject, and there have been some unique titles like *Red Hot Monogamy* and *Sheet Music*, and I think *Sex God* will challenge some people. It is a very unique book."

INTERNET IMPACT

Every Man's Battle (WaterBrook) by Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker dramatically expanded the number of Christians openly talking about sex. The book, published in 2000, deals candidly with masturbation, pornography and sexual temptation for men—single or married.

And, perhaps, most significantly for retailers, the book proved once and for all that sex books could be more than just steady backlist sellers. The "Every Man" franchise, which now includes "Every Woman's" books as well, has spawned more than two-dozen titles, which combined, have sold more than 2.5 million copies.

Sex guide sales

The top-selling Christian books addressing sexual issues last year were:

1. *Sheet Music*, Dr. Kevin Leman (Tyndale House, 2003)
2. *Intended for Pleasure*, Ed Wheat, M.D., & Gaye Wheat (Revell, 1977)
3. *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is)*, Joshua Harris (Multnomah, 2005)
4. *The Purity Principle*, Randy Alcorn (Multnomah, 2003)
5. *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, John Piper and Justin Taylor (Good News/Crossway, 2005)
6. *Not Even a Hint*, Joshua Harris (Multnomah, 2003)
7. *Honey I Don't Have a Headache Tonight*, Sheila Wray Gregoire (Kregel, 2004)
8. *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is)*, A Study Guide for Women, Shannon & Joshua Harris (Multnomah, 2005)

9. *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is): A Study Guide for Men*, Joshua Harris, with Brian Smith (Multnomah, 2005)
10. *Someone I Love Is Gay*, Anita Worthen and Bob Davies (InterVarsity Press, 1996)
11. *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Good News/Crossway, 1991)
12. *Not Even a Hint: A Study Guide for Men*, Joshua Harris, with Brian Smith (Multnomah, 2004)
13. *What's the Difference?*, John Piper (Good News/Crossway, 1990)
14. *When Two Become One* (hardcover), Christopher & Rachel McCluskey (Revell, 2004)
15. *Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*, Wil-
- liam Cutrer, M.D., and Sandra Glahn (Kregel, 2001)
16. *When Two Become One* (softcover), Christopher & Rachel McCluskey (Revell, 2004)
17. *Not Even a Hint: A Study Guide for Women*, Shannon & Joshua Harris, with Brian Smith (Multnomah, 2004)
18. *The Invisible Bond*, Barbara Wilson (Multnomah, 2006)
19. *Coming Out of Homosexuality*, Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel (InterVarsity Press, 1993)
20. *Sex 101*, Clifford & Joyce Penner (W Publishing Group, 2003)

List based on sales for Christian Living/Relationships/Sexual category according to the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association STATS (Sales Tracking Analysis Trends Summary) data for the year ending Dec. 29, 2006.

While the "Every Man's" and "Every Woman's" books don't use the word "sex" in their titles (many do in their subtitles), they do something perhaps more important—they make sex acceptable to talk about in Christian circles.

Every Man's Battle also hit shelves when the Internet was booming. Suddenly, sexual images and information were more accessible than ever before, "which in some ways made the battle (against sexual temptation) more difficult, and men were struggling with it," said Dudley Delffs, vice president and editor-in-chief of the WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group, publisher of the "Every Man's" and "Every Woman's" books.

"Men were mostly struggling alone, maybe connecting in a small group in their churches—but before *Every Man's Battle* the resources were limited," he said.

The resources are seemingly unlimited these days, with Christian books on sexuality available for every group imaginable, including teens, adults, singles and couples. There are how-to sex manuals, books that examine the theology of sex, books for those suffering from sexual addictions, books on lust, books on chastity, books on the emotional impact of sex, books on talking to your teen or child about sex, books for your teen or child on sex and books that tackle provocative sex-related questions.

One such title is the September 2006 release *What You Didn't Learn From Your Parents About Sex: A Guide to a Touchy Subject* by Matthew Paul Turner, published by NavPress. The book is aimed at a college audience and is a humorous, no-holds-barred look at sexuality from a Christian perspective, and one that LifeWay Christian Stores refused to carry due to its mix of sexual and comedic content.

"I wanted to write a book that would talk about sex without making the reader feel completely guilty and without setting the bar so high that you couldn't even approach it," Turner said, noting some books in the Christian community "say you shouldn't even kiss your boyfriend or girlfriend," which Turner sees as a "very unrealistic picture" of dating.

"However, there are godly principles that we as people of faith should be following, but it really comes down to our motives and what's in our heart," he added.

MARKET SENSITIVITY

It takes more than good motives when dealing with a conservative constituency. It takes books that retailers are comfortable with—and few topics are as sensitive in the Christian market as sex.

Even today, with Christian publishers more willing than ever to push the envelope—especially in packaging and titling—some sex books go too far, according to LifeWay, which has 134 Christian bookstores.

Chris Turner, media relations manager

for LifeWay, noted that the retailer has a selection process for choosing books, with questions such as "how theologically rooted is the book?" and "is the content handled discreetly."

Many Christian industry books "go beyond the bounds of communicating the content in a respectful, discreet way," Turner said. LifeWay stores carry a fraction of the books that are available due to sheer volume: "If there are 50 books out there on a topic, we're going to carry 12 of

rized. "I think stores will continue to keep the books displayed and featured in their Love/Marriage category," McShea said.

"There is still sensitivity out there to keep the environment in the store family-friendly, and we have received comments from a few concerned customers that some titles are getting a bit too edgy, so it is something that we do need to keep in mind," he added.

However, most retailers seem to have no problem with carrying sex books—even

SUPPLIER CONTACTS

Contact information for each supplier mentioned in this article is available at www.ChristianRetailing.com.

the January title, *Is That All He Thinks About?: How to Enjoy Great Sex With Your Husband* by Marla Taviano (\$11.99, Harvest House).

SHELF LIFE

Cryderman said that sex books are not only a part of many publishers' frontlists, but make even better backlist titles.

"I expect *Sex God* really to be a best-seller out of the blocks, but generally books that deal with sexuality don't sell great the first year," Cryderman said. "But people are always interested (in sex), which is why they make great backlist books. One of ours that continues to sell for us is *Real Questions, Real Answers About Sex* (by Louis and Melissa McBurney, 2005). This book has about as frank of questions as you'll find anywhere, with very honest, unblushing answers."

Other steady backlist titles include *Intimate Issues* by Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus (WaterBrook); *His Needs, Her Needs* by Willard F. Harley Jr. (Revell); *The Act of Marriage* and *The Act of Marriage After 40* by Tim and Beverly LaHaye (Zondervan); *A Celebration of Sex* by Douglas Rosenau (Nelson Books); *Intended for Pleasure* by Ed Wheat (Revell); *Sex Begins in the Kitchen* by Kevin Leman (Revell); *Sexy Girls* by Hayley DiMarco (Revell); *Sex and the Soul of a Woman* by Paula Rinehart (Zondervan); *Real Sex* by Lauren F. Winner (Brazos); *Wait for Me* by Rebecca St. James (Nelson Books); and *Love, Sex, and Lasting Relationships* by Chip Ingram (Baker).

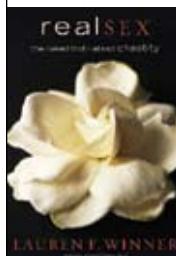
Delffs agreed that sex books are part of a strong backlist and said that *Intimate Issues*, originally published in 1999, stands as proof of that. "It sells several thousand copies per year and has a very low return rate," Delffs said. "Seven years later to be selling several thousand per year? Any publisher's happy with that."

McShea agreed. "(Sex books) are usually not on the best-sellers list(s), but there are consistent sales, and the category continues to be steady," McShea said. "Not huge numbers, but they just sell, and you know they will sell at a very steady rate. They just are not the type of books that jump off to huge sales and then diminish; they just start selling and keep selling."

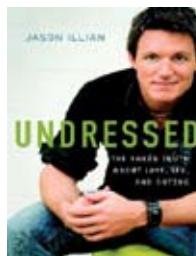
Brian Hampton, senior vice president and publisher of Nelson Books and Nelson Business, said Rosenau's *A Celebration of Sex* has sold 130,000 copies since its release and is still selling, as is St. James' 2002 release *Wait for Me*, which, when combined with sales of its accompanying journal, have sold more than 100,000 copies.

"If a retailer stocks the right titles for their customer base, (books on sex) can certainly be profitable," Hampton said. "Backlist classics and books with a truly novel approach, such as *Every Man's Battle*, do very well." ■

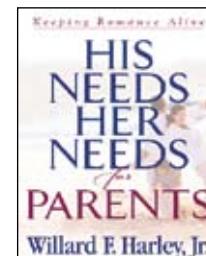
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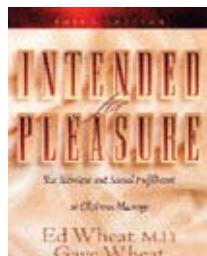
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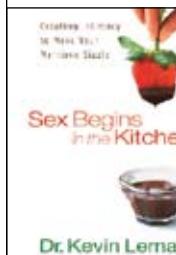
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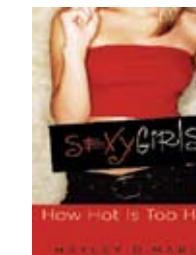
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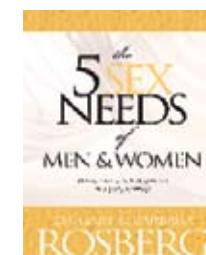
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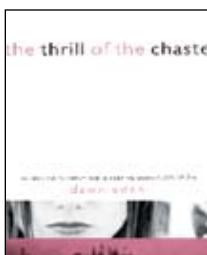
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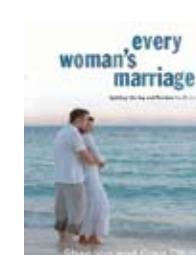
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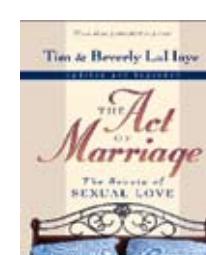
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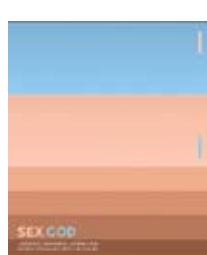
WaterBrook



WaterBrook



Zondervan



Zondervan

them, and we're going to carry ones that are more theologically rooted—ones that lean toward a more conservative interpretation of Scripture."

Like LifeWay, Parable also reviews the books it promotes to make sure the content is appropriate, but that can be tricky when it comes to sex.

"This is a topic that is very difficult to draw the line on. The books have always been frank and open, but some of the topics are getting a few people uncomfortable," McShea said.

"We try to be respectful of this and yet we still need to offer material on the issues that people face. We have had to pass on a few books that were deemed too graphic, but they are the exception rather than the rule. Rob Bell's new book (*Sex God*) is definitely a very edgy title, and I think it has the potential to be a good seller to his audience, and, yet, it may generate some negative comments from others."

McShea said retailers want to keep stores "family-friendly," which influences how sex books are displayed and catego-

those with edgy titles—unless they articulate views contrary to traditional Christian teachings on sex.

They should have no trouble filling their shelves—within the last six months alone, Zondervan, Thomas Nelson and Tyndale House have all released titles that focus on sexual issues, from *Sex God* to the December 2006 release, *The Thrill of the Chaste* (\$13.99) by Dawn Eden (W Publishing Group).

In October 2006, Tyndale House published *The 5 Sex Needs of Men & Women* (\$22.99) by Gary and Barbara Rosberg, and this month Tyndale will release *The Way to Love Your Wife: Creating Greater Love and Passion in the Bedroom* (\$13.99) by Clifford and Joyce Penner, a re-release of the 2004 book, *The Married Guy's Guide to Great Sex*, which has more than 25,000 copies in print.

Other recent sex titles include the late 2006 book, *Undressed: The Naked Truth About Love, Sex, and Dating* (\$22.99, FaithWords) by speaker and former reality TV show contestant Jason Illian, and