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Love in the time of liberation

PRESENTING...

It's what you bought that counts



REDEFINING NORMAL

The private (and complicated) life of female desire

drive TIME

Sexual anthropologist **Dr Bella Ellwood-Clayton** wants you to make love instead of pumpkin soup. If you want to, that is. **Catherine Woulfe** checks out her new book.

I read this book in a deeply unsexy way. Propped up in bed, a highlighter clamped between my teeth, in the half-hour before falling asleep. Six nights in a row I read, knowing I had to get up at 5.30am, two doors closed between me and my husband-to-be, who was playing *Call of Duty 3* in the lounge.

I read it in the afternoons, too, in front of David Attenborough's *Blue Planet*. Squid exchanged egg sacs. Female sturgeon darted toward the surface to expel their eggs, shadowed by squadrons of males. Clouds of coral-gametes drifted over reefs.

So much nature, just getting on with getting it on. It seemed remarkably at odds with what I was reading. *Sex Drive: In Pursuit of Female Desire* (out this Thursday) is a book that attempts to sum up the debate so far, and to point us in a new, "you're okay, I'm okay" direction.

The author, Dr Bella Ellwood-Clayton, is a Canadian living in Australia, age 36, married, with two kids. She has steered out of academia and into media, writing columns for Australian newspapers, often popping up in TV and radio interviews.

It's easy to see why she is such a go-to. In this book, she uses the f word and the c word (the one that ends with k). She makes a joke about ecstasy. One chapter includes the golden line, which really should be a fridge magnet: "Empty spaces in a mother's life are few and far between. And when they do blissfully appear they often get filled with a sigh, a cup of tea, and feet up for the first time in hours. Not a penis."

At 15, Ellwood-Clayton read Naomi Wolf's iconic, angry book *The Beauty Myth*, and promptly shaved her head. She says she feels a bit arrogant comparing her book to Wolf's, but that her intentions were similar – she wanted to take a snapshot of a mad situation, and point out all the things that were off about it.

So this book unpicks the way women are sucked into the vortex of career, family, housework and trying to appear desirable, which leaves no time for actually desiring. It charts the dive in sex drive that comes with long-term relationships, kids, menopause, depression and old age – and says, in each case, 'Hey, perhaps that's okay.' It busts myths based on dodgy science: FYI, it's not true that men peak sexually at 18 and women at 36; what academics call a "sexless marriage" is actually defined as 10 times a year; one study found that only one-third of women diagnosed with low



sexual function were actually distressed about it. Translation: just quietly, lots of us actually don't mind our lack of libido. So why is it something we diagnose?

This book is strident in its condemnation of that new disease, female sexual dysfunction, and it calls out scientists for being in the pocket of Big Pharma – actually naming individuals, which the author sounds a little nervous about.

"We've had the legal team read through it and it should be alright," she says, hopefully.

The central, crucial message is posed as a question: "What if low libido itself is a social construct, and isn't

a problem at all, but rather falls within the 'normal' range of female desire?"

Well, a lot of women would feel a lot better about themselves, for a start. Probably a lot of men would despair. And the pharmaceutical industry, which is racing to find a drug to rev up the female sex drive, would keep trying to make us think we need fixing.

Ellwood-Clayton is certain 'pink Viagra' will be on your local pharmacy shelf soon. For some women it'll be a miracle, she says. I say, imagine if it didn't work

for you, how incredibly sad. She agrees, and adds: "Hopefully it won't be used as just, Friday night, you know, completely not in the mood but what the hell, I'll just pop this now, we can have sex then after we'll just go back to our real life."

Because if your level of desire is lower than you'd like it to be, it's probably real life getting in the way.

Mary Hodson is an accredited sex therapist and a regional director of Sex Therapy New Zealand. She says 99 percent of the women who come to her worried about their desire level have completely normal hormone test results. She blames stress,



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lack of time, the treadmill of work, home, and kids.

"That's what I see in my practice, lots and lots and lots of young women, young couples, who are struggling to do everything and bring up their children and are *extremely* stressed, and they're not making time to allow themselves to feel sexual.

"Some [women] come and say, 'It used to be okay, and now I just can't be bothered, basically, there's so much going on in my life that sex is the lowest of my priorities.' And I would think it's about 50-50, those women who identify it themselves for whatever reason, and those who are getting a bit of prodding from their partner."

Or not, I say. Hurr, hurr.

"Not that kind of prodding," Hodson says, then, "One of the things we don't do that well in New Zealand is talk about sex. It's good to be able to talk about it in an intelligent, grown-up, considered way, and still have a real laugh about it, isn't it?"

She says that contrary to popular belief, women tend to be very private about their sex lives, and tend not to talk to their partners, let alone their friends. There's a competitive aspect that creeps in: "We are doing it so my relationship's okay."

The "dirty little secret" at the heart of it all, Hodson says, is money.

"People are so indebted with mortgages and things, that they've both got to be out there working... I see masses of that. And I feel sorry for them, in a way, because they can't escape from it and they have huge guilt about not being able to spend that time with the children. Enormous."

"But, you know, you don't have to have a really expensive house, holidays – you can go without and it doesn't actually hurt you or the children. And that's not a popular idea today."

Another trend Hodson points out: marrying a person who shares your interests and philosophies; who is your friend, basically, but not someone who makes you swoon. "That's almost a current wisdom – young people are likely to marry somebody where that is what they have, but they don't have the spark, the chemistry. Romance."

(Don't freak out: Hodson does believe that spark can be brought back, and even created, if you work on it.)

In *Sex Drive*, the chapter on what kids do to your sex life is particularly terrifying. Ellwood-Clayton says – and I believe her – that if she'd read it before

having children, it would have given her pause.

But probably most disturbing (and accurate) is the book's assertion that modern women, regardless of kids or health or life stage, are ruled by an endless list "of things to do, to buy, to finish". It leaves no time for us to truly relax, or have enjoyable sex.

"Worst of all, The List is invisible. Many of us grow resentful that our partners don't seem to see it, that The List is ours alone." (Page 96, by the way, for those of you planning to shove this under someone's nose.)

Ellwood-Clayton tells me that women don't seem to see the list for what it is, either: she often hears women talking about their lists, but not actually recognising them as "this is preventing me" or "something to watch out for".

She says: "One of the messages in the book is to hold up a bit of a mirror to your life and think, 'How are you spending your time, why is our sexuality suffering, why do we feel we have to perform so many roles at such a high level?'"

So sex becomes another thing on the list?

"It does become another thing on the list that makes us feel more pressure, and perhaps even more depressed about not being sexualised enough, or alive

enough, or sensual enough. But on the flip side, I think women can use the information in the book about the fact that there is no normal necessarily, and that where we are at in our life is valid. So I think that can help us fend off that pressure."

After working my way through the *Blue Planet* box set, and with my mind whirling with all the slippery science and what-ifs and inevitable self-analysis, I find myself blurting out, "Aren't we all overthinking this, just a bit?"

"Yes," says Ellwood-Clayton. Then she adds a big 'but'.

"If our free time tripled – if we had an abundance of free time, and we didn't have money worries, and we felt like we looked beautiful, we'd probably be having sex all the time."

If you've got this far and are still feeling worried, not relieved – if you *would* like to be making love, instead of pumpkin soup – a few tips.

From Hodson: "Women generally are good at analysing, so analyse what's going on, what you actually need, what you think needs to change. Then talk to your partner about it honestly and say, 'This is how it is for me, what do you need, how do you think we can change things?'"

Nail down a routine. Farm the kids out to a friend's place for the night, regularly (you take theirs sometimes too). Every day, find at least 35 minutes to talk to your partner about important things – other than who's getting the groceries this week.

From Ellwood-Clayton: "This is probably too personal, but last night it was Australia Day, and there were fireworks, and my husband and I watched them on the balcony of our house. And I didn't have this spontaneous lust inside of me, but I looked at my husband and felt close and warm... We had sex last night. And that was a decision in my mind."

In long term relationships, particularly if you're juggling lots of roles, desire is not going to be a visitor that's around all that much. Jump on those moments where you feel closeness and just take a risk. Step towards it."

Finally, from her book. Plan: "As in: meet you in our bedroom on 30 October, nude." Kiss your partner, or go rock climbing with them. Make your bedroom a pretty, relaxing zone. Do fun stuff by yourself, spend time with friends, go to night classes. And start slashing that infernal list: let TV babysit the kids occasionally, cut down on the preening. Step away from the pumpkin, lady, and go open a can. ●

Dr Bella Ellwood-Clayton

