

EVERYDAY EXPERIMENTS, RELATIONSHIPS, SEXUALITY

In his novel *Before She Met Me*, Julian Barnes discusses the fate of one Graham Hendrick, an academic historian, who has left his wife and begun a relationship with another woman. When the novel opens, Graham is in his late thirties, has been married fifteen years and, 'halfway through life', he can 'feel the downhill slope already'. At an otherwise run-of-the-mill party he meets Ann, who once was a small-time film actress and has since become a fashion buyer. For some reason their encounter stirs in him barely remembered feelings of hope and excitement. He feels 'as if some long-broken line of communication to a self of twenty years ago had suddenly been restored' and is 'once more capable of folly and idealism'.

After a series of clandestine meetings, which turn into a full-blown affair, Graham leaves his wife and child and sets up house with Ann. Once his divorce comes through the two marry. The core of the novel concerns Graham's progressive discovery of the lovers in Ann's life before he entered it. She hides little, but volunteers no information unless he asks for it directly. Graham gradually becomes obsessed with a need to uncover the sexual details of Ann's past. He watches and re-watches the cameo parts Ann has played on the screen, trying to glimpse an exchange of glances, or other signs, that would indicate that she and a particular

man with whom she appeared had been lovers. Sometimes she admits there have been sexual liaisons, mostly she insists not.

The ultimate development of the story is savage, its conclusion almost completely subverting the style of dead-pan humour in which most of the book is written. By dint of assiduous research, Graham discovers that his best friend, Jack – to whom he had been confiding his problems about Ann's life 'before she met me' – himself had a sexual involvement with Ann several years before. Graham arranges to see his friend as if to continue his discussions. But he takes with him a knife, a 'six-inch blade tapering from a breadth of an inch to a sharp point'. When Jack turns his back on him at one point, to busy himself with a minor task, Graham stabs him. As Jack turns round in bewilderment, Graham slips the knife in repeatedly, 'between the heart and the genitals'. After putting a plaster on his finger where he has cut it during the course of the murder, he settles down in a chair with the remnants of a cup of coffee that Jack had made for him.

In the meantime, increasingly worried by Graham's absence, which has stretched across the night, and having telephoned the police and local hospitals in a fruitless endeavour to discover his whereabouts, Ann starts searching through Graham's desk. There she unearths documents bearing witness to Graham's compulsive enquiries into her past – and finds that he knows of her affair with Jack (the one sexual encounter which she has actively concealed from Graham). She goes over to Jack's flat and finds Graham there, together with Jack's bloodstained body. Without understanding why, she lets Graham calm her down and tie her arms together with a few yards of washing-line. Graham calculates that this procedure will give him enough time to accomplish his objective, before she can dash to the phone to get help. 'No curtain lines; no melodrama': picking up the knife, Graham cuts deeply into each side of his throat.

About Ann – ‘he loved Ann, there wasn’t any doubt about that’ – he has miscalculated. Ann dives headfirst through the glass of a window, screaming loudly. By the time the police arrive, the armchair is irretrievably soaked with blood and Graham is dead. The implication of the concluding paragraphs of the novel is that Ann has killed herself also – inadvertently or otherwise we do not know.

Before She Met Me is not primarily a novel about jealousy. While reading through the materials that Graham has accumulated about her, Ann recognises that jealous ‘was a word she wouldn’t use of him’. The important thing was that ‘he couldn’t handle her past’.¹ The ending is violent – incongruously so given the half-comic tone of the rest of the book – but cool. Graham’s violence is a frustrated attempt at mastery. Its origins are left quite opaque by the novelist, something which reflects their obscurity to Graham himself. The secrets Graham seeks to discover in Ann’s sexual history are bound up with her non-conformity to what he expects of a woman – her past is incompatible with his ideals. The problem is an emotional one; he recognises how absurd it is to suppose that Ann should have organised her former life in anticipation of meeting him. Yet her sexual independence, even when he did not ‘exist’ for her, is unacceptable, to such a degree that the end-result is a violent destructiveness. To his credit, Graham tries to shield Ann from the violence she has provoked in him; but of course she becomes caught up in it anyhow.

The events described in the novel are distinctly contemporary; as a discussion of the lives of ordinary people, the novel could not have been set, say, a century ago. For it presumes a significant degree of sexual equality and, specifically, depends upon the fact that today it is commonplace for a woman to have multiple lovers prior to entering (and even during, as well as after leaving) a ‘serious’ sexual involvement. Of course, there have always been a minority of women for whom sexual variety, and also a measure of

equality, were possible. But for the most part women have been divided into the virtuous and the loose, and 'loose women' have existed only on the margins of respectable society. 'Virtue' has long been defined in terms of a woman's refusal to succumb to sexual temptation, a refusal bolstered by various institutional protections, such as chaperoned courting, shotgun marriages and so forth.

Men, on the other hand, have traditionally been regarded – and not only by themselves – as requiring sexual variety for their physical health. It has generally been thought acceptable for men to engage in multiple sexual encounters before marriage, and the double standard after marriage was a very real phenomenon. As Lawrence Stone says in his study of the history of divorce in England, until quite recently a rigid dual standard existed about the sexual experience of men and women. A single act of adultery by a wife was 'an unpardonable breach of the law of property and the idea of hereditary descent' and discovery brought into play highly punitive measures. Adultery on the part of husbands, by contrast, was widely 'regarded as a regrettable but understandable foible'.²

In a world of increasing sexual equality – even if such equality is far from complete – both sexes are called upon to make fundamental changes in their outlooks on, and behaviour towards, one another. The adjustments demanded of women are considerable but, perhaps because the novelist is male, these are neither fully represented, nor portrayed with much sympathy, in the book. Barbara, Graham's first wife, is depicted as a shrill, demanding creature, whose attitudes he finds baffling; while he feels a consistent love for Ann, his understanding of her views and actions is hardly any deeper. One could even say that, in spite of the intensive research work which he carries out on Ann's prior life, he does not really come to know her at all.

Graham tends to dismiss the behaviour of Barbara and Ann in a traditional way: women are emotional, whimsical

beings, whose thought-processes do not move along rational lines. Yet he has compassion for both of them, particularly, at the time of the story, Ann. His new wife is not a 'loose woman', nor has he any right to treat her as such. When she goes to see Jack, after having married Graham, she firmly rejects the advances Jack makes to her. Yet Graham cannot shake from his mind the threat he feels from activities which occurred before he was 'in control' of her.

The novelist conveys very well the tentative, open-ended nature of Graham's second marriage, which differs substantially from his first. Graham's earlier marriage, it is made clear, was more of a 'naturally given' phenomenon, based on the conventional division between housewife and male breadwinner. With Barbara, marriage was a state of affairs, a not particularly rewarding part of life, like having a job that one does not especially appreciate, but dutifully carries on. Marriage to Ann, by contrast, is a complex series of interactions that have to be constantly negotiated and 'worked through'.³ In his second marriage, Graham has entered a new world that was only barely emerging at the time of his youth. It is a world of sexual negotiation, of 'relationships', in which new terminologies of 'commitment' and 'intimacy' have come to the fore.

Before She Met Me is a novel about male disquiet, and male violence, in a social world undergoing profound transformations. Women no longer go along with male sexual dominance, and both sexes must deal with the implications of this phenomenon. Personal life has become an open project, creating new demands and anxieties. Our interpersonal existence is being thoroughly transfigured, involving us all in what I shall call *everyday social experiments*, with which wider social changes more or less oblige us to engage. Let us give some more sociological flesh to these changes, which are to do with marriage and the family as well as with sexuality directly.

Social change and sexual behaviour

Lillian Rubin studied the sexual histories of almost a thousand heterosexual people in the US aged between eighteen and forty-eight in 1989. In so doing, she produced evidence revealing 'a tale of change of almost staggering proportions in relations between men and women' over the past few decades.⁴ The early sexual lives of respondents over forty contrasted dramatically with those reported by younger age-groups. The author prefaces her report on what things were like for the older generation with her own testimony, as a member of that generation herself. She was a virgin at the time of her marriage during World War II, a girl who 'followed all the rules of her day', and would never have 'gone all the way'. She wasn't alone in drawing clear boundaries to mark out the limits of sexual exploration, but shared codes of conduct common to her friends. Her prospective husband was an active participant in ensuring that those codes were complied with; his sense of sexual 'rights and wrongs' matched her own.

Virginity on the part of girls prior to marriage was prized by both sexes. Few girls disclosed the fact if they allowed a boyfriend to have full sexual intercourse – and many were only likely to permit such an act to happen once formally engaged to the boy in question. More sexually active girls were disparaged by the others, as well as by the very males who sought to 'take advantage' of them. Just as the social reputation of the girls rested upon their ability to resist, or contain, sexual advances, that of the boys depended upon the sexual conquests they could achieve. Most boys gained such conquests only by, as one 45-year-old respondent put it, 'fooling around with one of *those* girls, the sluts'.

When we look at teenage sexual activity today, the good girl/bad girl distinction still applies to some degree, as does the ethic of male conquest. But other attitudes, on the part

of many teenage girls in particular, have changed quite radically. Girls feel they have an entitlement to engage in sexual activity, including sexual intercourse, at whatever age seems appropriate to them. In Rubin's survey, virtually no teenage girls talk of 'saving themselves' for an anticipated engagement and marriage. Instead, they speak a language of romance and commitment which acknowledges the potentially finite nature of their early sexual involvements. Thus, in response to a question from Rubin about her sexual activities with her boyfriend, one sixteen-year-old interviewee remarked, 'We love each other, so there's no reason why we shouldn't be making love.' Rubin then asked to what extent she envisaged a long-term tie with her partner. Her reply was: 'Do you mean are we going to get married? The answer is no. Or will we be together next year? I don't know about that; that's a long time from now. Most kids don't stay together for such a long time. But we won't date anybody else as long as we're together. That's a commitment, isn't it?'⁵

In previous generations, the conventional practice was for the sexually active teenage girl to play the part of innocent. This relation is today usually reversed: innocence, where necessary, plays the role of sophisticate. According to Rubin's findings, changes in the sexual behaviour and attitudes of girls have been much more pronounced than among boys. She did talk to some boys who were sensitive about connections between sex and commitment, and who resisted the equation of sexual success and male prowess. Most, however, spoke admiringly of male friends who went with lots of girls, while condemning girls who did the same. A few girls in Rubin's sample emulated traditional male sexual behaviour, did so openly and with some defiance; faced with such actions, the majority of boys responded with a sense of outrage. They still wanted innocence, at least of a sort. Several young women whom Rubin interviewed, on the point of getting married, found it necessary

to lie to their future spouses about the range of their earlier sexual experiences.

One of the most striking findings of Rubin's research, which is echoed by other surveys and applies across all age-groups, is the expanded variety of sexual activities in which most people either engage or deem it appropriate for others to participate in if they so wish. Thus among the women and men over forty, fewer than one in ten had engaged in oral sex during adolescence; for each successive generation, the proportion increases. Among the current generation of teenagers, although not universally practised, oral sex is regarded as a normal part of sexual behaviour. Every adult Rubin interviewed now had at least some experience with it - this in a society where oral sex is still described as 'sodomy' in statute books and is actually illegal in twenty-four states.

Men mostly welcome the fact that women have become more sexually available, and claim that in any longer-term sexual tie they want a partner who is intellectually and economically their equal. Yet, according to Rubin's findings, they show obvious and deep-seated unease when faced with the implications of such preferences. They say that women have 'lost the capacity for kindness', that they 'don't know how to compromise any more' and that 'women today don't want to be wives, they want wives'. Men declare they want equality, but many also make statements suggesting that they either reject, or are nervous about, what it means for them. 'How would you contribute to raising the children?' Rubin asked Jason, a man who, in his own words, has 'no problem with strong aggressive women'. His answer: 'I'm certainly willing to do all I can. I don't expect to be an absent father, but someone has to take the larger share of responsibility . . . And I won't say I can do that, because I can't. I have my career, and it's very important to me, what I've worked for all my life.'⁶

Most people, women and men, now come to marriage bringing with them a substantial fund of sexual experience

and knowledge. Not for them the abrupt transition between furtive fumbings or illicit encounters and the more secure, yet also often more demanding, sexuality of the marriage bed. Newly wed marriage partners today are for the most part sexually experienced, and there is no period of sexual apprenticeship in the early stages of the marriage, even when the individuals involved have not lived with one another previously.

Yet far more is anticipated sexually of marriage, Rubin shows, by both women and men, than was normally the case in earlier generations. Women expect to receive, as well as provide, sexual pleasure, and many have come to see a rewarding sex life as a key requirement for a satisfactory marriage. The proportion of women married for more than five years who have had extramarital sexual encounters is today virtually the same as that of men. The double standard still exists, but women are no longer tolerant of the view that, while men need variety and can be expected to engage in extramarital adventures, they should not behave likewise.

How much can we glean about generic social changes from such a piece of research, carried out with limited numbers of people, in a single country? We can learn, I think, essentially what we need to know for the purposes of this study. It is beyond dispute that, broadly speaking, developments of the sort charted by Rubin are happening throughout most Western societies – and to some extent in other parts of the world as well. Of course, there are significant divergencies between different countries, sub-cultures and socio-economic strata. Certain groups, for example, stand apart from the sort of changes described, or actively attempt to resist them. Some societies have a longer history of sexual tolerance than others and the changes which they are experiencing are perhaps not quite as radical as in the US. In many, however, such transitions are happening against the backdrop of more constraining sexual values than were characteristic of American society several

decades ago. For people living in these contexts, particularly women, the transformations now occurring are dramatic and shattering.

Heterosexuality, homosexuality

Rubin's research deals only with heterosexual activities. Her decision to exclude homosexual experiences is odd, given the fact, already revealed by Kinsey, that a very high proportion of men, as well as a substantial proportion of women, have taken part in homosexual acts at some time in their lives. Kinsey found that only about 50 per cent of all American men were, in his terms, 'exclusively heterosexual' – that is, had neither participated in homosexual activities, nor felt homosexual desires. Eighteen per cent were either exclusively homosexual or persistently bisexual. Among women, 2 per cent were wholly homosexual, 13 per cent of others had engaged in some form of homosexual activity, while a further 15 per cent reported having had homosexual urges without having acted on them.⁷

Kinsey's findings shocked a disbelieving public at the time. Over the past quarter of a century, however, homosexuality has been affected by changes as great as those influencing heterosexual conduct. Even at the date when the Kinsey volumes appeared, homosexuality was still seen in much of the clinical literature as a pathology, a form of psychosexual disturbance along with a whole range of others – fetishism, voyeurism, transvestism, satyriasis, nymphomania and so forth. It continues to be regarded as a perversion by many heterosexuals – that is, as specifically unnatural and to be morally condemned. Yet the term 'perversion' itself has now more or less completely disappeared from clinical psychiatry, and the aversion felt by

many towards homosexuality no longer receives substantial support from the medical profession.

The 'coming out' of homosexuality is a very real process, with major consequences for sexual life in general. It was signalled by the popularising of the self-description 'gay', an example of that reflexive process whereby a social phenomenon can be appropriated and transformed through collective engagement. 'Gay', of course, suggests colourfulness, openness and legitimacy, a far cry from the image of homosexuality once held by many practising homosexuals as well as by the majority of heterosexual individuals. The gay cultural communities that came into being in American cities, as in many urban areas in Europe, provided a new public face for homosexuality. On a more personal level, however, the term 'gay' also brought with it an increasingly widespread reference to sexuality as a quality or property of the self. A person 'has' a sexuality, gay or otherwise, which can be reflexively grasped, interrogated and developed.

Sexuality thereby becomes free-floating; at the same time as 'gay' is something one can 'be', and 'discover oneself to be', sexuality opens itself up to many objects. Thus *The Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex*, published in 1990, describes a case of a 65-year-old man whose wife died following a happy marriage lasting for forty-five years. Within a year of his wife's death, he fell in love with a man. According to his own testimony, he had never before been sexually attracted to a man or fantasised about homosexual acts. Such an individual now follows his altered sexual orientation quite openly, although he has had to face the problem of 'what to tell the children'.⁸ Would he even a few years ago have conceived of the possibility that he might transform his 'sexuality' in this way? He has entered a new world in much the same way as Graham did.

The idea of the 'relationship' emerges as strongly in gay sub-cultures as among the more heterosexual population. Male homosexuals commonly have a diversity of sexual

partners, contact with whom may be only fleeting – as epitomised in the bath-house culture before the advent of AIDS led to its virtual disappearance. In a study undertaken in the late 1970s, some six hundred male homosexuals in the US were asked how many sexual partners they had had; about 40 per cent stated the number at five hundred or more.⁹

It might seem as though we find here a social universe of male sexuality run rampant, where one-night stands have become random ten-minute couplings. In fact, a high proportion of gay men, and the majority of lesbian women, are at any one time in a live-in relation with a partner. The same studies just quoted found that most people contacted had been in a relationship with one main partner at least once for a period of two years or more. Research undertaken by the Kinsey Institute in the early 1980s, based upon interviews with several hundred homosexual men, found that virtually all were at one point or another in a steady relationship for at least a year.¹⁰ Gay women and men have preceded most heterosexuals in developing relationships, in the sense that term has come to assume today when applied to personal life. For they have had to 'get along' without traditionally established frameworks of marriage, in conditions of relative equality between partners.

'Sexuality' today has been discovered, opened up and made accessible to the development of varying life-styles. It is something each of us 'has', or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. Somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms.

Such changes are nowhere better demonstrated than in the case of masturbation, once the dread symbol of failed sexuality. Masturbation has 'come out' as openly as homosexuality. The Kinsey Report found that 90 per cent of men,

and 40 per cent of women, had at some time in their lives engaged in masturbation. Figures from more recent surveys have upped these proportions to almost 100 per cent in the case of men and around 70 per cent for women. Equally important: masturbation is widely recommended as a major source of sexual pleasure, and actively encouraged as a mode of improving sexual responsiveness on the part of both sexes.¹¹

In what ways do the changes just discussed interact with transformations in personal life more generally? How do the changes of the past few decades connect to more protracted influences upon sexual conduct? To answer these questions means investigating how 'sexuality' originated, what it is and how it has come to be something that individuals 'possess'. These problems will be my concern in the book as a whole. But one particular work has dominated thinking about these issues in recent years, and we can make an initial approach to them through a brief critical appraisal of it: Michel Foucault's account of the history of sexuality.

To forestall possible misunderstandings, let me emphasise that a full-scale encounter with Foucault's thought would be out of place in this study, and I do not attempt such a thing. Foucault's brilliant innovations pose certain key issues in ways which no one had thought to do before. In my view, however, his writings are also deeply flawed, in respect both of the philosophical standpoint that he elaborates and some of the more historical claims he makes or implies. Admirers of Foucault will be unhappy: I don't justify these claims in any detail. My differences from Foucault, nevertheless, emerge clearly enough in the substance of the arguments I develop; I use his work mainly as a foil against which to clarify those arguments.

NOTES

- 1 All quotations are from Julian Barnes: *Before She Met Me*, London: Picador, 1986.
- 2 Lawrence Stone: *The Road to Divorce. England 1530-1987*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 7.
- 3 Barnes: *Before She Met Me*, pp. 55ff.
- 4 Lillian Rubin: *Erotic Wars*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990, p. 8.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 7 Alfred C. Kinsey et al.: *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*, Philadelphia: Saunders, 1948; *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*, Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953.
- 8 June M. Reinisch and Ruth Beasley: *The Kinsey Institute New Report on Sex*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p. 143.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 11 W. H. Masters and V. E. Johnson: *Human Sexual Response*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1966.