



How to Think More About Sex

Alain de Botton

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Covering such topics as adultery, lust, pornography and impotence, Alain de Botton argues that 21st century sex will always be a balancing act of trust versus risk, and of primal desire versus studied civility. By examining sex from a subjective perspective, he uncovers new ideas on how we can achieve that balance.

How to Think More About Sex Details

Date : Published May 1st 2012 by MacMillan (first published 2012)

ISBN : 9781447202271

Author : Alain de Botton

Format : Paperback 160 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Philosophy, Psychology, Sexuality, Self Help

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A. says

When I showed my friend this book, he said it looked like something Carrie of Sex and the City would read. I sneered. This book? Alain De Botton's slim volume on the philosophy of sexuality, a book so hip there's not even a picture on the cover, just a serif font and the author's name? Pfft. Yeah. Right. Screw yew, dude. This thing was written for the under-sexed, under-Benzo'd undergraduate.

So I sat down and started reading it. De Botton gets off to an obvious but well-stated start. We deal with sex in inefficient, unhealthy and conservative ways. We're clueless when it comes to the subject. Sure, Masters and Johnson can walk you through all the specifics of the "plateau" but can anyone explain concretely the existential dread you feel after hooking up with some random 21 year-old who wears Etnies sneakers and jelly bracelets from Hot Topic? De Botton would call that one of the "peculiar difficulties imposed by our unavoidable possession of a sex drive." (I'd probably agree.)

Before studying the difficulties, De Botton comments on the "pleasures of sex." This first half of the book is very enjoyable -- the author covers how sex can liberate the self, unite people, loosen conceptions of status, dazzle the senses and mind. I especially liked the commentary on how sex is a communion of the "polluted sides of our selves"--accurate, it sounds cool, and it reminds me of "Purity and Danger," the classic wherein society effectively relegates dirt and other nastiness to the outermost periphery of social reality. Sex, then, allows us to transform the profane and forbidden into the honest and the lovely. "At the precise juncture where disgust could be at its height," De Botton writes, "We find only welcome and permission."

The chapter "Can Sexiness Be Profound?" is also very illuminating. De Botton says the "inner beauty vs. outer beauty" eternal deathmatch is dumb. Pithily citing a few no-name studies, De Botton argues that the outside mimics the inside. "Getting turned on is a process that engages the whole self," he says. Who hasn't fantasized beyond the errant sexual thoughts that bubble up when you think of a crush? Who hasn't assigned a love interest the goodness of a minor deity solely on the basis of their cute bum or their nice lips? De Botton argues we are attracted to people because they offer a "promise of happiness." Captivating, encouraging and succinct, it's my favorite section in the book.

The second-half was the book my friend prophesied: a bright pink pop-philosophy tome Carrie Bradshaw would be proud to tote around in her clutch. Focusing more on sexual issues within established relationships, the forecast is grimmer here -- adultery is inevitable, the institution of family is a running joke, sexual rejections are apt at sending one into an "epicentre of suffering." Yikes. o_O De Botton also begins to offer some bizarre advice, culminating in the chapter on adultery, suggesting people enjoy some infidelity or achieve a "colossal failure of the imagination."

Despite a great amount of insight littered throughout, there's an equal amount of weaknesses. Some of De Botton's ideas are just so far removed from reality. My fave: porno of the future should not only take aesthetic cues from the "sexiness" of Renaissance-era Madonnas, but should incorporate "people performing oral sex on one another with an air of sweetness and regard." Excuse me? Does that scene come before or after the gangbang in the "former Soviet Union" De Botton described 20 pages prior? Because, see, any porn industry wherein such films exist ain't ready for "witty" porn stars or "people caught looking embarrassed." (Well, the latter actually exists; it's called "Gay-for-Pay" and I don't think it's the aloofness De Botton had in mind.)

The book ends with a bibliography (annoyingly titled "Homework") in which De Botton claims, "I have learnt about pornography from Pornhub .com," before going on to recommend Natalie Merchant's album "Ophelia." Hmm. At the end of journey, you can't help thinking that maybe De Botton is not the best tour guide for the caverns of human desire. His prose is comfortably sparky, and he expresses his ideas thoughtfully. He makes an impact with big, initial concepts about sex and self, shame and kink. But De Botton leaves the fire unkindled after the first half. He flings some intriguing ideas around before settling into a series of so-so cultural criticisms. (Jane Austen inspired the myth of a perfect marriage! Porn abandons aesthetics! Impotence is a sign of respect! etc. etc.) His chapters on porn and Natalie Portman (separate chapters fyi) are amusing(ly strange) in their own right.

So does De Botton succeed? Does one walk away from "How To Think About Sex" empowered and virile, ready to tame the wild "problem" of sex? No, not really. In his conclusion, De Botton somewhat cops out. "We would be so much better off if we didn't have a sex drive," he writes. Really? 170 pages to glean that gem? De Botton then chalks up sex as just one of those cah-razy things we have to deal with as human beings. Great. Awesome. Now what?

Da Takeaway: De Botton thinks sex is a desirous monster we must approach cautiously. If we win its favor, we're treated to physical bliss, an escape from self, possibly even a completion of self. Still, De Botton reminds us throughout: sex is a force of nature, not some domesticated impulse. Sex is, and will always be, 100-percent cray.

Richard Kramer says

The title is misleading; it could (accurately) be renamed as HOW TO THINK ABOUT SEX IN A MORE INTERESTING WAY. It's a little chapbook, this, really, not terribly ambitious, but full of lovely writing and the more than occasional arresting thought. He's very good on pornography, very good on how sex is a bear, particularly insightful on Our Culture's misunderstanding of fidelity, or perhaps I should say its unuseful way of regarding that concept. I read paragraphs of this aloud to friends. It's smooth, elegant, funny. It adds up to less than you want it to, maybe, but it's worth the hour or so it asks for. De Botton's book of about ten years ago, HOW PROUST CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE, was pretty terrific. This new book is a ditty, nothing more, but sweet enough to make me search (and find) nis recent A WEEK AT THE AIRPORT, which I'm going to read next.

Siv30 says

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Margaret Heller says

This is a short book, an extended essay in the School of Life, which is a kind of philosophical self-help venture that all of Alain de Botton's work has been leading up to seemingly. That said, I really enjoy his particular take on life--I get the sense that many men do not share this attitude. Much of his take on sex may strike one as overly conservative, but the idea that human nature remains essentially unchanged even as our expectations and trappings of life change is convincing to me. The point of the book is that it is worth thinking more about sex in a more careful frame of mind and with a longer view. I think it succeeds very well in that, and without the bizarre thought experiments that made up too much of Religion for Atheists.

But be aware, the US edition is not something you might be totally comfortable with on the library hold shelf or on a crowded bus. I got over it, but it's very strikingly a book about sex.

Bastian Greshake Tzovaras says

So far I thought «Ass Goblins of Auschwitz» would be pretty safely the worst book I've read in 2013, but now I'm not too sure anymore. This book basically is a mix of the worst of Freud, the worst of evolutionary psychology and – for good measure – adds lots of naturalistic fallacies. Put this all in a blender and you end up with this mess... Got any fetishes? Let's grab some Freud. Oh, and evolution made sure sex in relationships will get boring after time, don't rebel against it, it's natural and thus must be fine.

Oh, and did I mention that he actually thinks censorship might be the way to go in order to limit online pornography consumption? The best thing about this is his motivation for encouraging censorship: Because otherwise we stupid people would never come around to read highbrow literature. When I came to this part of his essay I actually thought I might read a polemic and he would just be trolling...

But in the end his shaky arguments really make me wonder: How could de Botton get a degree in philosophy? Either King's College must be basically handing them out to everyone, or he knows better and is just hoping that his audience won't notice. I can't decide which scenario would be worse.

If you want a longer rant on this book I recommend reading this review.

Ena Rusnjak Markovic says

Has some flaws but really lucid and astute. Has problematic aspects that made me cringe a number of times while reading. But I think there are some really interesting ideas in it, as long as you don't take them too far, or read them too literally.

I do feel like he's writing from his own very personal experience and perspective, but then bringing in bits and pieces of theory to support it. It kind of reminds me of the kind of thing Naomi Woolf does, when she takes her experience and then writes about it but brings in all this other research.

de Botton does write incredibly beautifully and so strikingly sometimes, and those moments really stand out and resonate with the full force of all the humanity that stands behind them. But at other times there's a huge gulf and those times are when he is most writing from his very specific male, white, hetero, privileged experience. But I still think this book has a lot of value, so long as it's read with a critical mind.

I will say it's incredibly generous of Alain de Botton to provide an annotated bibliography at the back, guiding you through where some ideas he wrote about can be found and explored in their original form. Reads kind of like getting an email and reading list from your favourite professor, letting you into their intellectual journey. Super grateful for that, and will be checking out many of the recommendations and sources.

Kathleen Brugger says

My conclusion is this poor man has had some very bad sexual experiences. Why else would someone write this: "We might be so much better off if we didn't have a sex drive; for most of our lives it causes nothing but trouble and distress. In its name, we do revolting things with people we don't really like, only to feel disgusting and sinful afterwards." How sad. But how horrible that he feels he has the ability to write a "sexual self-help" book for other people!

The book is also blandly conventional; the people he imagines for his examples are heterosexual. The married couple, in their 30s, have had sex 9 times in the last year. De Botton seems to think this is normal. He says explicitly that if you have a handful of great sexual experiences in a lifetime you're doing well.

I enjoyed another of the books in this "School of Life" series, "How to Stay Sane," and looked forward to the same bare-bones, no-nonsense approach to life. But, unfortunately, there's no concept of a "saner" sexuality here. He starts the book with "For most of our lives, sex seems fated to remain steeped in longing and awkwardness. Whatever the manuals promise, there are really no solutions to the majorities of the dilemmas sex creates for us. A useful self-help book on this subject ought hence to focus on the management of pain rather than its outright elimination." What an ugly warped view of the possibilities of human sexuality. I think the only proper response is to feel sorry for him.

Leo Robertson says

After Alain de Botton touches himself (to Boticelli paintings and the cinematic works of Godard), he feels empty. Past 40, he is painfully aware of death. People find him sexually repugnant, and shame bathes his world.

'I know', de Botton buttons, 'If I convince everyone they have to feel like me, I will have all the power. But what to do with it?'

So begins his increasingly powerful legacy, beginning with Religion for Atheists, where he convinces the 40 and not-yet 40 to either fear death or begin fearing death respectively so they can gain interest on their fear, to remind all new lovers that they will not caress those milkyslender legs with such joy ten years from now, nor will those legs look so milkyslender, and why?

Simple.

Alain de Botton wants to have sex with your wife while you watch. And if you can pay him to convince you to do so, all's the better for it.

'And I'll call it "How to let me sleep with your wife! No, that won't work. Let's put a title that would convince people to buy it, rather than tell them what the book's really about.'

Henry Le Nav says

I had great hopes for this book but was somewhat disappointed. It is a very short book at least on the Kindle. Only 1339 locations. The fact that the print length is 185 pages tells me that the printed version of the book is loaded with white space.

de Botton will make a pithy observation, and you will think oh this is going to be good. Then he keeps writing and the pithy thoughts turn into somewhat boring sentences that turn into words that turn into letters that turn into pixels on my Kindle's screen and what started out as a really cool observation just seems to disintegrate into dust before your eyes and drifts off into some of sort of second law of thermodynamics isotropic fog. You go back and read it again because surely you missed something and soon enough you are once again staring at meaningless pixels thinking what the hell did that mean? Thank God it is short.

The other thing that bothered me about the book is that de Botton has seemingly become jaded with long term committed monogamy. He is pessimistic about the outcome of maintaining fidelity in most marriages and he almost seems pessimistic as to whether the effort is warranted.

Spouses who remain faithful to each other should recognize the scale of the sacrifice they are making for their love and for their children, and should feel proud of their valour. There is nothing normal or particularly pleasant about sexual renunciation. Fidelity deserves to be considered an achievement and constantly praised – ideally with some medals and the sounding of a public gong – rather than discounted as an unremarkable norm whose undermining by an affair should provoke spousal rage. A loyal marriage ought at all times to retain within it an awareness of the immense forbearance and generosity that the two parties are mutually showing in managing not to sleep around (and, for that matter, in refraining from killing each other). If one partner should happen to slip, the other might forgo fury in favour of a certain bemused amazement at the stretches of fidelity and calm that the two of them have otherwise succeeded in maintaining against such great odds.

de Botton, Alain (2012-12-24). How to Think More About Sex (The School of Life) (pp. 167-168). Picador. Kindle Edition.

There is something profoundly sad in the above quote. For a moment one thinks that de Botton is about to praise faithfulness in marriage and then he mocks it with medals and gongs. What has happened to de Botton that he can advise replacing the pain, humiliation and fury of discovering an infidelity with "a certain bemused amazement"? Why has he given up on monogamy?

I can't get over the feeling that great deal of what was going on in the book went straight over my head. Perhaps I need to read it again, I was hoping for a better understanding of the more philosophical elements of sex, instead I became depressed by a deep thinker who has abandoned fidelity.

A.V. Flox says

I've heard about Alain de Botton's book *How To Think More About Sex* from so many people, I decided I had to read it. Their reviews were excellent -- "It's like hearing David Attenborough narrate various sexual situations and philosophize about them *at the same time!*" one of them said. I enjoy sex. I dig philosophy. I am a huge fan of nature documentaries, especially those narrated or presented by the aforementioned British broadcaster -- so how could I possibly resist?

I picked up the little book. Indeed, de Botton is such a charmer, I refused to put the book down, and when company arrived shortly after, I took to reading out loud rather than stopping to make polite conversation. And then I got to page 15.

This section, like all the others, is relatively short. Unlike the others, which up until this point are heavier on amusing human experience than theory, this one seeks to make sense of our inherent sense of alienation. In his explanation, de Botton takes us on a journey back through time to our childhoods. The trip is a little Freudian, but I waved my discomfort away. He wasn't saying anything *outright* Freudian, after all. He was just saying we humans have gone from being adored for no seemingly good reason to having to prove ourselves through our achievements. It's not like he was suggesting our sexual destinies had any relation to our parents, right?

I pressed on, heartened by de Botton's assurances that fetishes are nowhere near as abnormal as they're made out to be. And then, it happened. My worst fears were realized: "The precise origins of our enthusiasms may be obscure, but they can almost always be traced back to some meaningful aspect of our childhood: we will be drawn to specific things either because they recall appealing qualities of a beloved parental figure or else, conversely, because they somehow cancel out, or otherwise help us escape, a memory of an early humiliation or terror (p. 30)."

Freud's name makes an appearance in the next paragraph and the paragraphs following relate the story of a man who becomes excited when he discovers his date is wearing flats (by Marni, a label de Botton likes enough to mention more than he does Freud in this book). The man likes the flats because his mother was a promiscuous actress who always wore very high heels. "Although the man is not aware of it, his psychological history is the omnipresent filter through which he looks at shoes, and by extension at the women wearing them (p. 31)," de Botton writes.

The woman, for her part, is jazzed that her date is wearing an old-fashioned watch because it reminds her of her father (Jung incoming!). The sight of it makes her nipples harden, as she subconsciously recalls her doctor father. She won't take her eyes off that watch as she and her date have sex. Later, she squeezes his arm between her legs, just to feel the glass against her thighs.

Shortly thereafter, there is a bizarre justification of fetishes via Plato's *Ladder of Love* (p.33). It's not that sexual desire is a natural drive that makes itself manifest in a variety of ways, it's that fetishes are the first step up a ladder that will lead us to transcendence. Instead of desiring sex like the base little creatures we are, the fetish will send us on a journey, the climax of which involves cloistering ourselves in an ivory tower.

Hurrah! Problem solved. Thanks, dude!

If that's not judgy enough for the casual reader, note the very next page. Shortly after de Botton assures the reader that orgasm really is the supreme moment (ugh), the only time we're not all alone in this world, he says that analyzing what we consider sexy is "the only way we will understand that eroticism is the feeling of excitement we experience at finding another human being who shares our values and our sense of the meaning of existence."

Anyone who has experienced chemistry with another person knows that this attraction often has *nothing* to do with having encountered someone who shares our values or "sense of the meaning of existence," whatever that is. But apparently those people don't exist. No, we take that back, they do exist, it says so right on the next page -- they're just doing it wrong (p. 34). Per de Botton:

There are of course ways to have an orgasm that have very little to do with finding common purpose with another person, but these must be thought of as a greater or lesser betrayal of what sex should really be about.

In short: masturbation is not an activity that is natural and healthy or even a decent way to get to learn what we find pleasurable. Neither is it acceptable that we might have sex with people with whom we have no common purpose. After all, if we're to take to heart the previous paragraph about the importance of sharing values, then what kind of people are we if we commune with individuals who don't share these values and therefore our purpose?

The next sections jump into "evolutionary-biological interpretation," which we took to mean science, and which gave us the distinct impression that the author's research of sex stopped at the work of William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson instead of *starting* there. That's not surprising, though. To accept studies that suggest that what we find attractive may change (as frequently as the place that a woman finds herself in her menstrual cycle, for instance) or that it may be related to our immune systems, would compromise the theory that our parents define our sexuality, which is central to this work.

So instead of giving us information, de Botton assures us that science has no compelling answer as to why our tastes are so varied. Lacking that and in order to help us better understand why we prefer some people over others, he brings us a 1907 essay by the German art historian Wilhem Worringer titled *Abstraction and Empathy* (because who is an expert on sex if not an art historian?). "Worringer argued that we all grow up with something missing inside us (p. 50)," de Botton summarizes. "Our parents and our environment fail us in distinctive ways, and our characters hence take shape with certain areas of vulnerability and imbalance in them. And crucially, these deficits and flaws determine what is going to appeal to us and repel us in art."

Art, which possesses "a particular psychological and moral atmosphere" speaks to our "psychological histories," and as a result, we like the pieces that compensate for what is missing in our lives. Essentially, if you like vivid art, you are a desiccated and sterile soul. Surely you suspected. And God help me, being ever so fond of the hyper-structured *Composition A* by Piet Mondrian: clearly I'm a sociopath (and surely in love with my father to boot!).

Joking aside, de Botton goes on to extend Worringer's ideas to human attraction, posing that we are attracted to other people because we see in them what we are missing in ourselves. Not content to reinforce the unhealthy (if slightly romantic) notion that we need another human to be "complete," de Botton pens an ode

to the virgin/whore construct by comparing Scarlett Johansson's features to those of Natalie Portman, giving each a completely subjective meaning ("her cheekbones indicate a capacity for self-involvement," he says of Johansson). "We end up favoring Natalie, who is objectively no more beautiful than Scarlett, because her eyes reflect just the sort of calm that we long for and never got enough of from our hypochondriacal mother (p. 56)."

That unfortunate dichotomy comes up again later when de Botton accuses women of also engaging in it (via the "nice guy/bastard complex" p. 71) as part of a discussion on why it is difficult to keep passion alive in long-term relationships. Unfortunately, before we can really understand what he is trying to say, we're back to Freud, this time to visit "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love." Those who are familiar with it may take a moment to roll their eyes here.

For those of you who aren't, let me summarize the logic of this chapter: we were denied sex with the people who taught us what love is (our parents); as a result, we seek our parents in lovers; we become weirded out by (and thus unable to have sex with) our long-term partners as they begin to age and we recognize our parents in them; and this is why some are so likely to run off with a younger lover. This is not a pathetic search for lost youth! This is *poignant*! "The parental ghosts have subsumed their partners and, as a result, rendered impossible any sexual intimacy with them (p. 74)."

There are a lot of utterly fascinating explanations like these in this book. The next whopper suggests that impotence is a problem of civility (p. 84). If men didn't care so much about their partner's desire, pleasure, comfort and well-being, psychological impotence would not exist. The author points at caveman times as an ideal. He writes:

The early humanoids ... may have had a hard time finding food, evading dangerous animals, sewing underpants and communicating with faraway relatives, but having sex was a simple matter for them, because the one question that almost certainly never ran through the minds of male hunters as they lifted themselves up on their hirsute limbs was whether their partners were going to be in the mood that night -- or whether they might instead feel revolted or bored by the sight of a penis, or just keen to spend a quiet evening tending to the fire.

[...] The greater our power of imagination, the more acute and amplified will be our apprehension about giving offense -- to the extent that when sex is a legitimate possibility, our doubts may prove impossible to cast aside, with fatal consequence, if we are male, for our ability to maintain an erection. It is civilization itself, with its faith in human rights, its respect for kindness and its moral sophistication, which has unwittingly generated an inestimable increase in occasions of sexual fiasco."

I have heard similar, if less eloquent, arguments about this before. Usually they just go "FEMINISM RUINED EVERYTHING." Sorry but I'm not the least bit sorry feminism happened.

And while there are conversations that should be had about the way men are oppressed via modern and vestigial constructs of "masculinity," I'm really not crazy about the idea that -- instead of continuing to explore and attempt to rectify impotence scientifically -- we ought to award impotent men, as de Botton suggests. We wouldn't award impotent men for their "depth of spirit" any more than we would award women suffering from vaginismus. Demystify and destigmatize? Yes. Award? Come on, really? (And isn't it funny how the award idea starts to break down when you swap impotence with vaginismus?)

This book really should have been titled *It's Not Our Fault*. From the first chapter, readers are told our childhoods and parents are at fault or somehow responsible for our desires. Our choices -- in art and sex and beyond -- are shaped by the subsequent deficiencies within our "psychological histories." Sex is kind of a base thing, but it might lead to something good, and anyway, it's not our fault, so we should have it. And since we're having it, we might as well get married. And since we're married and sex is getting boring, we might get a third person and watch them have sex with our spouses, or take pictures of our spouses and put them online to see how the world reacts to their bodies, or have sex in hotel rooms instead of at home to try to spice things up. Those are de Botton's suggestions, half-assedly jotted down, like a slight nod to the fact that some other configuration of sex might exist. His real suggestion, hidden under all those seemingly progressive ideas, is actually quite conventional: weekly psychotherapy.

We have no self-awareness, de Botton assures us. We can't be expected to understand ourselves -- what's the point of talking to our partners? Even if we did take matters into our own hands, we would fail! Enter the psychotherapist, who would ask the couple to arrive every week with a list of complaints to go over and make vague threats about what happens to a long-term union when you don't have sex at least once a week. "This therapist would belong to a new kind of priesthood," de Botton muses.

The book could have ended there, but no book about sex is complete without a chapter on pornography. The way this one reads, you'd think pornography was a fairly recent thing in the history of humanity. Pornography, de Botton tells us, is to be blamed for the fact that sales of "serious literature" are down. He mocks people who call it "unthreatening." Clearly, they have only ever peeked inside an old issue of *Playboy* or run across crap porn on the adult channel while staying at a hotel. But porn is actually very dangerous, he says -- nevermind that modern science suggests otherwise! Science has no real place in the imagination of Alain de Botton. In fact, according to de Botton, porn is bad *for science*, since it takes up the time researchers could be using to find the cure for cancer (p. 96). Good thing there's free porn online or imagine how many grants would go up in smoke, folks!

Masturbation and fantasy are in complete opposition to virtue, he argues, and porn is the terrible catalyst. No, not just porn -- the *entire* internet is at fault (p. 102)! The answer, de Botton suggests, is "a bit" of censorship, "if only for the sake of our own well-being and our capacity to flourish."

If you don't see how helpful "a bit" of censorship might be, it is because you "have never been obliterated by the full force of sex" (help! We've fallen into a Philip Roth novel and we can't get out!). Religions get this, de Botton reminds us. "Only religions see [sex] as something potentially dangerous and needing to be guarded against. (p 103)" There is a paragraph somewhere in there that seems to obliquely suggest that hijabs and burkas make sense by pointing out the excitement aroused in men by "half-naked teenage girls sauntering provocatively down the beachfront." Indeed, "a degree of repression is necessary both for the mental health of our species and for the adequate functioning of a decently ordered and loving society."

Pause here for a moment and consider this carefully: earlier in the book, de Botton offered an example of a woman who pretended that she wanted a relationship just so she could have sex. That was a nice example because it showed that he was aware that women, too, have desires and women, too, want sex. Unfortunately, his considerations for women began and ended in the same place. While he suggests an award for impotence to applaud men's "depth of spirit," he completely ignores any sexual issues women face. You caught that, right? Now look at the above paragraph again. See how the discussion of censorship targets women specifically? There is no mention anywhere about men's audacity to cavort on the beach. It is *women* who must be covered. It's the female body that must be censored.

In short: whatever sexual issues women face, they're not worthy of mention or award. Also, since women are

obviously only here to be desired, their freedoms must be curtailed in favor of public good. You know, since men are beasts incapable of self-control and if you do try to civilize them, you will only succeed in sentencing them to impotence.

Ready to throw the book out the window? Don't! The next part is the best. Trust me! In a subsection of the porn chapter, de Botton spends some time considering what the ideal kind of pornography would be. This kind of porn "wouldn't force us to make such a stark choice between sex and virtue -- [it would be] a pornography in which sexual desire would be invited to support, rather than permitted to undermine, our higher values."

Now, never mind that this kind of pornography already exists, that there are a lot of independent directors who already focus on capturing real pleasure, sharing true intimacy between real partners, exploring sex to foster a couple's bond during pregnancy, etc. It's highly likely that even if de Botton knew about them, the choices wouldn't satisfy him. Why? Because his notion of the ideal porn is "not dissimilar" to Christian art (p. 107). "The advantage of having sexual fantasies while looking at Botticelli's Madonna rather than at a stereotypical product of the modern industry is that the former doesn't compel us to make an uncomfortable choice between our sexuality and other qualities we aspire towards."

Sex is the enemy of goodness. It corrupts. It distracts. It is a problem. That, essentially, is the message of Alain de Botton's *How To Think More About Sex*. But wait, there's more! When people step out on their partners, the cheater shouldn't be abused. It's the spurned lover who ought to apologize (p. 117): "Certainly adultery grabs the headlines, but there are lesser, though no less powerful, ways to betray a partner, including not talking to him or her enough, seeming distracted, being ill-tempered or simply failing to evolve or enchant." He makes a valid point that we don't celebrate fidelity enough, that we take it for granted and we shouldn't, but the point is lost in the avalanche of rubbish.

There are other good points to be sure, three or four, but the need to evade responsibility underlying the entire work is toxic: It's not that I like this because I'm weird, it's that my psychological history has a deficit; I don't have a problem getting hard, it's just that having to care about your feelings makes me impotent; I am not banging our daughter's friend because there is anything wrong with me, my mother's specter has subsumed you and now I can't fuck you and I need someone young so I don't think about her when I have sex; I am cheating not because I have disregarded a relationship boundary but because you are boring and anyway fidelity is not the norm, etc.

Final word? Skip it. Everything you need to know about, you've read right here.

Originally published on Sex and the 405.

Yalda says

I have always had ambivalent feelings towards Alain de Botton. On one hand, I hate the fact that he simplifies everything and on the other hand, I'm fascinated with his ability to make the most complicated concepts understandable for everyone. anyway, I cannot but admit that he has a broad knowledge about many things! "How to Think more About Sex" is not his best, yet it is an interesting and easy read. If you are looking for a simple reading of Freud, that doesn't go deep into all his sophisticated ideas about childhood, unconsciousness and sexuality, or if you are wondering how you can apply evolution theory to your everyday life, this is the book for you. Plus you don't need to put too much brain into it, you can read it

on a buss, while brushing your teeth or cooking. It may help you decipher your fears or irritating feelings before/while/after having sex.

Caitlin says

Having read some of the other reviews, I've decided instead of simply reviewing the material, I'd put in my bit to perhaps to defend this book. The title, and reactions to it ("Oh, I definitely need to read that" or "I'm embarrassed this will appear on the top of my 2013 book list") demonstrate the need for this book. I'm quite relieved my copy is the little one with a modest cover which another person can't see me reading. De Botton addresses the way in which we think about sexual activity – how sex is "everywhere" and yet private, what goes on internally when we entertain this part of ourselves in a variety of different ways, something that is shameful but we kind of have a lot of fun with this shame.

The key message is that you are not as weird as you imagine.

This is part of the School of Life publications series – which attempt to cover quite considerable topics usually covered in whole university courses and big weighty tomes in nice little books. Naturally, they simply can't cover the breadth and depth of the universal experience, especially as the publications have international audiences. So I have read many criticisms of this book that address some of the assertions made (yeah, he lost me in the fetish section) and the many gaps that appear in his attempt to discuss the common, yet unsaid. For example, much of the reasoning behind initial sexual desire is put down to the procreative drive, which isn't the be all end all for everyone.

Of course de Botton really only covered the male heterosexual experience, especially in a long term family orientated marriage as he is a heterosexual man in a long term family orientated marriage – he did not attempt to determine how sex would be for women, homosexuals or a variety of other people because it's not his area. With something so intimate and personal as the experience of sex, it would be trespassing.

And, quite frankly, it was weird enough having de Botton in my head discussing sex as it was. I mean, I like the guy and his work, but I've belonged to enough chess clubs in my time to accept a cross-over between high intellectual activity and what really goes on in my head. It was kind of like getting the birds and bees talk from the shy, retiring maths teacher. And there is one diagram which had me believing a 14 year old boy had vandalised my book when I wasn't looking. You'll know what I mean when you see it (page 81 in the School of Life version.)

And this brings me to one aspect I expected de Botton to briefly mention, which is the practice of abstinence – especially in regards to those who take holy orders, deciding to go without sex in the pursuit of a richer internal life, under the assumption that sex is antithetical to deeper thought, and how/why this has sometimes failed.

It is important to focus on the purpose of this book – it wasn't to tell us a history of sexual desire or an instruction manual on improving our sexual selves. I understood the purpose to be an attempt to get people to think about sex more – but by "more" it's less about frequency and about depth – however, how to think deeper about sex without killing your enjoyment of it.

This book was about opening a dialogue, even if it's just one you have with yourself while reading the book. While I hate to mention its name, what made "50 Shades of Grey" a phenomenon – rather than simply a

popular book – was less about what the author actually said, but how the readers engaged with the material and its effects on them. So naturally, there is much in the book left to be articulated, but not by de Botton himself – he wants you to respond, to argue with him, to get on forums like this and put your two cents in, as this demonstrates you are already thinking more and more deeply about this strange group of activities we don't want respectable people to know we do.

So I highly recommend this book – even if you're reading it simply to make a list of things to argue against, at least it gets your mind out of your head and back in your pants.

Jessica says

I have tried, and failed, to love Alain de Botton's other books after reading (and loving) *The Consolations of Philosophy*. This book is a pathetic attempt at explanations for why we behave the way that we do about sex. De Botton has somehow managed to categorize sexual experiences into very stereotypical, Hollywood-esque boxes that are in no way reflective of reality. The book also contains some very boring attempts at humor, that are neither funny nor witty in any way. Ugh.

Alain de Botton is not a psychologist. This is all too apparent in his other works and essays, which, far from being enlightening, are often basically textbooks that analyze emotions and values that are personal and learned. Most of his ideas are borrowed from Freud, whose theories, like de Botton's, were often plausible to a certain degree, but also incredibly reductive. What aggravates me is that de Botton makes huge leaps and arrives at conclusions with little evidence. He rarely attempts to offer alternative solutions to or explanations on a subject. He was clearly not meant to be a psychologist or therapist, and when he churns out garbage like this, I really wonder how much he really knows about anything.

One of de Botton's main problems is that he somehow manages to trivialize, contradict and confuse notions of love, sex, honor, humanity and integrity with one another. I think what makes me angriest about this book is that it boasts to be a self-help book, and to teach people about life (it is part of a 'School of Life' series) - but it is really just a book that offers explanations for conventional practices and values without ever attempting to challenge them.

De Botton makes himself out to be this incredible authority on issues like a 'lack of desire' by using absolutes (X is because of Y, this WILL be stopped if we do this). I found this, despite all of de Botton's professed philosophy, entirely unconvincing.

Read this if you are looking for some incredibly facile explanations for why you feel the way you do. Maybe then you can blame your weird libidinous urges on your inner bestial desires.

De Botton really missed the mark on this one.

Luke says

I like Alain de Botton, and I hate self help books. Now de Botton spearheaded a new series of philosophical self help books, the first one by him.

So, he says some weird things in this book, all of which are pointed out by the many reviews below. I liked

the book a lot, I think because this is the only book I've ever read that tackles the themes of sex, long term commitment, love, attraction, etc in such a clear and simple way. He does say a lot of weird things (like, the way to make your partner of many years sexy again is to watch him/her sleep with someone else), but I read them as (for the most part) rhetorical flourishes that help get a point across. This book made me understand adultery in a way I've been working toward for a while, but which is fairly unusual in our culture today.

Don't let these things inhibit the real benefits of this book: it's short, it's smart, and it will help you think more clearly and more compassionately about love and sex and relationships. And it's very short, it doesn't preach, it doesn't tell you to do any little activities or go on and on about other peoples' situations in excruciating detail. He takes the best of what the humanities have to say about this subject and wraps it up in a helpful and entertaining way.

Seamus Thompson says

The latest in my reading series "Books With Titles That Get Me Funny Looks On The Bus" -- all part of an ongoing project to keep my own special brand of social awkwardness thriving.

Cheeky title aside, this is an interesting look at the various ways in which sexuality informs (and warps) our lives. In particular, it is geared towards readers in committed relationships struggling with the mundane, powerful realities of everyday life that can make trying to remain a sexual being with the person you love so difficult. To quote: "To fall in love with another is to bless him or her with an idea of who he or she should be in our eyes; it is to attempt to incarnate perfection across a limitless range of activities (how to educate the children and what sort of house to buy) to the lowest (where the sofa should go and how to spend Tuesday evening). In love we are therefore never far from the possibility of a painful or irritating betrayal of one of our ideals. Once we are involved in a relationship, there is no longer any such thing as a minor detail."

Botton's strident call for an outright ban of pornography is compelling but will make anyone opposed to censorship deeply uncomfortable. More interesting (and, perhaps, feasible) is his suggestion that we might, like Christian artists during the Renaissance who used sexuality in their paintings and sculptures to make lofty principles more appealing, start creating a new kind of pornography with artistic merit. Throughout the book Botton argues that our society has tried to repress and ignore the nature of sexuality, ensuring the kind of frustrations that come with unrealistic expectations.

At the core of this book is the basic idea that our sexual natures are, more often than not, a source of discomfort, pain, awkwardness, loneliness, disappointment, failure, etc. The list of miseries is long and will be familiar to anyone. Still, sex and our need for it are here to stay. "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone," the philosopher Pascal famously wrote. Sex is probably the main reason for this. But, as Botton writes in his conclusion, "sex gets us out of the house and out of ourselves." For while sex may be at the root of a great deal of pain and wasted time/energy, it is also the heart of our greatest pleasures -- not only (or even primarily) the act itself, but all the wonders we have created in our efforts to get some.
