



The Joys (and Oys!) of Sex After 50

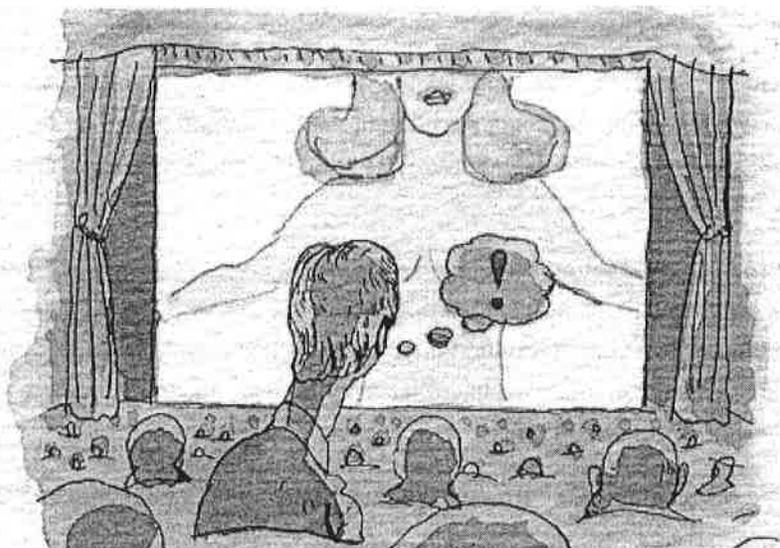
6 boomer authors open up about physical intimacy — then and now

AARP The Magazine, August/September 2014



Technically, the baby boomers didn't invent sex. They didn't even lead the sexual revolution — sexologist Alfred Kinsey published the first of his two groundbreaking sexual-behavior studies in 1948. The oral contraceptive pill appeared in 1960. And a complex confluence of social and cultural factors helped unbuckle Americans' sexual lives in the late 1960s and 1970s. But you'd be forgiven for giving boomers all the credit, since they're the ones who got to enjoy the fruits of the revolution.

Coming of age as they did in this heady, horny time, it's little wonder that sex has always loomed large in the boomer psyche. Now that the youngest boomers are celebrating their 50th birthdays, has anything changed? To find out, we asked 1,816 people to share the intimate details of their sexual lives for an exclusive AARP survey. The good news? Most boomers (71 percent) say sex is still important to their lives. Only slightly more than half (54 percent) are satisfied with their sex lives, however, and 67 percent admit that their sexual desire has receded in the past 20 years.



Most boomers (71 percent) say sex is still important to their lives. — Barry Blitt

The raw numbers, of course, don't tell the full story. So we asked some of our favorite writers and thinkers to offer personal observations on the ever-changing, ever-fascinating shape of human desire.

Holy Cow, Look at Me Now!

By Sally Koslow

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Last year I met with a plastic surgeon and stripped to the waist faster than [burlesque performer] Dita Von Teese. I'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. A unilateral mastectomy was in my future. The doctor told me that when he did the replacement surgery, he could fit me with implants on both sides and make not only my faux breast a bit bigger than its original, but also add a small implant to the healthy breast, so my girls matched. Lots of women do this, he explained.

Holy cow. Through the scrim of anxiety I glimpsed a silver lining, though it might have been the glimmer of hot-girl lingerie in my future.

I'd never felt my sex life had been diminished by having small breasts. I am married to an aficionado of legs and a pert behind, and on both scores, my husband had always given me 9.5 and no lack of amorous attention. He is also a guy who held my hand during cancer's darkest moments, changed post-surgical drains, found my drugged word slurs charming and never stopped making me feel great about my body. Still, I couldn't wait to get my cleavage card punched.

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I'll admit I'd forever envied more voluptuous women, i.e., virtually every other female on Earth. A sleek chest is an asset for running and sleeping on your stomach, a male comic's punch line and ... that's it. I'd been wearing wee bras since seventh grade. I thought it would be fun — and frankly, an aphrodisiac — to see how the other half dressed.

Depreciated self-esteem is common after breast cancer, but for me, self-esteem spiked. Do my new breasts look natural? Hell, no. They look better than natural. We're not talking Las Vegas knockers, but I love the way I look, especially in the upgraded underwear I prance about in at every opportunity. And my husband says that if he closes his eyes, he feels he's with a 25-year-old. Last night he gave high praise to the new bathing suit I modeled. Sayonara, leg man.

Every couple needs sexual novelty. I never expected ours to come in 32D.

Sally Koslow is the author of Slouching Toward Adulthood and The Widow Waltz.

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Still a Fool About Sex

By Walter Mosley

Our generation had such promise. We were going to overcome war and prejudice, national borders and poverty. Free love was to be our hallmark, and liberty our only expression.

It didn't happen. Our hair fell out, and sex turned toxic. But it was a good time while it lasted. We had all the right pills, from birth control to LSD, and with them we didn't only open the door: We tore the mother off its hinges.

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Sex was in the air back then. I had it all over the place: in back alleys, on rooftops and with strangers in vans I'd hitched a ride in while they were speeding across Montana. I thought it was because I was a hippie, because I was a rebel against what was wrong and therefore loved for my inner beauty. I wasn't afraid to rub my face in it, to roam from lover to lover with little concern and a few lapses in good judgment.

In important ways I haven't changed a bit. I'm just as arrogant, still a fool about sex. I'm older, much older, though I doubt any wiser. I believed when I was young that we had broken through some kind of barrier about sex and drugs and war. The important phrase in the last sentence is "I was young." The hormones of youth clouded my senses. I didn't know that sex had always been in the air, that the doorway had never had a proper door.

But I took something out of that, something useful today. [Sex for me now is more talk](#) than anything else, but it is open and meaningful communication between me and my readers, casual acquaintances and friends. I'm always talking to people about sex with hardly any tension, and no expectations whatsoever. They talk about their indiscretions and desires, because these are the topics closest to their hearts. They talk about having sex with their teachers or outside their expected gender preference; about once with a half brother on a lost weekend or one of their father's old friends ... just to see him blush and to hear him say, "I'm sorry." Sex and survival are the major desires we have in common, and I believe that the '60s and '70s made sex so accessible, so pedestrian, that the experience was brought back down to its natural, its primitive nature.

"Your head is shaking no, but that bulge says come on," one might sing. This bluesy recognition of ambivalence, aggression and reticence is acceptable today; we can say what we feel without hiding behind metaphor or innuendo.

That's something, I guess.

Novelist Walter Mosley is the creator of the Easy Rawlins series; his newest novel is Debbie Doesn't Do It Anymore.

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Better Than Sex?

By Suzanne Braun Levine

There comes a time, as Gloria Steinem has put it, when remembering a name is better than having an orgasm. Which is not to denigrate orgasms, just to acknowledge a pattern that comes to the fore around the same time as forgetting names. It is inelegantly called downsizing, and many aspects of older people's lives are, like lust, diminished. But in my experience, the process is also about upgrading. What is left is all the more precious because of its quality.

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For some, the downsizing applies to sex qua sex, but the upgrading is an expanding horizon of sensuality and intimacy. In my case, the discovery that my feet are an erogenous zone has suggested wondrous possibilities.

The territory of love, once so closely tied to sex, is also expanding. Friends experience ecstatic bonding with grandchildren. ("When I'm expecting a call from my granddaughter, my heart beats as if I were awaiting a call from a lover," one told me.)

I don't have grandkids, but I have felt a surge of love for my girlfriends and my husband of over 40 years.

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Earlier on, my friendships with women were important, but there was an out-of-sight, out-of-mind quality to them. So much else was going on. Now, I simply can't imagine getting older without my girlfriends. And I wouldn't have said that my husband provided that "girlfriend" kind of support before; but that is changing — because we are changing. He and I have downsized our expectations of each other and upgraded our appreciation.

These few carefully selected and tended people always know just what I mean, and they can make me laugh. Laughter may be the one experience that need not be either downsized or upgraded. So it is reassuring to learn that a good belly laugh is physiologically a lot like an orgasm. And almost as satisfying as remembering a name.

Suzanne Braun Levine is the author of How We Love Now: Women Talk About Intimacy After Fifty.

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The First Supernova of Genuine Toplessness

By Nicholson Baker

In second grade, after I asked one too many questions, my mother bought me a slim yellow paperback called *Where Do Babies Come From?* It was short on the specifics, but there were two exciting pages. One was a picture of the uterus, which seemed to be a Grecian flowerpot with two leafy boughs growing out of it, and the other was a description of how the male chicken fertilizes the female chicken by pressing against a "spot" near her tail. Hot stuff in 1964. Then the sexual revolution happened. Portnoy was finding new uses for his baseball mitt, and flower children were getting naked at Woodstock — reportedly. I didn't see pictures.

The first dirty movie I went to, when I was 16, was all simulated sex, but I didn't care because a nice-looking brown-haired woman laughed and took her top off in one easy movement, and I saw her freed breasts bobble — what a sight! I sat through the rest of that movie and the coming attractions and the next movie — enduring the overdone moans and the contortions of the sex-faking men — until I circled around to the first supernova of genuine toplessness. I left all atremble and bicycled home. This was it — this was real life, real nudity. A few months later, sex movies became hard-core, and I sat through many a double feature, hoping that my 10-speed Raleigh Grand Prix bike wouldn't be stolen from the side street where I'd locked it to a No Parking sign.

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Now I'm 57, happily married for 29 years — and that's enough about that. Annette Haven, my first adult-movie heroine, has long retired, and there's been a second, better sexual revolution, which perhaps began in 1989 with Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. Instead of porn, let's call it plorn — do-it-yourself porn. A novel of mine, *Vox*, in 1992, may or may not have played a tiny part in this wave, but it was mostly thanks to sex-positive feminists of the 1980s — Susie Bright and others — who threw themselves into this friendlier porno-cultural transfiguration, which was then ratified in the summer of 1992 by a brilliant *Seinfeld* episode: the one where they talk about being "master of your domain." After that, everything was different.

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The sharing of an [orgasm](#) or two, or 200 — what could be nicer? I like the generousness of sex. I don't understand why it has to be dark or forbidden or self-destructive or tangled up with fantasies of domination and lengths of rope, but then that's me.

Nicholson Baker's books include House of Holes and Traveling Sprinkler.

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Sex at Our Age

By Bill Hayes

Sex has never been better for me than it is now. In part that's because I have done and tried a lot — not everything, but a lot — and I know what I like and what I don't, what I will do and what doesn't interest me (mediocre sex being at the top of that particular list).

When I told a friend that I'd been asked to write about this topic, he looked puzzled and asked why.

"Because I'm gay and in my 50s," I told him. He looked more puzzled still. My friend is over 80 and hard of hearing. Turns out, he thought I'd said they asked me to "write about death." We laughed at the mix-up, but the reality is, for gay men the two are not unrelated.

When I came out in the early 1980s, sex (not unlike silence, in the famous ACT UP motto from that era) did = death. The equation seemed so clear-cut — friends and lovers in their prime dying with alarming speed — that many of us stopped having sex at all. This saved our lives, no doubt, but what's more, it taught us a valuable early lesson: In the realm of things, having sex is not really that important.

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Only in the past few years has the equation changed. Sex no longer means certain death, or even chronic illness. Along with condoms and [safe sex](#), we now have the drug Truvada, which can be used to help prevent HIV in those at high risk of infection, as well as antiretroviral drugs that make those who are HIV-positive far less likely to infect others.

Some say gay men are on the verge of a whole new sexual revolution, not unlike that seen in the 1970s — the very revolution that, one might argue, opened the door to AIDS. But I don't see this as a step back, as if nothing has been learned. No. Informed by wisdom but free of fear, sex today is something altogether new: a joyful, powerful expression of fully living.

Bill Hayes is the author of The Anatomist: A True Story of Gray's Anatomy and a forthcoming history of exercise, Sweat.

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A Newlywed, Again

By Joyce Maynard

Last summer, a little shy of my [60th birthday](#), I made my way through a field on a New Hampshire hillside, where my 61-year-old groom awaited me. I'm a newlywed again.

It's different, of course. No babies, no in-laws. Where, in my 20s, I barely knew myself, let alone the man I was marrying, the partner Jim gets is a fully formed woman with a long history of friends, work, other relationships, old wounds and hard-earned wisdom. I get a man with the same.

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And then there's the sex part. I know women my age who say they're all done with that, and others (a few) who hunger for it. I'm in neither place. I'm not even close to feeling ready to give up on the idea of being my partner's lover. But I can't pretend, either, that my body chemistry leaves me in the same place I was at 25 or even 45. Tell me about a couple who spend five hours making love, and my first reaction will be: That sounds tiring.

In the early days of our time together — when I held in my stomach when naked and he did pull-ups on the beam over our bed — we showed each other our best selves. Two years later, he knows I get Botox to iron out the lines in my forehead. I ask — when we're heading out on a trip — did you bring your pills? (Also, the lubricant.)

But if [sexual intimacy](#) is, in the end, about showing one's true self, then we are having the most real sex of our lives. Not the wildest, or the most frequent or athletic. We are two battle-scarred soldiers, home from the front. I appreciate every small good thing — the way, seeing a drop of pesto on my arm, Jim leans across the table and licks it off my skin; the way, when he plays his bass guitar, I catch a glimpse of the young man he must have been 40 years ago. Often, when we get into bed, what we want most is sleep. But even then, if I have put on my pajamas (old habit), he tugs at them gently. "What's this?" he says. (And in truth, I was hoping he'd say that.) Then I pull them off, and we are naked together.

Joyce Maynard's most recent novel, After Her, was just released in paperback.

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