

## BOOKS

## The Hites Of Sex

The Hite reports have helped to shape women's perceptions of their own sexuality. Rosalind Brunt analyses the third and final volume of this massive sex survey

The most shocking thing about the new Hite report is likely to be, for women anyway, the shock of recognition. For what is covered here is deeply familiar territory: the surprise is that it has not been explored so systematically before.

This is the last in Shere Hite's massive trilogy of reports on women's and men's sexuality. It is based on detailed questionnaires completed by a sample population of 4,500 American women and mixes statistical data with 'qualitative' evidence - the women's own words - and Hite's commentary. But the book is buttressed by profuse expert testimonials to Hite's scientific integrity and a florid tribute to her own husband and these provide an edgy reminder of past accusations of doing 'man-hating' research.

Such defensiveness is unnecessary when the report itself stands as a positive demonstration of the honourable philosophy that marxists uphold: 'the truth is always partisan'. Taking sides needn't be incompatible with scientific rigour and Shere Hite is scrupulously open about her evidence and methods whilst being out-and-out 'for' women and quite clear about moulding her data into a particular feminist framework.

My own interpretation of the report is that it presents the most damning and comprehensive indictment of men's treatment of women who love them that I've ever read. At the same time, it is nothing new and immediately recalls all the stories that women tell. But what makes it so devastating is its scale and consistency: so many voices from such varied circumstances saying such similar things.

Over all the report's findings is a sense of the sex and gender times being com-

pletely out of joint: a massive emotional and attitudinal disparity between women and men; with men still encased in character-armour - in every sense, stuck rigid - while women have been 'on the move', reassessing personal experience in all sorts of ways that have life-changing implications.

Hite summarises that what prevents men 'letting go', becoming, as she puts it, 'emotionally equal with women', is their fear of losing control, and thereby power, over women. Most women in the report say that most men take little or no responsibility for the development of a love relationship: they won't 'work at it', lack intimacy with women, are demeaning, rejecting and unaffectionate, preoccupied with 'more important things'. They tend to treat sex as a primary means of communication and equate sex with love; otherwise, they are emotionally withholding and distancing and offer no emotional support to women. At the same time, without acknowledging it, and whilst complaining that it is *women* who do the whingeing, clinging and demanding, it is the *men*, women believe, who are the desperately 'needy', emotionally dependent and passive sex: demanding all the attention, time and nurture from women that they are not providing in their turn. Plus 12% of women in the sample had been beaten by a loved man/men and 57% threatened with violence in a relationship.

In this state of affairs, Hite notes a significant factor in the current American divorce rate (50% of marriages): 90% of the actions are now initiated by women, whereas the men are still getting enough satisfaction from the relationship to want to continue marriage. Furthermore, she observes a



Shere Hite: Reporting what women have always known about love and men

marked trend of 40-plus divorcees now embarking on their first lesbian relationship. The only chapters in the report that express any real contentment are those where women describe lesbian or celibate lifestyles. Hite notes the value women place on friendships with women and how it is often only sisterly support that makes life with men bearable.

So what is going on here? What remains the point of sticking with men? I think the Hite report undoubtedly downplays the role of continuing material and cultural inequality between men and women in promoting-heterosexual choice. At the same time, it presents a challenge to those radical feminist analyses that say if women had equal access to the same means of existence as a man then it would indeed be a case of naked emperors. This might well be so if women were claiming only to be

buying into the action and lifestyle of men and not, as Hite insistently demonstrates, offerings indeed *demanding*, to love and be loved by men as well. So doesn't there have to be 'something' about men, besides the real social props of patriarchy, that makes them objects of desire to women, however strange that seems?

The questions that resonate throughout the report remain the puzzles about men that women are always posing to each other: Is he really worth it? What did I see in him? Why ever do we bother with them? And if we reject, as Hite does, the currently fashionable notion that women are masochists who somehow 'love too much', then it is getting rather urgent that we come up with some good answers for why women go on making a heterosexual choice. •

*Women and Love*, Shere Hite, Viking £14.95 hbk.