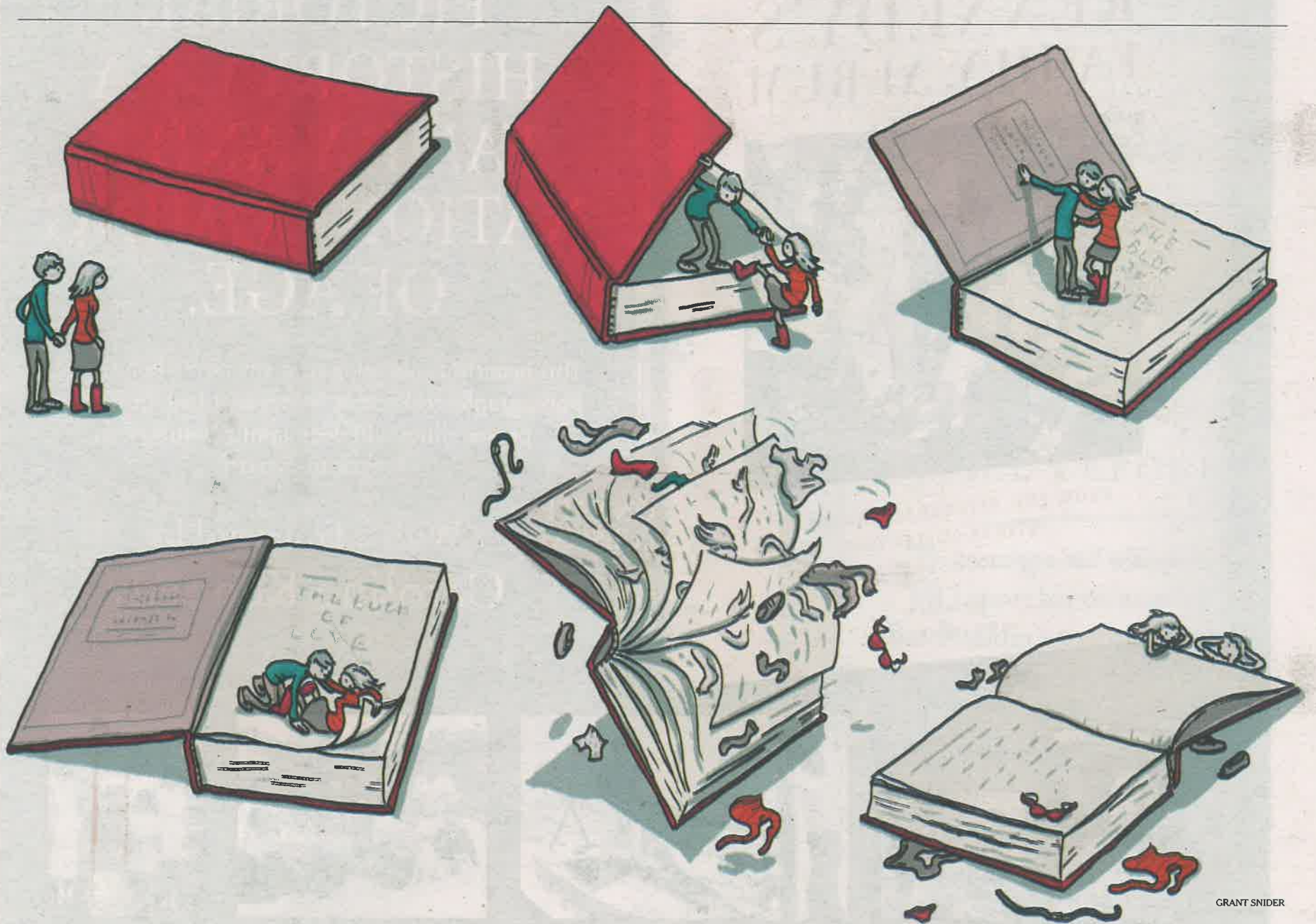


# Book Review



GRANT SNIDER

## Let's Read About Sex

'Fear of Flying' turns 40 ♦ MEGAN ABBOTT on 'The Secret Lives of Married Women'

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, NICHOLSON BAKER, RACHEL KUSHNER, EDMUND WHITE, JACKIE COLLINS, ALISON BECHDEL, TONI BENTLEY, SAM LIPSYTE

AND OTHERS on good — and bad — writing about sex ♦ BOOKENDS: What's the most erotic book you've ever read?

DANIEL BERGNER on 'Perv' ♦ EMILY WITT'S Sex Lives Shortlist

ALEXANDRA JACOBS on 'Sex Is Forbidden'

# Unzipped

Ever since the 40th anniversary of my first novel, 'Fear of Flying,' peeped over the horizon, I've been thinking a lot about storytelling — why certain stories stick with us and others don't.

Let's go back to when I was writing "Fear of Flying." What an amazing time the late '60s and early '70s was; you could follow a plume of smoke down the streets of Manhattan and get a contact high. Primitivism was the rage. So was magic. So was feminism. So were sex, open marriage, ethnic equality. We kvelled over books like "Man's Rise to Civilization as Shown by the Indians of North America From Primeval Times to the Coming of the Industrial State" and "The Autobiography of Malcolm X"; "The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge," by Carlos Castaneda; "Sisterhood Is Powerful," edited by Robin Morgan; "Couples," by John Updike; and "Portnoy's Complaint," by Philip Roth. Add to that the poems of Allen Ginsberg — who was already publishing in the '50s but was suddenly famous in the '60s because of his public protests against the Vietnam War. And thanks to the Grove Press publisher Barney Rosset and other brave souls, literary censorship had been defeated, and we could now read "Lady Chatterley's Lover" or "Tropic of Cancer" without going to the locked rare book room at a university library.

It was a time for awakenings — "clicks," as Ms. magazine called them — that coalesced into movements, Black Power and the Redstockings, consciousness-raising groups, a revival of interest in Simone de Beauvoir, Emma Goldman and the suffragists of our grandmothers' era. It was a thrilling time — and like all thrilling times, it produced both startling wisdom and banal blather.

In college we mostly read books by male authors — even at feminist Barnard, where I studied in the early '60s. But when I crossed the street to embark on a Ph.D. in 18th-century English literature at Columbia, I knew for the first time the blatant sexism of academe. The old-boy network still held sway; Lionel Trilling and his cohort almost never hired women graduate students.

Those were the days of novels, like "Diary of a Mad Housewife," by Sue Kaufman, and "Such Good Friends," by Lois Gould, whose victimized heroines made me queasy. By that time, I was a published poet, and I wanted to write about a woman who loved men but craved independence, a woman who was both a mind and a body, who didn't give up her goals for marriage and then bitterly resent her husband. I believed we could do both: love and be intellectually free. After all, so many great women writers — Colette; George Sand; George Eliot; Charlotte Brontë; Mary Shelley; her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft; Doris Lessing — were passionate lovers of men.

I wanted to write about everything that happened inside a woman's mind: the fantasies, fears, daydreams and nightmares. "Fear of Flying" was a picaresque tale, a rant, a satire, a dirty joke, an act of rebellion, self-

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'Flying' around the world.

discovery and a desperate *cri de coeur*. It terrified me and delighted me and made me laugh. I was sure no one would publish it. I dumped it on my editor Aaron Asher's desk and ran. But he adored it. "It has everything," he said. "Of course it needs to be edited, and 'zipless' is ungrammatical, and the title makes it sound like nonfiction, but this is the book everyone needs to read."

He thought it was very literary and planned on a modest print run. But Elaine Koster, then the head of New American Library, read it and said she wouldn't buy the paperback rights if we printed fewer than 35,000 copies. She said it was the story of her life. It was the first time there were women in such powerful positions who could intervene in such a way.

But publicity proved difficult. People in publishing were still very prudish back then. We couldn't advertise on television; the networks wouldn't accept it. At one point, I was sent to Johnny Carson's talent booker. When I told her what the book was about, she said, "Johnny isn't interested in human relationships," and threw me out of her office. Male critics — except for John Updike and Henry Miller — seldom got it. But readers did. Through word of mouth, hardcover copies were soon out of stock everywhere. When the paperback edition appeared, it sold three million copies in its first year.

Twenty-seven million copies later in 40 languages, the book continues to sell. Although it has never been out of print, there will soon be a new hardcover and trade pa-

perback. A movie is in the works. And I still feel like a poet who fell into the bad habit of writing novels.

When I try to understand why readers connect with "Fear of Flying," I'm reminded of my attachment to "Little Women," "Jane Eyre" and "The Golden Notebook," the books that told me women could be writers, intellectuals — and still have rich personal lives. We need to feel that we are more than our looks, more than our wombs. We yearn to use all our gifts — and this has never been easy for women. The books we treasure, and the books that last, proclaim this: Let us be whole, let us be complete. That is what my heroine Isadora Wing declared 40 years ago. It's a message that remains necessary and powerful. □