

The sex diaries What goes on (or not) in Britain's bedrooms

New York author Arianne Cohen has interviewed thousands of people worldwide about their sex lives. But what did she discover when she asked the British to kiss and tell?

I must have the best job in the world. I collect the sex diaries of strangers. I find them through websites, friends and by posting adverts. They use a computer program to log every thought that they have relating to sex and relationships for a week. I call them and ask more questions about how they feel, and I edit their words. The result is a portrait of their most private fantasies, thoughts, emotions—and, of course, their sex lives. They are totally compelling. Who wouldn't want to look in on their neighbour and see what they are up to?

What started as a magazine feature in New York four years ago quickly became an online phenomenon and I have now edited thousands of sex diaries from all over the world for my books and blogs. Talking about sex is never just about sex—it's about all the ways we connect and disconnect with people.

The diaries really changed my own life. When it started I was dating and looking only for people who I wanted to be my future husband. I was 26 and waiting to get on the dating escalator that society constructs, where you go from dating to commitment, marriage and children, trying to make it all last for ever. The diaries exposed me to a lot of options that I wouldn't have considered. I went from being a card-carrying monogamist to being in a long-term open relationship. It may not work for everyone, but it does for me.

Having edited diaries in the US and Italy, I can tell you one thing: Britons are wordy people. You have a charming way of summarising very basic sexual acts in more words than necessary. There is a total avoidance of being straightforward about physical acts. The British diaries are double the length of the American diaries, and it's not because more is happening. The British diaries are also more creative. There is, for example, a British builder who has a fantasy about a post-op transsexual. I've seen so much of people's relationships that my friends come to me for advice now. I can't give advice but I can give context. One of the things that I have learnt from reading so many diaries is that the diarists who are happy all have two things in common: they know what their needs are and they feel as if they are on the path to having them met. That isn't quite the same thing as having them met.

For example, if you have a couple whose

marriage is falling apart and they agree to go to therapy for six months and really work on the relationship, the wife or husband in that relationship is fairly serene because they are doing the best that they can. It's the people who don't know what they want and are unhappy who tend to blame their partner, leading to angst and insecurity. For a lot of people, when they start writing diaries it's the first time that they ask: what do I want, what do I need, where am I in this?

Even if the diarist can communicate something to me, it amazes me how little they tell their partner. Often the partner has no idea and it's really causing them angst. They might send text messages to their partner all day long but they are not actually communicating what they want to say. The first thing I learnt is that if you ask for what you want, the chances are substantially higher that you will get it. If your partner doesn't know what you are upset about or what your needs are, you're never going to get to where you want to go with this person.

One of the diaries that changed my perspective a little was an American one back in the first year of the project. He was an investment banker. The first two days of his diaries were very boring and exactly the same. He got up, went to work, came home, masturbated and went to sleep. It was so boring that I almost wasn't going to use it. Then on day three he calls in, takes the day off and goes to the airport and flies to the middle of America for a pre-arranged sex date with a couple. He had a great time, went home and went back to work the next day. This diary amazed me because what he did sounds extreme—but at the same time it was consensual and sounded healthy.

It's really obvious when reading a diary about a relationship that is going to fail, because the person is doing something different from what they are saying. For example, a woman might say I really love my husband, but what that person is doing on a day-to-day basis is being passive aggressive and not communicating.

Many of the happiest diaries are by people who are willing to let their relationships be what they are supposed to be rather than over-analysing and forcing it into something that they want. My hope is that people will find something new about their sex life by reading about other people's.

At my website—sexdiariesproject.com—you can keep your own sex diaries and also catch up on what happened next for the UK diarists on these pages.

As told to Ruth Levy

“I went from being a card-carrying monogamist to being in a long-term open relationship. It works for me”

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LEAN INSH FOR THE TIMES/PALMER
She knows your secrets: Arianne Cohen has edited thousands of sex diaries from all over the world

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“This morning I wanted to leave him. This evening I want to propose to him. Anyone who falls in and out of love 1,340 times a day is not normal”

Sarah*, 35, is a shop owner from Brighton involved in a long-distance relationship

Sunday

10.38am A man just walked into my shop. He smiled the way men smile when they fancy me. When I was 20, my mum told me that it was OK to be fussy with guys. She also warned me that once beauty and youth wore off, I could no longer be fussy. At nearly 40, I finally understand what she means. I'm not married, I'm not a mother, my boyfriend, Josh, is 6,000 miles away. I'm scared of looking back and having regrets.

12.05pm The shop is empty. After being single and wild for a decade, I found myself an amazing boyfriend... around the globe. In the beginning, I thought a long-distance relationship would be exciting. After one year of expensive travels, I'm not so sure.

7.30pm Went to the pub alone. Men are looking at me. I wish I could see the same desire in my boyfriend's eyes. He's more respectful and romantic than sexual—he'd never throw me on the bed and spank me.

11pm Yay! I danced! I drank! And I kept my knickers on! I texted him all night, and got typical responses.

I like it when he's a bit jealous. It shows passion. Right?

Monday

10.12am Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. My head is spinning. Sambucas. That's all I remember.

11.25am I haven't had sex for three weeks and two days. I am feeling horny. I'd love to think that when I see him next week, we'll spend the first day doing it like rabbits. But that's not how it works with him. He needs to be 'in the mood'.

12pm I've spent the week thinking that I should really end my long-distance relationship. So many problems.

3.30pm Thank God I have Pat, a little vibrator named after my boyfriend's middle name.

8pm Call from Josh, and I'm melting. So I love him. This morning I wanted to leave him. This evening I want to propose to him.

9.54pm I think I am a freak. My friend says I am normal. But anyone who falls in and out of love 1,340 times a day is not normal.

10.04pm I know what I need. I need a man who behaves like a man.

10.45pm And if I can't have that, I'll have a woman. If this doesn't work, then it's time to switch.

10.48pm To a woman like Victoria. She was only 19, fresh, beautiful, naughty and very keen. I now know what men feel when we are on top of them. I know how empowered men feel when they grab our hips. I know because two years ago, a night with Victoria became the most divine thing I'd ever experienced.

Tuesday

4.48pm Packing! For my surprise trip! What shall I bring? I don't even know where we're going. It will be like a honeymoon! This will be my chance to seduce him. I want to do something so that he can say: Ten years ago, she did this to me.

10.30pm Done packing! Clothes, shoes and accessories. But I'm dreading the jet lag, and the usual customs questions. Also dreading the first awkward moments in the airport, when I'm wondering whether Josh notices the new wrinkles.

11.15pm I can't wait to look into his amazingly tender blue eyes, smell his hair, laugh at his silly jokes, fall asleep to the sound of his voice. And I really—I mean, really—can't wait to finally get laid.

“Worst day of my life was on the Tube. I was standing, staring at a beautiful young woman. She saw me staring, smiled sweetly and asked if I'd like her seat”

John, 66, has a girlfriend, but he still shares a house with his wife, from whom he is separated

Thursday

8am I'm writing this in the annex of the home I share with my wife of 40 years, from whom I've been technically separated for three. But under the same

roof. The annex is not as luxurious as the house, but in the three months since I've moved down, our relationship is much better because we're no longer driving each other mad.

8.02am If we could get back together, I would be happier. A reconciliation would have to be on my terms: no arguments about money, and acceptance by my wife of me the way I am. I suppose that means I need to accept her the way she is.

5pm Thinking about sex. I am trying to understand why it is that my wife of 40 years and I couldn't really get together sexually, even though we both claim to love each other. Meanwhile, my girlfriend (GF) and I have an amazing sexual relationship. I am amazed myself and my girlfriend when my first performance was, in her words, "astounding", particularly considering my age and general lack of fitness.

For years my wife complained about the lack of sex and I was feeling so emasculated that I asked the doctor to prescribe Viagra. Which he did, and I never used.

Friday

7.15am Last night I fell asleep thinking about work today—didn't even think about GF. I told her last Saturday that I couldn't see her, but didn't say why. We did get together on Sunday for the staple diet of eating, drinking, Scrabble and sex. 7.45am On the Tube. Worst day of my life was on the Tube a couple of years ago. I was standing, staring at a beautiful young woman. She was raven-haired and slim with a wonderful figure and great legs. She saw me staring, smiled sweetly and asked if I'd like her seat.

Sunday

1.15pm Daughter just called. The younger one is a terrific supporter of her old dad; the older one doesn't want to know. 8.05pm Back home. I told GF when we got back that my wife and I are talking about going away somewhere for Easter. 11pm How was the weekend? Absolutely amazing. Never have I enjoyed so much sex in so short a time.

“I want to wear the coloured hippy dresses and have sex in the fields like we used to”

Margaret, 52, a grandmother from Kent, is nostalgic for sex

5.48pm Roast in the oven. Been thinking a lot about how to reassert myself. After so many years of being a shadow, ▶

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pillow, buffer, even I don't actually know who I am. I am certainly not the pretty girl in the wedding photo. Nor am I the self-effacing woman with all the grandkids always milling around. Rebellion is churning in the pit of my stomach. I want to wear the colourised hippy dresses and have sex in the fields like we used to.

10.29 pm Everyone in bed, including [husband] Sam. He seems so accepting of the way things are. Maybe he is right, maybe platonic, respectful friendship is OK and I should stop fretting about what we are missing and be grateful.

1:36 am I've been awake for a long time, just thinking about how we used to be. We would grab any opportunity to make love — on his mum's bathroom floor (real tricky, that odd-shaped floor), in the back of a car. The time we waited for his parents to go to bed and jumped on the sofa, not realising that his younger brother wasn't home. He came in just as we reached the point of no return, and stood in the door watching us. For years he called me Cita — Caught In The Act. Little s***.

Wife just got back from work. We didn't kiss or touch because neither of us is inclined to do so. It's not a big deal. This is not a novel!

Ed, 52, is a house husband from London who misses intimacy with his wife

Tuesday

7.49am Woke an hour ago. [Wife] clattering in kitchen. Mendelsohn on radio. I masturbate, swiftly, fantasising of unspeakable acts with my best friend's wife. In real life she looks you directly in the eye.

2pm Watching one of my three children, son No 3, sailing beneath a good sun and in a cool breeze. An instructor mentions that he thinks buying boats for children is a waste when they're hopeless sailors. I agree.

5.56pm I've put on the stew, telephoned the insurance people, and I am now tempted to enter 'erotic photography' into Google. Or shall I go and do some washing? Hmm.

6.06pm Had a quick look for something in erotic photographs. Couldn't find much. I'd like to have had sex with all the women I have liked.

8.09pm W just had sex from work. We didn't kiss or touch because neither of us is inclined so to do. It is not a big deal. This is not a novel. She is tired. I heat up the stew for her.

8.17 pm W asks me how son No 3's day has been. It's been good. How has her day been? Exhausting. She is going to bed. I cannot stand the clothes she is wearing. Her shoes are clumpy. She is fat. She is beautiful. I do not fancy her right now. I do not say any of this, obviously.

9pm How do I rediscover W's sexual allure? My toothpick is my most intimate companion.

Wednesday

7.03am Woke early to get son No 3 off. Grabbing a few minutes on Google. Looking but not touching.

8.30am Making W a cup of tea. Just asked her how she is. "It feels like it has already been a very long week," she said. I said, "Sorry".

3.30pm Spending far too long fishing for porn. The easy availability of porn — and in particular the immediate access to the moment's fantasy — diminishes my desire for W. Would I have strayed without it? Dunno. I am married with no intention of being otherwise, but at the same time, almost obsessively desirous of the loving touch of another. I am in love with almost every woman I like. I think of W working and guilt overwhelms me. As ever, I have the nagging consciousness of my uselessness as a breadwinner. My children are the biggest favour I've done the world and are a continuous source to me not only of anxiety but of joy. I shall never be able to earn as W does, and my failure to earn anything is the chief obstacle to pure marital bliss. Although, if I am honest, a svelte and obliging mistress in her mid-twenties would be nice.

Thursday

8.19am Woke up, got out of bed, dragged a comb across my head...

9am W lost a job during the night. She works so hard, it is heartbreaking. Still no loving touch this week, although I did pat her back this morning.

12.13pm Drove W to work. We kissed goodbye. Sweet. On to dentist.

2pm Is there something sexually interesting about having your mouth worked on and pain inflicted by two not unattractive and terrifically authoritative women? No, there isn't.

5.17pm While walking my dog, I passed a woman in her late thirties with a small child. I waited for my dog and watched the woman go by, in the hope of catching sight of a well-proportioned bottom. It was. This wasn't a sexual event, though. It was simply a pleasing thing to look at, that bottom.

Friday

8.10am Massaging W's neck and shoulders. Trying to stop her filling the dishwasher. W and I discuss some interior decoration. I'm happy with plan. She has ideas. I accede to them.

10.47pm W and I have enjoyed our evening sorting pictures and changing sofas. Naturally we argued about both, which is as it should be. We may even have sex tonight.

Saturday

6.45am Awoke with a raging erection. The best cure for these conditions is, of

“ Am tempted to enter 'erotic photography' into Google. Or shall I go and do some washing? **”**



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* All names have been changed

course, rampant sex. W is already up, tidying. She simply never stops. Living with her is exhausting. Let alone trying to keep up.

8.57am Had rampant sex! Followed by full English. Now reading about maps. God is in his Heaven, etc.

“ Sex now resembles a quivering doe, but harpooning a beached whale **”**

Natasha is a worried 27-year-old expectant mother from London

Thursday

7.59am Used a hypnosis CD to get to sleep last night. Worked a treat. Being a half-whale makes sleep more difficult, and

I struggle to switch my mind off. We're expecting our first child in four weeks and I flit between excitement and sheer terror.

8.37am Self-love. Not that I was feeling horny — Radio 4 was on. I just needed to prove to myself that I am still capable of such things. That I'm more than a human incubator. Feel a tinge of sadness that in a few weeks' time, that part of my anatomy will be unrecognisable.

10.15am Train. Finding myself ogling the ample thigh of the young, chubby woman opposite. It's not a sexual urge, just attraction to the proud fleshiness, the arrogance of being fat and sensual. I don't possess that gorgeous sexuality.

10.17am Baby kicks me to say: "Stop perverting you're a mother now."

3.59pm Feeling my identity as a hard-working, erudite professional slip away. Colleagues have started to use a different voice to address me: all soft and goey, like there is an invisible baby already in my arms.

Friday

9.48am A rare lie-in together. Talked about how our relationship will change.

10.02am Other Half says: "I was thinking how we've been together all these years and I still love you." I well up. Oxytocin is

pumping around my body to prepare for labour and bond me to the sperm provider.

4.11pm Been thinking about the Virgin Mary. Her virginity seems a convenient solution to the conflict as you move from girlfriend/lover/wife to mother. Maybe the virgin tale has been perpetuated for centuries because it's a good way that mothers can still be sexual beings.

Saturday

1.34pm Went back to bed mid-morning and spent the hours napping, making love, napping, making love. Amazing. "Though you weren't doing 'naughty' any more," he grins.

1.45pm He gets out of bed and says: "All of that can't be good for the baby." I tell him not to think about the baby. "It's pretty hard not to."

Tuesday

11.20pm Other Half stepped out to see a gig, came home pleased to see me. Heading upstairs now. You'd have thought that at over eight months' pregnant, there'd be some sort of health and safety procedure for lovemaking, but it remains surprisingly spontaneous, though sex now resembles not overcoming a quivering doe, but harpooning a beached whale.

“ I've just completed a year of celibacy — a little bubble where you don't have to think about men **”**

Alice, 43, is a London publicist who uses meditation to 'ask the universe' for a man

Wednesday

6.56am I've been single now for five years, and I'm actually quite happy with that, in that I have seen nothing out there that tempts me — nothing. However, I do eventually want to have a family of sorts, so I am remaining positive and open to opportunities.

Thursday

7am Going to meditate. I've also just completed a year of celibacy — a whole year of meditating, cutting karmic cords, "giving back" energy to exes and being in a little bubble not having to think about men.

6.30pm An ex-lover of mine is flirting on Facebook. When I dated him two years ago, I ended what we were about to start when I found that he had a girlfriend.

6.55pm He's still online. In truth he broke my heart a little and it feels good to know that he is still "interested", but I have to close that book.

Friday

10am Woke up feeling well slept and horny. Any thoughts of sex were instantly killed with a phone call from my sister about her divorce. She is still living with her husband, who she has secretly recorded in his study looking at the most depraved things. She hasn't had a good snog in 12 years.

Saturday

10.07am You know, I feel I've missed out. I've never had good regular sex with anyone. Yeah, I've had threesomes and been tied up, but in reality, they've been one-offs, and just crazy fun.

8.48pm I'm home from an impromptu walk in the park with the cool guy I met at a charity event! He found my number through a friend. I believed it could happen and it just did, incredibly quickly!

10.09pm I couldn't help feeling the fecundity of the early spring in that bleak park. Later having tea, I mentioned how fertile our walk had been, and he mentioned that his cleaner might be pregnant. I just struck me that the whole afternoon could be fertile, as Philip Larkin said: "The trees are coming into leaf/Like something almost being said."

Sunday

12.15pm For the first time haven't told a friend about the walk yesterday, as I always get crass "How's the love life?" questions from people who seem to think that my emotional life is for their entertainment.

11pm Just got in from group dinner with the cool guy and a mutual friend. I feel very feminine to be wanted by someone so dynamic and dominant.

11.43pm Reading back over my wish list. The cool guy is, verbatim, what I filled two fooscap sides of my dream diary with. Absolutely unbelievable.

“ It's been so long since I had sex that it seems a ridiculous idea **”**

Kieran, 43, is a gay journalist from London who hasn't had sex for two years

Wednesday

6.02am Awake. Wondering what to wear today. Worried about my ever-expanding waistline. And worried that I'll never have sex again. I'm long-term single and I'm not sure how that happened as I was sexually busy in my twenties and thirties. I haven't had sex or a relationship in more than two years. It's been so long since I had sex that it seems a ridiculous idea.

7am Latched after a guy running fast on the treadmill at the gym. I have a penchant for short, dark, bearded men, and for years lived in countries where I could hone that taste.

8.15am In the cafe having my morning cappuccino, fantasising about having a threesome with a couple of bearded guys who are sitting at a nearby table.

4.15pm E-mail from my ex. We were together for 16 months. It was glorious at first — the joy of discovery, feeling attractive and feeling "normal" for having a partner. But we were too different to make a go of it. Also, I worked; he spent. We remain good mates.

3pm I wish I could talk to Peter about all this. Talking to him, even on the phone, makes me feel alive again. Imagining myself away from here, where my identity returns, brings my libido back. Peter. We met at college, had a mad affair, then spent two years not managing to get together. A great loss in my life.

6.05pm Listening to all the wonderful things other park parents did with their kids this Easter holidays. I looked after a violently ill, suicidal man for three weeks.

9.45pm I wish Peter were not so far away. Even if I could just get on the phone to him. But he has to remain a secret. My kids would forever blame me for the split. Peter is my past, and I can't let that interfere with my present.

10pm My son sleeps with me. My partner and I sleep in separate rooms, have done for years. But in the mornings, when I'm horny, I really wish Peter was here.

“ Did I mention that he's a closet transvestite? Normal would be lovely **”**

Emily, 43, is a housewife from Devon who feels trapped by her bipolar partner

Saturday

9.13am My partner has taken our ten-year-old daughter to London. I keep getting excited texts. I'm thrilled for her.

10.01am Got to stop feeling sorry for myself. It's not that I'm lonely. Just not coping. I'm stuck at home with two kids and a long-term partner with bipolar disorder. Did I mention that he's a closet transvestite? Normal would be lovely.

1.18pm How can I find him attractive after everything that he's done to make our lives so difficult? All that money gone. All the mood swings making our life so miserable.

1.20pm What am I talking about? I have a show I wrote being staged next week, just one of the few chosen to be performed. I should be proud of myself.

1.48pm I wish I could just go back to bed with a vibrator for half an hour. Cheer myself up. My son is bouncing on the sofa and wants me to keep him company.

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THE SEX DIARIES PROJECT: ARIENNE COHEN

