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Lost In Space

"When a woman uses complete sentences, it can be a turnoff. Using complete sentences is a subtle clue to him that she is still in her head and not fully in her body."

For therapist Linda De Villers, Ph.D., (SE, ST), reading the quote above in John Gray's *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom* was, in itself, an out-of-body experience.

"I kept thinking: I can't believe this," she says. "It was a resurrection of the 1950s."

By extolling the gender stereotypes of days gone by, popular advice books like Gray's can undermine relationships, particularly between the opposite-gender partners that constitute their target audiences, according to De Villers. Instead of promoting the communication skills essential in a healthy sexual relationship, these books leave readers lost in space.

De Villers became aware of the insidious influence of such material when one of her clients came into session confused and anxious after listening to a John Gray audiotape.

"I had been in the process of helping her learn to articulate what she wanted in relationships," De Villers says. "And along came this person who wrote, essentially, 'Men really like it when you're indirect.' That goes against the findings of reputable research. We all know that a problem in sexuality is often the difficulty in expressing what one would prefer."

To test responses to the divisive, gender-based myths promoted by some popular authors, De Villers presented anonymous ex-

cerpts to a group of undergraduate and graduate students and community members. While her sample group of 178 individuals does not constitute a definitive study, it does reveal how helpful gender-stereotyped advice is perceived to be.

Here's how De Villers' respondents evaluated a few gems from the advice book market:

The Thighs Have It

"You do it with your thighs. When a man comes on too strong and too hard and starts banging, just squeeze your thighs, which will clamp around his hips and keep his body from ramming your body, and slow him down. Slowly, as he finds out he can't 'bang' you because you won't allow it, he'll start to ease up his attack because he really can't do anything else...When you squeeze your thighs, you can control how much of his penis you allow inside you...So you can tease yourself with his penis...[and] you definitely can have an orgasm this way..."

—From *How To Satisfy a Woman Every Time...And Have Her Beg For More!* by Naura Hayden, pp. 60-61.

Why doesn't she just tell him what she wants? asked the respondents to De Villers' survey. Over 80 percent of women with a B.A. or B.S. degree or more found that Hayden offered bad advice. Ten percent said it was good advice, while another 10 percent said they

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didn't know. Among males of the same educational level, 40 percent found Hayden's thigh-squeezing technique constituted bad advice, 40 percent said they didn't know, while another 20 percent said it was good advice.

In their written comments, the respondents stressed the need for direct communication.

"She should be able to talk to her partner and let him know he needs to slow down," said one respondent. Another commented: "It sounds as if the man is raping her."

A male respondent wrote that the advice simply wasn't helpful: "I'd like for my partner to tell me what to do, instead of doing this thigh thing."

The Magic Ring

"Under no circumstances let him pressure you into having sex. You tell him that the moment you have your wedding band you are going to be the hottest thing in bed. You are going to be the best lover that this world has ever borne, but that you have decided to wait until you have that wedding ring."

—From *Dr. Ruth's Guide to Good Sex*, by Dr. Ruth Westheimer, p. 81.

Eighty-seven percent of De Villers' respondents found Dr. Ruth's advice to be flawed. What bothered them was not the woman's desire to defend her decision not to have sex, but the way that Dr. Ruth encouraged her to brag about delights to come.

"If someone wants to be a virgin, that's what they have a right to be, but the stuff about 'I'll be the best' is junk," De Villers says.

The Man Should Plan

"When a man plans a date, handles the tickets, drives the car and takes care of all the small details, that is romance."

—From *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom*, by John Gray, p. 181.

Nearly three quarters (73 percent) of the males and females in De Villers' study disagreed with this advice. "When asked to reflect on their experiences, they said that what was important was that somebody planned a romantic evening, not who," De Villers says.

A gay respondent said that because he and his partner planned the evening together, they were able to create a "dream come true."

Could it be that two men can produce twice the romance? Gray doesn't say.

Cool Hand Luke

"One little tip that any man can easily learn is the art of taking off her bra.... One day when your wife is not around, find her bra drawer and take five minutes to examine her different bras.... In a few minutes, you can become an expert.... Practice opening them so you can do it effortlessly with one hand...."

The next time you have sex, she will be greatly impressed as you coolly and confidently release her bra. Women like men to have confidence.... As he releases her bra with

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one hand, she will begin to melt and surrender to his knowledgeable and masterful touch.”

—*Ibid.*, p. 39.

As delightful as it is to imagine men practicing bra clasps (especially while drinking beer and watching football games), only 15 percent of the males and 21 percent of the females in De Villers' survey considered the quote above to be good advice. In fact, the more educated the male respondent, the less interested he seemed to be in refining his bra-clasp technique. None of the males with a B.A. degree or more found Gray's tips to be good advice.

“We're all a little bit guilty of saying ‘men this and women that.’” admits De Villers. “Seeing men and women as inherently different has been a tradition for centuries. Evolving away from that kind of thinking, even though it facilitates harmonious relationships, calls for much more energy and effort.

“Carefully designed, university-based research shows us that differences in education, power, social class and ethnicity account for far more of the variations between people than the single variable of gender.”

For instance, social psychologist Carol Tavris has commented that what appears to be a gender gap in behavior is actually a power gap. “Both sexes tend to be indirect and manipulative when they are angry at someone who has more power than they.... And both sexes are equally likely to lose their tempers with people who have less power than they have,” she wrote in *The New York Times* (9/17/1996).

One of De Villers' most distressing discoveries has been how professionals sometimes recommend books like *Mars and Venus In the Bedroom* to their students or clients, often

without reading them first.

“That's not acceptable when there are reputable books available in the popular press. Either a person should not use bibliotherapy, or she or he should use it responsibly,” De Villers says.

She recommends the *Authoritative Guide to Self-Help Books* (Gilford Press, 1994), a resource that draws on a survey of mental health professionals in evaluating over 350 books in 30 self-help categories.

One common quality of writing based on gender-stereotypes is that it tends to promote strategic rather than authentic communication. The authors urge readers to engage a kind of mating hokey-pokey dance, rather than helping them make a connection that could lead to intimacy.

De Villers urges sexologists to give students and clients the research and skills that will facilitate communication about sexuality.

“Being open and communicative makes people feel closer to each other and ultimately enables them to be less inhibited. It reduces misunderstanding and it gives partners the chance to learn about their sexual selves,” she says. That understanding is impossible when partners are trapped in outdated stereotypes.

Linda De Villers, Ph.D., (SE, ST), presented “Beyond Mars and Venus: Dispelling Popular Stereotypes about Men, Women and Sexuality,” at the World Congress of Sexology in Valencia, Spain, this June. Dr. De Villers is the author of Love Skills: More Fun Than You've Ever Had with Sex, Intimacy and Communication, (IMPACT, San Luis Obispo, 1996). Besides conducting a private practice, she is a professor in the Psychology Department at Chaffey College and adjunct professor in the Graduate School of Psychology at Pepperdine University. Contact Dr. De Villers at

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Take Charge!

To counteract the bad advice in the popular press, De Villers says that sexuality professionals should do the following:

- Pay attention to the material regarding sexuality and sexual relationships put forth in the popular media.
- Do NOT recommend various forms of self-help material to clients, students or the general public without reviewing it.
- Present tips based on well-established research in simple, usable form.
- Have the courage to challenge popular, but erroneous beliefs.
- Conduct well-designed research that will reveal the adequacy and helpfulness of popular pronouncements regarding sexuality and sexual relationships.
- Help people develop critical thinking skills. Highlight the dangers of accepting ideas and advice without reasoned reflection.