

Laughing, Not Laughing: What Welsh women really think about sex.

Writer Catherine Merriman discusses her latest book with Sarah Broughton.

Catherine Merriman has lived for the past thirty years high up in the hills above Abergavenny in the picturesquely named 'Railwayside'. More than half her time here has been spent producing the five novels and three collections of short stories that have established her as one of Wales' leading fiction writers.

When the Welsh publisher, Honno, approached her in 2002 to edit an anthology of erotic writing, Merriman wasn't keen. "I didn't find erotic fiction a particular turn on myself; I said if I was reading about sex I preferred fact not fiction." To Merriman's surprise Honno thought this was a brilliant idea and the idea for *Laughing, Not Laughing* was born. It proved to be a fascinating and rewarding experience for the writer. "All my novels concentrate on people and how they react with each other so it's not surprising I'm really interested in women's inner thoughts on sex."

It took two years to accumulate enough pieces for the book, an indication perhaps of how private we all still are about our sexual lives; something that Merriman is quick to acknowledge. "There are an awful lot of people who wouldn't dream of writing about their sex lives; so I think it's a great credit to the writers that, thank goodness, there were enough people brave enough to actually write something important."

The contributors range in age from their 20s to the over 60s and all responded to adverts in various outlets, including newspapers, asking women to write a piece on the theme of 'My Experience of Sex'. There was only one condition: it had to be

autobiographical. In the end twenty-six accounts ranging from the deeply affecting to the inspiring and all of them "downright interesting" were selected and found their way into print with the minimum of editing. The result is, as Merriman herself says, "quite unputdownable, you finish one piece and you want to go straight on to the next because it's just such riveting reading."

Initially worried that many of the accounts might be similar she was, in fact, astonished by the sheer variety. "There are points of reference that we can all identify with, but otherwise it's clear that women do have very different outlooks on sex, very different patterns of behaviour, very different routes to pleasure. It doesn't feel like a community where everyone's having the same experiences, a lot of women clearly feel very separate and alone in their sexual lives. They don't actually know what the 'norm', if there is such a thing, is."

The contributions are certainly diverse enough to throw up some interesting distinctions. Older women were more likely to write about the ignorance, the prevailing hypocrisy and the silence that surrounded anyone's, but especially girls, sexual lives. Women in their 20s and 30s, however, appear to take the actual nuts and bolts of sex for granted and dwell instead on a particular aspect such as the impossibility of having good sex with a man who doesn't like women's bodies.

Merriman comes from a standpoint of being open-minded and liberal and declares herself "fairly unshockable where sex is concerned". Nevertheless she does admit to having her eyes opened by some of what she read. "It's clear that for some women sexual feelings are overwhelming and to try and deny women their sexual lives is actually what ends up leading them into trouble about it. They're dealing with huge feelings they can't control because they don't understand them, because nobody will talk about them, because there's a silence about them." It is the silence that

troubles her. “The fact is it’s impossible for children to experience something and not try and make sense of it and if they don’t have anything to make sense of it with, they invent their own stuff which is how some very peculiar early attitudes to sex can be explained because the kids just have nothing to work on at all.”

Times *have* changed and Merriman believes that some women do talk about sex in a more explicit way today (her 20-something daughter confirms this for her) but there is little in *Laughing, Not Laughing* to substantiate this. "There is one account called *Four Heads, Two Beds* where a girl who wants to lose her virginity is lent an ex-boyfriend by her best friend and they share a room, so there are two couples having sex - but not together. That is one of the most surprising pieces in the book because it's quite an unusual thing to do."

In Merriman’s own work sex has its place – but only where it’s relevant and to the point. She admits that it is difficult to write good sex. “Very difficult because the language is so debased – they are always the bits that get rewritten and rewritten and cut and cut.” One of her novels, *State Of Desire*, is about a woman rediscovering sexual feelings after a bereavement; Merriman’s solution in this case was to write about what she was thinking while it was happening rather than the anatomical details. In *Laughing, Not Laughing* she believes that for some of the women, writing about their sexual feelings was a revelation. “They’re coming to an understanding themselves *as* they write because they’re actually for the first time externalising on paper what they’ve experienced and coming to some sort of conclusion about it.”

Illuminating, poignant, entertaining and “unputdownable” – these accounts lift the lid on what Welsh women really think about sex. As Merriman says, “I think it will certainly make people realise that even Grannies can have huge sex lives!

Laughing, Not Laughing, is published by Honno at £7.99 and is available from most bookshops, online from www.gwales.com and Amazon.