

VOGUE

Culture

PROFILES

Sex and the *Girls* Woman

by Toni Bentley



Lena Dunham as Hannah Horvath in "Girls." Photo: Jessica Miglio/HBO

Why do the girls on *Girls* have sex? This question arises in my mind while watching this terrific, smart HBO series that wraps up its second season on Sunday. The four quirky protagonists have sex frequently and easily and, hey, why not? They have the pill and we have the right to choose. But, what exactly are they choosing? Not pleasure, that's for sure. Don't get me wrong: I am all for sex, as often as possible please, both on and off

screen. However, there is something missing, something troubling about the couplings on *Girls* that serves as a mirror while displaying an insidious complicity in our much-documented epidemic of female sexual malaise and dysfunction. The girls on *Girls* have funny sex, sudden sex, awkward sex, speedy sex, sad sex, absurd sex (I know: it's always absurd). In episode seven of season two, Hannah did it with young Frank (who's Frank? who cares?) literally in the dirt. "It lasted eight seconds," she reports to Jessa. Frank, however, does have the self-esteem to feel "used" after the fact. That is how good this show is. They also have, most refreshingly, politically incorrect sex. The show's creator, **Lena Dunham**, has the courage to portray things like Adam peeing on Hannah in the shower. Or **the now much discussed scene** in which Adam asks his pretty new vanilla girlfriend to "get on all fours" and crawl to his bedroom on her knees. It brought me happy memories of **Maggie Gyllenhaal** in *Secretary*, crawling down the hall to her bliss. But just as Hannah hated being peed on (even as many greater grotesqueries fill her life), Adam's current girlfriend is equally unhappy about this classic enactment of male desire and dominance. But just as I was applauding Adam's I-am-not-a-prisoner-of-feminism chutzpah, he quickly backtracks and suggests that she might want to fire him now. This is where Dunham's courage—or imagination—fails her: She dares to depict kinky sex, but not to make it pleasurable for the woman, too. She could have. Safely, she makes it "gross." In having the women involved both comply and complain, she reflects the great scandal of feminism: Do me, Do me now, Do me hard . . . How dare you do me like that? And so we come upon the elephant in the bedroom: Sex that is mutually transgressive—wrong person, wrong place, wrong time, wrong position—is, more often than not, the hottest sex. Why can we not acknowledge this? If women continue to participate, but then deny, their own off-kilter pleasures, they not only propagate the patriarchal oppression of the "good girl," but masochistically collude in oppressing themselves. I would also like to put Dunham over my knee and give her a spanking for reinforcing the misuse of the word *vagina* (this is merely the passage between the good stuff and the womb), when what she means is *vulva*, or any number of other savory and unsavory euphemisms that more correctly, and sexily, refer to a woman's entire sexual core. But then *Girls* might have to deal with that truly big yes-yes no-no: female pleasure as measured by that elusive, life-affirming, life-giving, fear-inducing, mystical, Darwinian outlier called the female orgasm. If every woman—even the four sweet little gnomes on *Girls*—were having real ones, big ones, regularly, then **Sheryl Sandberg's book** would be called not an anemic *Lean In* but a show-stopping *I've Arrived*. And every house in America would be sending up smoke signals like the Vatican.

Toni Bentley is the author of five books, including The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir, which has been adapted for the stage and will premiere at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August.

March 15, 2013 2:48p.m.