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'SEX AND THE SEASONED WOMAN,' BY GAIL SHEEHY

A Steamy Passage

Review by TONI BENTLEY

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WHEN all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To Gail Sheehy, America's most therapeutic journalist, everything looks like a passage. Must we all keep passing through, forever in the process, always becoming? Can't we just get somewhere, put our feet up, have a martini and enjoy the view? Apparently not, because, as they say, "life is a journey." More like a long slog, sometimes.

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Michael Falco For The New York Times

Gail Sheehy

I'm told — by my friends — that while I remain ageless, the rest of you are all rapidly aging. In fact, the ranks of the over-50 population are reaching, according to those in the know — or in the passage, as the case may be — epidemic proportions. But now Sheehy, the bestselling author of 14 books, including "Passages," "New Passages" and "Understanding Men's Passages," is back with "Sex and the Seasoned Woman," a book meant to help us navigate the hills and valleys we must traverse en route to the final plot.

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SEX AND THE SEASONED WOMAN

Pursuing the Passionate Life.

By Gail Sheehy.

Illustrated. 354 pp. Random House. \$25.95.

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Her 1992 investigation of menopause was called "The Silent Passage," and Sheehy's latest book revisits the same population in the same passage — women, midlife to death. But in Middle America, where Sheehy has done much of her research, things are no longer silent. In fact, according to a study conducted by AARP, women are getting pretty noisy: two-thirds of divorces in couples over the age of 40 are initiated not by husbands but by wives. And, on a

lesser but not quieter note, women are buying vibrators at a ferocious rate.

Can you hear it? The happy hum of Pocket Rockets and Rabbits all across this great land of ours? Vibrators, Sheehy reports, are especially big in the conservative South, where women who routinely attend church with their husbands also congregate for "Passion Parties" organized by a privately owned company that's come up with a lucrative phenomenon — it may well be, Sheehy claims, "the Tupperware Party of the new millennium." At these popular women-only affairs, sex toys and lingerie are sold in impressive quantities, along with detailed instructions.

The feistiest woman Sheehy meets is C. J. Haynes, known as "the First Lady of Passion," the company's "top-ranking grosser," responsible for a group that racked up \$5 million in sales in 2004 across the states of Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi. A grandmother in her mid-60's, she owns three Mercedes-Benzes and drives with her pearlhandled pistol poised in the cup holder to protect the booty in her trunk.

When Sheehy wonders why Passion Parties are so fashionable in the South, C. J. replies in a "whiskey-tinged voice," "What other entertainment do they have?" Sheehy also interviews Linda Brewer, another Passion Party

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counselor, whose license plate proclaims her the "FUNLADY" of Sheridan, Ark. (population 3,872). Asked to name the single most "valuable thing you have learned about older women and sex," Brewer replies, "How wonderful it is to have an orgasm." This is news in 2006? (Hint: The first vibrator was invented some nine years before the vacuum cleaner — over 100 years ago. Women's priorities haven't changed much.)

Sheehy covers the usual midlife issues: sexless marriages, adulterous affairs, divorce, low self-esteem, financial dependence, overlooked dreams and empty-nest syndrome, as well as physical conditions like hot flashes and thinning vaginal walls. She then suggests the usual remedies: hormone replacement therapy, loads of girlfriends, "alone time" (bye-bye girlfriends), lesbianism (hello girlfriend!), young stud lovers (but don't get too attached) and, of course, a renewed connection with one's spirituality. If all these fail, there's always the \$6,800 sex-therapy spa weekend in Arizona, which is not about orgasms but "soul connection" — obviously, a more expensive proposition. (Sheehy practices what she preaches and admits that she tries to squeeze a week at Rancho La Puerta, in Baja California, into her busy schedule each year — a bargain at roughly \$3,000.)

As she demonstrated in her previous books, Sheehy is a coiner of words who prefers to Capitalize just about anything to remind us that what she's saying Is Important (or to avoid the pesky business of actually writing instead of Signposting). So she gives us the "L.L.'s" ("Lowered Libidos"), the "Seekers," the "Passionates" and those ever troublesome "W.M.D.'s" ("Women Married, Dammit!"). If you're lucky, toward the end of your "Second Adulthood" (must we do it twice?), you'll survive a "Meaning Crisis" and reach "Grandlove," the "payoff." (I know this doesn't sound spiritual, but it is.) Is "Grandlove," finally, the passage to end all passages? Somehow, I doubt it.

My personal favorite is the "Pilot Light Lover" who "reignites a midlife woman's capacity for love and sex." Just for the record, I'd like to say that when the time comes for my "reignition," I'll require not a small, flickering blue flame of a lover but a regular, old-fashioned "U.P."

("Unlicensed Pyromaniac").

Sheehy's prose is sloppy and frequently awkward. A group of women sit with their "twitchy Lhasas and cuddly cockers ladled into their laps," and while one midlifer's "ample bustline is lifted in an offertory angle," Camilla Parker Bowles offers "full mammary comfort" to her prince. Diane Keaton's character in the film "Something's Gotta Give" is described as being "like a flowering shrub pruned over many seasons." A "shrub"? Diane Keaton?

There is also what I'd call the Clinton Corollary. "When two people connect on the 'is' level," Sheehy writes, "you're on the primary level. You don't need words." I wonder if Sheehy's "is" is the same "is" as Clinton's was. She doesn't say.

It's depressing to hear the supposedly intelligent women Sheehy interviews speaking so earnestly in clichés. Mai of Santa Fe reports, a few days after receiving her astrological chart, that she is finally "ready to have a relationship with myself." Brave woman. When her lover of six months leaves her, we hear 53-year-old Maxine declare, "Oh dear, I have to live inside myself." Maybe her lover was tired of meeting her outside herself?

"Inside" beauty has taken literalism to a new level. While once sought by reading the great books or considering one's character defects, these days one can simply sign up for vaginal rejuvenation surgery. Medical necessity aside, this elective procedure is only the latest expression of female insecurity taking refuge in vanity and masquerading as self-love.

Sheehy's parade of chapters specialize in prosaic and recycled information, but the real subject she's discussing — aging — merits far more depth and attention than even the best vibrator can provide. What about that intangible component called dignity? How to have it, how to keep it, how to teach it?

And where in these pages is there evidence of a sense of humor? Sheehy appears to have none. Surely an appreciation of the absurd should increase in direct proportion to the mostly unavoidable humiliation that is

aging — for both sexes. Confused readers might do better to consult Miss Manners's superb and witty etiquette manuals, which tell us how to behave with grace in any given situation, at any age. Because isn't life really, in the end, not so much about which passage you're in but how to behave, wherever you are?

Toni Bentley's most recent book is "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir."

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