

Nymphomania: A History

By Carol Groneman Ph.D.

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"A knowledgeable, tightly constructed piece of scholarship."?*Washington Post Book World*

Nymphomania?organic disease, psychological disorder, legal construct, and locker-room joke. Throughout history, it's been all these and more. Today images of sexually available women permeate our culture, and curiosity about nymphomania appears to be as insatiable as the stereotypical nymphomaniac herself. Carol Groneman follows the idea of nymphomania over the last two hundred years, unraveling questions about how much is too much sex for women?and who decides.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
The dictionary still defines nymphomania as "excessive sexual desire in a female," yet, as Groneman shows, the condition may not even exist. Nymphomania, she argues, is a metaphor reflecting society's ambivalence toward and discomfort with female desire. Victorians considered nymphomania an organic disease. In the early 20th century, psychoanalytic theory associated nymphomania with frigidity, penis envy, lesbianism and prostitutionAall thought to stem from a woman's "immature" inability to enjoy vaginal orgasms. By the mid-20th century, scientific evidence of female sexual response led to even more confused theories of nymphomania, as "sexperts" sought to reconcile evidence of multiple orgasms and easy arousal with notions of morality. Groneman, a professor of history and co-editor of To Toil the Livelong Day: America's Women at Work, 1780-1980, sketches the historical and social contexts in which nymphomania was considered, and enlivens her text with numerous medical and legal case histories. She exposes the historical association of nymphomania with "lower" classes and new immigrants, and documents the disturbing tendency to blame rape and incest on the alleged provocation of the victim. Groneman concludes, "[E]ven though the sexual revolution appears to have changed the double standard about who gets to enjoy sex or how much sex is 'normal,' a deep ambivalence still exists... toward female sexuality." Groneman's anecdotal history stimulates thought and supports her feminist perspective, but remains more a general overview than a complex analysis. Agent, Georges Borchardt. (Aug.)
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From Booklist
Groneman explored the annals of American medicine, law, and popular culture to trace the evolution of nymphomania, a term so prone to fluctuating definitions that it resides, she observes, strictly "in the eye of the beholder." Generally understood as a pathological degree of female sexual desire, nymphomania was once considered so dire that doctors removed the ovaries and clitoris of healthy patients in pursuit of a socially acceptable female sexuality, one that is unthreatening to men and with motherhood as its goal. Using case studies as her stepping stones, Groneman presents one disturbing disclosure after another as she moves from the homebound Victorian era into the complexities of twentieth-century womanhood, and deftly analyzes the madonna-whore syndrome, the biases of male sex experts, and all the harm done by Freud's misconceptions about women's orgasms. As Groneman drives home her point that interpretations of nymphomania are closely tied to advances in medicine and human rights, she provides dramatic examples to support her argument that in spite of improvements, fear and confusion regarding women's sexuality are still rampant and destructive. *Donna Seaman*
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Review
“[A] chronological narrative of its evolution, documented with an abundance of (often grisly, always mind-boggling) case-histories…thorough, dispassionate, dryly witty.”
- Peter Green, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Fascinating.”
- Molly Haskell, *New York Times*

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