

A SNEAKING SUSPICION



JOHN DICKSON

PEOPLE OFTEN ADMIT TO

having a sneaking suspicion there's something 'out there'; they just aren't too sure what exactly. Perhaps you too have a quiet feeling that you don't yet have the whole picture.

The big question is: can we ever see that whole picture?

This is a book about things that matter. Things like life, death, relationships, sex, suffering, meaning. A book about how the whole picture of your life looks from the perspective of the God who created it.

Starting out as a professional singer-songwriter, **John Dickson** now works as an author, speaker, historian, minister and media presenter. He strives to be a public advocate for the Christian faith in doubting times.



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JOHN DICKSON



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

For Rob and Jaime—
my brothers and friends.

A Sneaking Suspicion

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A Hell of a Life

Hanging in There

If I were God, I'd end all the pain

If I were God, I'd make myself clearer

Simply Christianity: A modern guide to the ancient faith

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INTRODUCTION

You might agree that Australians on the whole have never been a particularly religious bunch. When church attendance was made compulsory in the 1790s, the early settlers responded by burning Australia's first and only church building to the ground.

Some people have referred to this church burning incident as symbolic of how Aussies have felt about religion right up to today. Part of me agrees with this. You've only got to watch the TV or read the news to learn that one of the most consistent pictures of a 'religious' person is a narrow-minded bigot who at best is out of touch with reality and at worst is a danger to society. This modern parody of Christianity is very effective at keeping the average 'normal' Australian at arms length from religion.

And yet despite the apparent cynicism towards religion, there have always been real signs that Australians are not the 'church-burning pagans' they might at first appear to be. I'm always getting into conversations about spiritual things with people I meet at parties—and it's hardly ever me who brings it up. It usually starts with someone asking, "What do you do with your time?" I usually explain that I spend close to half of my year writing books about big things like 'faith', 'God', 'life' and 'death'. No sooner have I said this than the person tells me the story of their spiritual life. They tell me about the good experiences and the bad ones. They explain what they don't like about formal religion but do like about the 'guy upstairs'. Suddenly, someone who doesn't normally talk much

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about spiritual stuff has told me his or her theory on life, the universe and everything. Nine times out of ten people admit to having a sneaking suspicion there's something 'out there'; they just aren't too sure what it is exactly. Perhaps you're the same. Perhaps you too have a hunch that there is a spiritual side to life—a quiet feeling that what we see and hear in the media is not the whole picture.

The big question is: can we ever see the whole picture?

Is it possible to find a path through all the ideas, trends and religions in modern life? Can we hope to ever have more than a hunch about God? In a way, this book attempts to paint the picture from one angle: the Christian angle.

In a multicultural society, Christianity is only one of many ways of looking at life, but each of the following chapters hopes to show that the more you compare the message of Christ with other ideas, the more convincing it becomes. A book like this is not going to change the world, but it may just help to confirm some of your own suspicions about life, love, sex, death and God. That's my hope, anyway.

JOHN DICKSON

PART 1

**SOME SNEAKING
SUSPICIONS**

THE SEX FACTOR

IS SEX MORE LIKE A PORSCHE
THAN A DATSUN?



IT MIGHT SEEM STRANGE to start this book by talking about sex, but it seemed to me that wherever I put this chapter, you'd probably have read it first anyway (I know I would). So to save you the trouble, I've put it first.

Before Madonna was a grandmother-figure of the music scene, she put out a documentary movie

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that was probably designed to shock. One scene of *In Bed With Madonna* was especially interesting.

During one of her onstage performances, a huge bed appears on stage. Madonna begins rolling around the bed in a display of not-so-subtle sensuality. Her dancers also get excited, moving their bodies against hers as she sings, “Like a virgin, touched for the very first time”.

As you can well imagine, everyone is having a great time—Madonna, the dancers, the concert audience and those watching the film. Everyone except the Canadian police. In the film, we watch the men-in-uniform rock up to the 20,000 seat concert hall with a demand: cut that naughty scene or be ‘shut down’. Madonna’s promoters are genuinely worried and scurry up to her dressing room and tell her the bad news. She thinks for a moment and decides to ignore the police demands for ‘decency’ and go on with the show as planned. In this case, the ‘express yourself’ mentality wins the day.

This scene in the film illustrates two directly opposite attitudes toward sex.

1. Sex is naughty. Ban it.
2. Sex is wonderful. Flaunt it.

I’m assuming you’re an average human being like me, so we don’t really need to spend any time discussing the flaws in the first view. It’s negative, boring and denies the obvious fact that humans are sexual creatures.

But to be honest, I’m concerned that the ‘flaunt it’ approach is dangerous, cheap and ultimately a rip-off (so to speak). Let me explain.

SEXPERTS

The ‘experts’ on sex, or ‘sexperts’ for short, are everywhere in our society, all of them offering advice on this important topic. You’ll find them online, on TV, on radio, on podcasts... the list goes on. And what’s their message? You want to do it, you *need* to do it, but do it safe!

Sex is about the freedom to do and be whatever you want.

Of course, movies can bring us close to the ‘real thing’ in full technicolour and surround sound. In fact, with the help of gorgeous actors, stirring background music and the big screen, what they deliver is even better than the real thing. And what is the message of the movie sexperts? The best sex happens when you’re beautiful and not married (at least not married to the person you want to have the best sex with!).

Take the movie *The People vs. Larry Flynt* as an example. Larry Flynt was the editor of one of the world’s top selling men’s magazines. He is also rated as one of the great sexual ‘heroes’ of the 20th century. In the movie Larry is this heroic businessman who has to fight against the intolerance and self-righteousness of some sections of American society. Larry has a life full of excitement, pleasure and most of all, freedom. That’s until some closed-minded bigot shoots him. Our hero now has to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, paralyzed. Larry is more than a hero. He’s a martyr—someone who sacrifices so much in his fight for sexual freedom. That’s how the movie goes, anyway.

But beneath all the hype it turns out the real Flynt was by many reports just another businessman with a sexual appetite; an appetite that led to all sorts of allegations against him. His own daughter was protesting outside the opening night begging people not to believe the myth presented in the film.

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The Larry Flynt story is a good example of what's true of many of our modern sexperts. On the surface they seem to be the great promoters and freedom fighters for sex, but when you scratch beneath the glossy surface, it's just the opposite. The promoters turn out to be demoters. Their fight doesn't bring freedom; it sets a trap, which we sometimes fall into.

Often, the media aren't really interested in giving advice that will lead to the best sex life. They tell us what they think we want to hear, so that we'll keep engaging, so that advertisers will keep buying advertising space, so that they'll keep making money. If they thought you wanted to hear, "Be celibate!", that's exactly what they'd be saying. Although they go on and on about sex, they don't appear to value sex at all, except as a way of keeping their audience.

Kevin Williamson, a major TV and movie producer, claims: "We present sexual issues without any judgements, we don't preach, we just show teens talking about what's important to them". In reality though, most TV shows (including his) do preach; they just do it in a slick and subtle way. Beneath the expensive exterior, people like Williamson are frequently just pushing a clear message: If it feels good, do it! Just do it safe!

The same is true of many movies and much online material. On the surface they look like they're fighting for sexual freedom, but beneath the gloss and volume it turns out that they're really promoting sexual selfishness, triviality and unfaithfulness.

Here's an example of what I mean.

One of those attractive 'singers' (whose name we easily forget) had a hit single some time back in which the key lyric said: "Do to me what your eyes say you want to do. Do it, read my lips."

I've often wondered what would happen if this young woman went to a few high schools I know and said to the guys,

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“Boys, do to me what your eyes say you want to do”. Most girls (and I’m sure this singer, in real life) wouldn’t dream of letting guys do even half of what our hormone-blurred eyes say we want to do—sorry guys!

Anyway, I expect these ‘singers’ don’t really mean everything they sing, but it makes me wonder why they’d bother with such obviously cheap words. I guess you can justify anything if it sells.

The Family Planning Association of NSW once sponsored a diary called the *Fact and Fantasy File*, which they said was designed to make you “better informed about your own body, sex and relationships”. The diary, and an associated sex-info telephone hotline, was banned by the government. But not before a couple of thousand copies of the book got out to school students, nurses and me.

I read it with a fairly open mind, but I must say I was under-impressed. It wasn’t the explicit details that concerned me (I am a married man). It was the cheap picture of sex that the authors painted. For a group that wanted to promote sex, they did a poor job. For example, how’s this for a poem about sexual intimacy?

*Love is great
Love is golden
Love is made
In the back of a Holden*

And the handy sex tip for March 13th is sure to please your partner:

If you find sex boring, thinking about other things that make you sexually excited during intercourse can heighten the experience.

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Imagine your reaction when, during an intimate moment, you discover that your partner is fantasizing about someone other than you. I don't know about you, but I'd feel pretty humiliated and jealous, and any sense of intimacy would be lost in an instant. This sort of fantasizing may 'heighten the experience' of pleasure but not of the whole sexual encounter nor, more importantly, the relationship of trust between two people.

One episode of the TV series *Sex* gave similar advice. It encouraged us to fantasize as much as we like during sex but just keep it to ourselves so as not to hurt our partner's feelings. Sounds fine if you're only in it for the physical encounter. However, most of us agree that sex is meant to be the expression of a relationship. Relationships are built on loyalty and honesty, not mental unfaithfulness and deceit.

There are many, many examples in modern society where sex is discussed without mention of relationships. It's as if physical pleasure is all that there is to sex. As soon as we accept the advice of these 'sexperts' we may be heading for a hollow, confusing and even harmful view of sex—one that threatens to ruin our relationships. We'll end up wondering why on earth we can't hold down a romantic friendship, and why commitment, trust and honesty are so foreign to our relationships. It's an undersell—a rip-off.

PORSCHE OR DATSUN

In all the wide discussion, debate and argument about condom machines in schools, AIDS, abortion and online pornography, I've been amazed at how little is being said about the intimate side of sex, the power of sex to create 'oneness' between a couple (as the Bible would put it).

Any psychologist, sex therapist or average person on the street will tell you that a sexual encounter is often a 'whole

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person' encounter. By this I mean that there is an emotional and psychological impact which accompanies sexual intercourse. It's not just a physical act, like going to the toilet. It touches deep emotions. It is this 'deeper' dimension to sex that many of us are being conned out of.

My first car was an orange Datsun 1200 (you hardly see these on the road anymore, and for good reason!). It got me from A to B, but it really was a rust bucket. It only cost me a thousand bucks, so I didn't treat it too well and had no problem lending it out to any of my friends. I figured that if they crashed it, it was no big deal. Suppose though, I owned the latest Porsche. I can assure you, I'd care for it with my life and certainly wouldn't lend it out. In my mind, such a valuable machine deserves the utmost care. But what's this got to do with sex and relationships?

The media 'sexperts' can fool us into believing that sex is a bit of a 'Datsun'. Lend it out. It's not that special. But in God's eyes, sex is more like a Porsche. It is valuable. It demands care. It is something precious to us (and to him), not merely the machinery by which we get about and enjoy ourselves.

If humans were just glorified apes, then it probably makes sense to live entirely by our 'natural' instincts. However, if there is something different about us humans, if relationships are a vital key to our fulfilment, if there is a God who has carefully designed a plan for our sexual lives, then it makes sense to preserve our expression of sexual intimacy until we find a partner with whom lifelong commitment, loyalty and trust have meaning. That's the Christian logic, anyhow. I realize many don't agree with it. Some think it's crazy, others reckon it's harmful. I believe it is beautiful and rational.

Far from being against sex, God is very much for it. It's not as if the first human beings discovered sex one day and thought, "Oops, let's not tell God. He's bound to get annoyed."

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Remember, the Creator is creative. He could have invented a method of having kids that involved spitting on each other's big toe, if he had wanted to. But instead, he invented sex—fantastic, enjoyable, intimate and exciting. And because sex is so valuable, God has given some very smart guidelines and rules for its enjoyment and to keep us from getting hurt and from hurting others. The so called 'sexperts' usually say these guidelines are restrictive and boring, but that might just be because they have been tricked into thinking that the 'Porsche' is a 'Datsun'.

Christians believe that God's insistence that we enjoy sex in the context of a lifelong relationship of loyalty and trust is the most liberating and meaningful sexpert advice around. When you're in bed with someone who has promised to devote their life to you for keeps, the experience is more profound. For a start, there is a deep, mutual trust—something that is essential for great sex, and near impossible to find in a casual sexual relationship. More than that, because you're with your lifetime partner, you have all the time in the world to get better and better at enjoying each other physically. The desire to get what you want while you can (a very selfish and unsatisfying approach to sex) gives way to a desire to give all you can for as long as you can (a very satisfying approach to sex). The pressure to 'perform' (something that often hinders 'performance') gives way to mutual acceptance and enjoyment of each other (something that often heightens 'performance'). Many readers won't agree with all this. That's fine. I want readers to ponder this stuff and make up their own minds.

NEW BEGINNINGS

Unlike today, in first-century Palestine (when Jesus was alive) sex outside of marriage was a very big deal. A true story is

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recorded in the Bible about a woman (it could just as easily have been a man) who was known to have “lived a sinful life in that town”. Maybe she was a prostitute. Maybe she had committed adultery. We don’t really know. One day Jesus happened to be in town having a meal at the home of a prominent religious leader named Simon, and this woman turned up. Now, it was bad enough for a normal person to turn up without an invitation, so imagine what it was like for a woman with her reputation. To make things worse, she came into the room, fell down at Jesus’ feet and burst into tears. Imagine the scene now. Here was this woman in all her fear and shame in a room full of self-righteous religious people. As you’d expect, Simon was furious, not only with the woman but also with Jesus. He thought to himself, if Jesus really was a man sent from God he’d be able to tell what kind of woman she was and would tell her to back off. It’s true that religious folk can sometimes be like this. They judge people for their past. They devalue others because of their ‘history’. But not Jesus. Not true Christianity. The point is this: Jesus did know what kind of woman she was and still welcomed her. In fact, Jesus even defended her in front of all these important guests. To top it all off, he then turned to her and spoke what must have been the kindest words she had heard for a long time: “Your sins are forgiven”. I’m sure she could hardly believe her ears. She had been used to guilt and rejection, but here was someone offering her acceptance and forgiveness. These words marked a new beginning in her life.

I suppose some of you are aware of the big rip-off that robs sex of intimacy and leaves us with a cheap substitute. Some of you have experienced it firsthand. The Bible recognizes this. It records a number of stories of people—men and women—with a ‘history’, who are still loved by God and who discover his mercy. Two whole chapters of the Bible narrate the adultery

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committed by the great King David, one thousand years before Jesus, and how he owned up to his wrongdoing. Another beautiful chapter records the forgiveness God freely gave David when he asked for mercy. When I read stories like these (the Bible is full of them), I am strongly reminded that in Jesus' mind there is no such thing as a 'point of no return'. No matter what we've done or become, the great news is that there can be restoration, forgiveness and a new beginning.

FOR SUSPICIOUS MINDS

1. What attitudes about sex do you think you've absorbed from movies and the media? Do you think these are accurate?
2. Would you describe your attitude to sex as a 'Porsche' or a 'Datsun'?
3. Does God's attitude to sex make sense to you?
4. Try reading the story about Jesus and the sexually immoral woman. You'll find it in Luke, chapter 7, starting at verse 36. If you were this 'sinful' woman, what impact on your life would this meeting with Jesus have?