



America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction

Brian Alexander

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Welcome to the America we don't usually talk about, a place where that nice couple down the street could be saddling up for "pony play," making and selling their own porn DVDs, or hosting other couples for a little flogging. As award-winning journalist Brian Alexander uncovers, fringe experimentation has gone suburban. Soccer moms, your accountant, even your own parents could be turning kinky.

Stunned by the uninhibited questions from ordinary people on his msnbc.com column, "Sexploration" ("My wife and I have heard that a lot of couples in their thirties are playing strip poker . . . as well as skinny-dipping with other couples/friends. Any idea if this is a fashionable trend or has it been going on for some time and we never knew it?" or "I am interested in bondage and hear that there are secret bondage clubs someplace. Can you help me find them?"), Brian Alexander was driven to understand Americans' desire to get down and dirty—especially in an era where conservative family values dominate.

To find out what people are really doing—and why a country that suffered a national freak-out over Janet Jackson's breast was enthusiastically getting in touch with its inner perv—Alexander set out on a sexual safari in modern America. Whether mixing it up at a convention of fetishists, struggling into his own pair of PVC pants for a wild night at a sex club, being tutored on dildos by a nineteen-year-old supervisor while working in an adult store, or learning the surprising ways of Biblical sex from an evangelical preacher, Alexander uses humor and insight to reveal a sexual world that is quickly redefining the phrase "polite society."

Gonzo journalism at its funniest and kinkiest, *America Unzipped* is a fascinating cultural study and an eye-popping peek into the lives of people you'd least expect to find tied up and wearing latex.

One Dozen Things to Avoid When Exploring American Sex

1. Asking an enthusiastic devotee to explain cock-and-ball torture while standing within arm's length.
2. Assuming an evangelical Christian will not be familiar with the term "69."
3. Incredibly tight PVC pants.
4. Trying to become the first male sex toy home party salesman in Missouri.
5. Standing too close to bondage models without wearing overalls and safety goggles.
6. Insisting that Dan Quayle would never invest in porn.
7. Displaying a look of surprise when a grandmother discusses the risk of removing a dildo from a microwave oven.
8. Admitting your sex vocabulary is smaller than an eighth grader's.

9. Explaining the difference between “cream pie” and “gonzo” to a suburban mom shopping for her son’s birthday sex DVDs.
10. Trying to interview a naked submissive locked on a cage.
11. Expecting answers about sex from a six-foot-tall pink rabbit.
12. Thinking that porn kings could not possibly have Ivy League degrees and run charitable foundations.

From the Hardcover edition.

America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction Details

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Jerry Smith says

You have to admire someone who would take on such a topic. His findings were not too shocking although some of the practices described do seem a little bizarre! In the terms of those in the book I guess that makes me vanilla!

The most interesting chapters were those on religion and sex, and also, living in the Mid West, the chapters on what goes on below the surface in the heartland!

I found the writing a little lacking in humour - there was far more potential for amusement, it takes itself a little seriously.

Sarah says

This second rate "Slouching toward Gomorrah" aims to look at American sexual behavior around the country, but really exposes the author as rude, narrow minded and totally unqualified to write on the topic. Most of the book is about his issues (with God, with queers, with fetish, with S&M) and he takes a confused and judgmental tone that is grating to read. Instead of really listening to his subjects, he otherizes them into good (rural women and vibrators sales) and bad (porn actresses and anyone into leather). Run far far away from this and grab some old Dan Savage books off the shelf if you want a real American sex education.

Shana says

The second on last week's reading list: America Unzipped: In Search of Sex and Satisfaction by Brian Alexander, MSNBC.com's "Sexploration" columnist. Honestly, I was expecting some higher quality writing. I haven't read any of Alexander's columns but I have a hunch that he's better with shorter articles as opposed to a whole book. Some parts didn't read very well but he does have some great moments of humor interspersed that made it less painful.

What I found most intriguing about this book was that it wasn't so much an "us" versus "them" look at sex. It blurred between lines of conservative/liberal, Republican/Democrat, blue/red, etc. Alexander really seems to capture the fact that sex is important for all of us. He spends time at Passion Parties (sex toy parties) in the heartland with women who attend church regularly. He attends a seminar for Christian couples where they discussed *gasp* oral sex. He sold vibrators to people who considered themselves Republicans.

What Alexander did was to break down the barriers we've put up in our minds about who has sex and who doesn't, and how they find sexual satisfaction. Maybe there are those who would prefer it otherwise, but while there is a demand for sex products and services, there are going to be people willing to provide them.

Samantha says

This book had been sitting on my "to-read" shelf for quite some time. I was supposed to read it for my Philosophy of Human Sexuality class a few years ago, but we never got around to it. I'm now taking a Sociology of Human Sexuality and was able to read this book for an extra credit assignment and saying that I enjoyed this book would be a definite exaggeration. I was disturbed by some of the things, but also fascinated by others. I don't see myself reading this again or recommending this book to anybody. I was relieved when I was finished with it because some parts I was falling asleep through.

Kate says

A really interesting exploration of how all forms of sex are becoming more mainstream even as those on the right protest for a return to more upstanding moral citizenship. Alexander speaks to many different types of Americans about their sexual habits and spends a lot of time with purveyors of adult entertainments of all kinds in order to find out what regular people are into these days. What he finds is that "regular" people, people who would describe themselves as average Americans, are way more interested in various forms of sex than Middle America would have you believe. Alexander spends time with people who make instructional sex videos, a preacher who teaches Christian married couples how to have better sex lives, several individuals into BDSM and people who like to have sex and make videos with people they meet on the internet. He also shadows a woman who throws Passion Parties and works in a large big box adult store. The book itself is pretty funny, especially once it becomes clear that Brian Alexander, the writer, is usually going to be the squarest guy in the room. It dragged a little toward the end and it is a little dated, but it's definitely worth the read.

Melody says

Alexander's goal with this book was to explore current fringe sexual practices in the US with an open, journalistic mind. I think he failed to remain objective, and his disdain and superiority color his reportage in a fashion I found to be smarmy. The author's tone was so annoying it was a real challenge for me to finish this book. He was raised Catholic and felt compelled to mention this many, many times- usually in the context of "we never heard of this sort of thing in my church, growing up". He also gave little asides which communicated his supercilious attitude all too clearly. There was one entire chapter which consisted of moaning transcribed in all caps- pages and pages of "AAAAHHHHH OOOOHHH" and so on- excruciating. Give it a miss.

Sheryl says

"Prostitutes are women too, you know! With all the same feelings, emotions and needs that you have. They are aware of what society thinks of them and that actually means that doing what they do takes courage, a lot more than you might think."

"Do you love Mimi?" "

As it happens, yes I do."

"How can you love a woman like that?"

"Because I don't think what she does is wrong and because it is your wretched Catholicism which traditionally gives women only two roles: Madonna or whore, and of the two, I prefer the latter."

The book was written by a politician who chose to remain anonymous throughout the entire story. Anonymous was or is a politician who belongs to the British Conservative party; the party which under Margaret Thatcher's iron leadership ruled over great nation for the entire 1980s. And like all politicians, Anonymous has a carefully managed public face -- and a very secret private life that few people would ever begin to suspect.

Anonymous' book is indeed a confession on his part -- of which he thinks is good for his soul. His book is a no-holds-barred expose' of sexual goings-on in the corridors of political power. Escorting us through every naked caress of his numerous sexual encounters, our guide lays bare what politicians do when they're not running the country. From romps with leggy beauties in the West End's lap-dancing clubs and Brighton's bordellos, to revelations of suburban extra-marital affairs and orgies just off the M25, our guide reveals all -- except his identity. That must remain a closely guarded secret.

Honestly, this book became one of my favorites. I just love how the author exposed that those who govern us are as fallible and frisky as the rest of us. I love the way he confessed all his sexual encounters with humor and sincerity. His memoir proves that power -- no matter how small -- is the ultimate aphrodisiac.

Ashley says

Alexander takes a look at the sexual activities and viewpoints of "typical" Americans. He begins by spending time with a fundamentalist preacher, co-hosting Passion Parties with a midwestern wife and mom and works his way up to working at a sex shop in Arizona and watching a BDSM (if you don't know, don't ask me) porn being filmed.

Alexander maintains his detached reporter-ness throughout, which keeps the book from feeling lewd in some of its descriptions (although it should probably have an NC-17 rating!) but somehow maintains an honest frankness that is sorely missing when this topic comes up. Alexander is not afraid to admit that some things really are weird, that there were times he felt uncomfortable (but not at what you may think), and shares his unexpected revelations with the reader. For example, what if nothing was taboo? Deep down are we just lonely and using sex as a way to make connections and feel a sense of belonging? One of the more interesting ideas explored was that as America pushes the sexual envelope and things that were once taboo become more mainstream, will there eventually be a point when nothing shocks us anymore? I also appreciate the seeming paradox of the rise of the religious right versus the apparent relaxing of American's sexual standards - and who really knows what others are doing behind closed doors?

Overall, an interesting, if slightly provocative, look at America's sexual proclivities with some interesting juxtapositions of what many claim to actually be doing (or not doing, in some cases).

Lani says

I was a little disappointed by the ending of this book. Most of the earlier chapters were fine. Interviews and observations about the sex of middle America, accounts of toy parties and working at an adult store. But it seemed that once Alexander got to the coasts and to kinkier 'more extreme' sex, he became judgmental and dismissive.

What bothered me was his implication that those into the BDSM and swinger scenes were doing it for shallow reasons, to just 'be risque' and not for the same reasons that others around the country were searching for their own sexual fulfillment. I can understand being a little exhausted and tired of hearing about everyone's sexual quirks by the end of the book, and I assume that affected some of his feelings about his later experiences.

Other than the ending chapters, I generally enjoyed the book. I wasn't surprised by the big reveals of 'people have sex everywhere! and use sex toys! even churchgoers and moms!', but I liked reading about environments that I'm not familiar with. The silent majority of people who are accepting of others and their sex lives is refreshing, so it's a little disappointing when the author seems less than open to some sexual experiences.

David says

This is a book about America's sexual culture, which is a totally different landscape than it was just 5 years ago. Alexander went on what was essentially a nationwide sex tour, researching it, not having it. He starts off talking to toy makers and hanging out at an adult filmmakers convention then sitting in on a fundamentalist Christian sex talk about freeing yourself with your spouse.

Then of course, there are toy parties that he goes to, spends time working in an adult store, checks out a fetish convention and a sex club. It's all very interesting really, especially to see what some people are in to. I won't even begin to say I get it, and I'm definitely not turned on by most of it. Still, to see where some people are and how they go about achieving intimacy and trust with other humans is fascinating. Really, that's kind of the whole point that Alexander is getting to throughout the book, we are looking for a way to trust and be intimate with other people.

Some people just go about that in a very different way from how I do. I did get annoyed through the first chapter or two. Alexander kept referring back to being a sheltered Catholic with Catholic kinds of ideas about sex growing up. I got that the first time he brought it up. I didn't need to read it another 10 times. I understand, I think, why he did this; to create a sense of ease in readers that were likely to be a little uncomfortable reading his book. But still, I could have done without being reminded that, "hey! this stuff is a little different than what you're used to!"

Once I got past those sections though the book picked up and I was glad to have taken the time to read it. I'd also recommend it to some people, but not others. For example, I'd refer it to a number of my friends, but definitely not to my mother, who would just call most of the people in the book sick. If you want to borrow it, let me know and I'll send it out to you. If nothing else, it might open you up to talking to your partner

about some of the things that you otherwise would keep inside. After all, sex is about intimacy and trust, and an important part of that is open communication with the person(s) you are with.

Keri (JD) says

This is the 2nt time I have borrowed this book from the library and it just could not keep my interest 200 pages in. Some aspects of it were amusing, entertains and informative. Most were dry, overstated simplicities and the whole feel of the book is drawn out like the writer felt he needed it to be longer.

Allen says

For those who read Brian Alexander's MSNBC Sexploration column, and those who don't this book is a great read for anyone who really wants to open up to at least read and learn about what sexual life has to offer, and by that Alexander means it, EVERY THING, lubes to preachers, condoms to charity work, costumes to electrified dildos, Alexander explores them all and everything that is truly out there for humans to explore with sex.

He does it from a journalistic perspective with research and experience (seeing not doing) what is out there, allowing everyone to tell their story, the real story about everything. I like some others found some of the later chapters to be a little forced where the first half chapters fly. By the end he finds what I found as a reader, is sex and everything associated with it, really all that taboo?

Wayland Smith says

Brian Alexander, a columnist, goes off to explore the sexual scene across America. He's thorough, dipping into several areas and getting many points of view. Some scenes are very sexually graphic, so if that bothers you, don't read this, you won't be happy with it.

Alexander gets viewpoints from sex workers, BDSM people, swingers, Christian speakers, and many others. He sees a lot, and is occasionally uncomfortable. It's an interesting study of people's viewpoints about the many different ways we approach sex. He had a lot of good thoughts.

There were some things he seemed oddly dismissive of for reasons never explained. The book sort of more stopped than ended, if you see the difference. It's an interesting concept with some good work behind it, slightly flawed in execution, but readable.

From the description I gave it and the cover pic, you probably already know if you're interested or not.

Izlinda says

I've been reading Brian Alexander's Sexploration column on MSNBC for quite a while, and have enjoyed them. When I heard he was writing a book/collecting data for America Unzipped, I was really intrigued. I

read the articles available online, then decided to wait until the public library bought it and I had time to read it.

I liked the way Alexander approached the topic, and the way he went about *doing* instead of just observing. However, he lost me for quite a bit during the BDSM pornography chapter. Seriously, with the spelling (either in all caps or not) of "AAHH HOOO OOOHHH yeaaa" of Madison having an orgasm or on the way to while ball gagged (or not). That took it a little too far and I started skimming through this chapter. >_<
Not good.

But I do appreciate the "oh, really?" tone he brings throughout each chapter, each demographic he's exploring. While there are some I'm skeptical about, or not that interested in reading based on my personal preferences, Alexander doesn't just accept what he's told or seen and just records them. He questions them, though not that heavily. (He isn't a sociologist.)

I'd recommend this book, but not the full price of a hard-cover. Maybe a library book/borrowed from a friend first, and if you absolutely love it, then, yeah, buy it for yourself.

Ryan says

America Unzipped is the story of one man's cross-country travels in search of America's sex culture. What he finds may surprise some, but most likely it will sound normal to most. And that is the point of the book. What used to be America's sex sub-culture, is now mainstream and practiced by folks of all walks of life. It's interesting how people describe themselves, in that most are proud republicans who attend church regularly, but still frequent sex toy shops and engage in less-than-monogamous relationships. This book is an exploration to determine just how widespread this former sub-culture really is. Has it expanded so much that it is now considered the norm? What brought about this sudden change...the internet? The people the author meets have opinions of their own, but its the collection of their experiences that helps shed light on the subject and may offer some answers to these questions.
