

Why People Have Affairs

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Why do people have long-term affairs when they're already "comfortably" married to somebody else? This steamy question arises from the new BBC2 serial *The Men's Room* starring Harriet Walter and Bill Nighy. We can all understand a night of passion, a bit of Shirley Valentine, saying "Yes" to Tom or Grace Jones, but to turn it into a habit. Going years and years seeing someone for illicit, secret, sex, to have "anniversaries" of infidelity, to remember the first summers together "when we were young", and still to carry on. Where's the magic and mystery in that? Isn't it a bit like taking your holidays in Ramsgate when you already live in Margate?

The question could be asked by the heroine herself, Charity Walton, a professor of sociology as well as adultery. However, social statistics only tell us that 40 per cent of married women have at least one affair by the age of 40 compared to about 60 per cent of married men and that women today "wait" on average only seven years before embarking on their first infidelity compared with twice as long in the 1960s. They don't tell us why people stray, nor why people get stuck in their rut.

More helpful is a category of these long-term liaisons. There is the "Ackerley", for instance, named after an Edwardian husband whose wife and mistress (plus two sets of children) lived in blissful ignorance of each other's existence till the day he died. His son Joe got a dreadful shock when he went through his papers. Ackerleys occur when fear of public scandal is almost perfectly counterbalanced by fear of upsetting the spouse. A kind of paralysis sets in, as does economy with the truth.

Then there is the type of "Marital Holiday" practised by "Gerald", a GP I once interviewed on radio, who is married with four children. Gerald goes to bed with the wife of a neighbour two or three times a year during medical conferences: "Nothing more. It's a kind of safety valve when we break all the rules to enjoy a breath of Spring. For once, we can put ourselves first. It's been going on since 1979." Both Gerald and his lover behave like responsible adults for the rest of the year. They choose this solution rather than "challenge" their solid, if mundane, domestic relationships.

More common is the "Malady" where one partner is disabled or no longer inclined to have sex and an unspoken agreement is made for a third person to make up the deficit. For instance, because her husband is totally incapacitated by multiple sclerosis, the District Nurse in one West Midlands parish has been receiving sexual as well as pastoral care from the local vicar throughout the past 11 years.

Commonest is the "Classic Mistress" who finds herself involved with a married man believing - sometimes for decades - that at any moment he is about to leave his wife. Even if she says she doesn't want him full-time, her self-esteem is miffed that he's never made a serious offer. Jenny a clever secretary is in this predicament with her boss Robert. She won't push things too far because she's been raised to believe women win by waiting and she cannot bear the thought of losing the drama and attention of it all. He, of course, just wants everything.

In "The Men's Room" Charity Walton is in danger of following this pattern but hers is more an example of the "True Awakening". All her life, as her name implies, she has lived for others. She worked hard at school to please her mum and married too early to appease her dad. She had lots of children to satisfy her husband then one day she wakes up and asks why? What's in it for me? And she asks this in the arms of

someone who has just introduced her to sexual ecstasy, Professor Mark Carleton. This type of affair has staying power because it tells you something about yourself you can discover in no other way - that charity begins at home, that you too can be a star. And Charity is marked for life.