



GIRLS ON GIRLS

WHAT WOMEN TALK ABOUT WITH EACH OTHER

EDITED BY MARGO PIERCE

Get a group of girlfriends together, and we'll be as non-PC and raunchy as any group of men. While this is common knowledge among the estrogen set, it occurred to us that some of the things we talk about might be of interest to the uninitiated.

Discussing the tons of possible topics we could address here, a few stood out and are included in the following pages: being single in a married world, stereotypes, health care, sex, money and the closeness of female friendships. Kicking around these ideas, a well-educated and thoughtful man who shall remain nameless asked us, "Are there still stereotypes about women?" After our laughter subsided, it was clear some education was in order.

"Girls on Girls," *CityBeat's* 11th annual Women's Issue, is a look at what matters to women and keeps us talking for hours. Sexuality, everyday life and careers are the topics of our most raucous conversations, and thus we've organized these stories under those three major sections. In addition to the familiar voices of former staffers

Stephanie Dunlap and Jessica Canterbury, the perspectives of new-ish editorial staffers Hannah Roberts and Julie Mullins are joined by some writers new to *CityBeat*:

- Mary Pierce Brosmer, poet, grandmother and founder of Women Writing for (a) Change
- Pat Morris, a writer and journalist based in North Carolina
- S.A. Strickley, a graduate of the Iowa Writer's Conference and short story writer

Thanks to courageous women in the Tristate and beyond, we've been able to recreate a sliver of the gab sessions that go on over drinks or dinner. The most startling revelation is that many women preferred to remain anonymous — we'll dish when it's safe but won't run the risk of hurting someone else or having our words used against us, personally or professionally.

The more things change...

For more information about MYTHS THAT NEVER SEEM TO CHANGE visit www.citybeat.com.

SEX ADVICE FOR A NEW GENERATION

Taormino finds a new language for what we all feel inside

INTERVIEW BY JULIE MULLINS

Talking about sex can be dangerous. Especially if you're doing it loudly in a small, quaint, informal café in the hip, gritty-on-the-outside-yet-civilized-at-heart area of Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Clad in a long-sleeved tee and jeans, with her long, dark hair splashed with incidental highlights, Tristan Taormino looks younger than her just-turning-35 years of age. Perhaps her most striking features are her heart-shaped face and green eyes accentuated by dark cat-eye frames.

Taormino enjoys talking about sex so much that she's carved the niche of a maverick.

An award-winning author, columnist, editor and radical sexuality educator, Taormino has written three books, lectures at top colleges and universities, teaches "hands-on" workshops and more (visit www.puckerup.com). She's also been referred to as an "anal sex guru" — a apt descriptor given that she wrote the second-ever book on the subject and the only one penned by a woman for women. (*Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex* for Women was Amazon's No. 1 best-selling women's sex instruction title of 1998.)

As the café's noise level increases with additions of music and a juicer, Taormino enthusiastically and articulately dishes her opinions on gender, feminism, sex education and more fun topics that aren't standard brunchtime chat. This notion is evidenced by periodic facial contortions from a nearby Englishwoman — possibly the place's owner or manager — that never quite achieve a full-on cringe but often come close.

Yes, in spite of sexual messages permeating our culture, people *still* just aren't comfortable talking or hearing too much about sex.

Porn, feminists and bisexuality

Taormino didn't set out on this career path. She had plans to become an activist attorney or public defender after having been involved in political activism at Wesleyan University.

Fate dealt her a round of rejection letters and a couple of wait-listings from the "big" law schools. She recalled a tearful visit to her advisor who had worked with her on her senior thesis addressing lesbian butch-femme identities, when she was told she was good at writing about sex and was advised to give it a try.

"I thought that was crazy," Taormino says. "I thought, 'No, no, no, that's not what I'm supposed to be doing, that's not part of the plan.'"

Her open passion makes it hard to imagine her doing anything else. She began writing erotic fiction based on some of her own experiences but soon decided she wanted to write true stories instead.

Taormino calls to mind a quintessential best girlfriend from high school, the one brash, bold and brave enough to try anything and then bursting at the seams to tell you all the "gorey" details. An opportunity would soon follow via her

"Adventure Girl" column for the lesbian sex mag *On Our Backs*, wherein she would embark on a reader-selected journey into unknown sexual territory such as a masturbation workshop, a session with a professional dominatrix or learning to ejaculate, and then write about it.

"I felt like, 'OK, we're doing it safely, and these people know what they're doing,'" Taormino says. "There's not a lot that embarrasses me, and so I was super game to do anything and everything. One of the results now is there isn't a lot I haven't done. Not to be jaded or anything, but fantasies have been fulfilled, territory has been explored."

Not to mention great field research obtained!

She'd like to put to bed (pun intended) any rash assumptions around labeling her sexuality. Though her partner is a biological woman who prefers using male pronouns, she describes herself as "equal opportunity." She doesn't like the word "bisexual" — it's too polarizing.

"I feel like (it) just reinforces that there's male and there's female and there's nothing else," Taormino explains. "There was a time when you were male or female or you were transsexual, where you were one and you felt like you were the other. Now there are people who identify as gender queer, who identify as a little bit of both. ... It's not just about who I love and lust after, but it's like my whole way of seeing the world."

Mention porn and feminism in the same sentence, and you might be asking for trouble. Taormino believes that two camps of feminism still exist: pro-sex and anti-porn. She recounts her recent stint as a panelist at Yale University.

"One of the women got up and said that porn is prostitution with a camera and that the people who make it are pimps, which is hard to hear from my sister in feminism," she says. "I think the major problem with anti-porn feminists is that, within their arguments, porn is one monolithic thing. Porn is not a monolithic thing. Is there porn out there that's degrading and offensive and humiliating and stupid? Absolutely."

But, Taormino adds, there are so many different kinds of porn: mediocre, boring, hot, inspiring.

"I feel like they're sort of stuck on this model of the worst," she says. "And certainly they can still trot out the worst of the industry and you can see gross things, but that's not all porn."

She ought to know. During her more exhibitionistic days, she took a brief foray into porn. It wasn't an easy sell (read: instructional, for women), but eventually she enlisted a reputable porn director to collaborate with her in producing and directing a couple of sexy and educational videos to complement her anal sex book. In addition to calling many of the shots, after some deliberation she appeared in her videos alongside the pros.

Braless and broke

Growing up on Long Island in the '70s, the first feminist Taormino knew was her mother. Her father came out as gay, though no one "clued her in" until she was about 16.

Her parents divorced when she was a baby, and her mother wanted to remain completely independent, refusing to accept child support. Before collapsing into giggles, Taormino quips, "To me, I associated feminism with being braless and broke."

Today, feminism means two things to her. "It's absolutely about choice and women having the right and the opportunity to choose what they do with their lives, their careers, their bodies and their sexuality," she says. "Feminism is also about the political struggle to acknowledge that the playing field is uneven and to work toward rectifying that."



PHOTO: JULIE MULLINS

Columnist Tristan Taormino likes to talk about sex.

Although Taormino is undeniably outspoken, she stops just shy of being in-your-face and maintains a friendly, approachable demeanor, an essential trait for getting sex workshop attendees to open up with their most personal concerns. One of the constants — and she believes sex columnist Dan Savage would tell the same story — is that, whatever issues people write to them about, the bottom line is almost always, "Am I normal?"

"As I talk to people about sex, obviously, every day," she says, "I think people want information and want a sense of validation that they're not a freak. You know, it's rare that people reveal a fantasy or a turn-on to me that I've never heard before. *Very rare*. And they think that they're *way* out there and I'm like, 'You're just as far out there as the person I talked to yesterday. Maybe you guys can connect!'"

Problems arise when people are bombarded with the mixed messages inherent in mass media's pervasive sexual imagery and resulting disconnection from the lack of substance behind it.

"We can't escape (sexual images), and they sort of drive us to go buy things or try to look a certain way or be a certain way," Taormino says. "But there's no real information or education that's connected with those images. A 12-year-old girl can learn how to dress provocatively from Britney Spears, but she has no idea where her clitoris is."

This fits nicely into the sticky subject of sex education. Taormino freely admits that the powers-that-be won't let her talk to high school kids, yet she recently received her first-ever request to speak to kids at a public high school in New York.

"You know, we are unwilling to educate children and teenagers about sexuality," she

says. "It's why I have a job. Thirtysomething (year old) people come to my workshops because they don't know, because they never learned it. And it's crazy to me. There's all this denial about kids' sexuality. ... It's like we want to keep our kids in this sort of weird bubble of adolescence, which isn't fair and isn't realistic and really just causes more confusion and more bad things like teen pregnancy and teen STD rates going up, depression, all that stuff."

Taormino's model of sex ed would be explicit but adapted appropriately for different age groups and "about giving people real information, about countering myths and misinformation and then about really giving people the tools to discover their own sexuality and feel empowered around it."

She'd also like to remove the heavily scientific, medical institution influences in which modern programs are steeped — right down to the language used.

"I feel like using terms like 'penis' and 'vagina,' which people do not use in the bedroom or in their everyday lives, distances me from the material, which is not my style and sounds clinical," Taormino says. "I'm really done with the metaphors, and I'm done with the charts. We've gotta get way, way, way before the Fallopian tubes. There's a whole shitload of stuff happening before we even enter the Fallopian tubes, and that stuff isn't being talked about."

She points out that many programs spend excessive time scaring young people about STDs and pregnancy rather than addressing the normalcy, health and pleasure of sexual behavior.

"Put forth this message of, 'This is us, this is what we do and it's a positive thing' — you've got to put it *all* out there," she says.

Risk and responsibility must also be part of the package, according to Taormino, including not only protection of one's physical body but also one's emotional well-being, which is crucial.

It's all tied to cultural fears surrounding sex. Remember that the U.S. is founded on puritanical ideals, with Christianity ("an anti-sex religion") ruling the roost. In terms of general advice, Taormino recommends that people must strive to reprogram their brains to counteract the powerful mainstream media images that dictate what sex should (or shouldn't) look like, sound like or feel like.

"The only way to get to parts of your authentic sexuality," she adds, "is to let go of that (standard) and to find out what really turns you on."

Sexual pleasures and adventures aside, what's been most rewarding for Taormino about her career?

"When someone comes to me ... and says 'I went to one of your workshops or I heard one of your lectures or I read one of your books and you changed my sex life,' " she says. "It's just like anyone else in any other profession. I want to make a difference in this world, and I feel like I can make it in the arena of sexuality."

When Taormino gets up to leave the crowded café, a few relieved patrons actually applaud.

READ MORE WITH TRISTAN TAORMINO: For an extended interview, including her thoughts on relationship issues and the challenges of her public persona, see www.citybeat.com.

'THANK GOD FOR COSMOPOLITAN'

How women learn about sex

If parents, ministers and other responsible types wonder why teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease are a problem in our culture, all they need to do is ask women how they learned about sex. We did, and the responses make it clear that adults who complain about the aforementioned problems aren't giving their daughters the information they need to protect themselves.

Women were interviewed in person, responded to a post on a message board or submitted written responses to the question "How did you learn about sex?" Most wished to remain anonymous, underscoring that even in the 21st century sex remains a taboo conversation topic.

Wendy, 35, white, gay, artist

"My mother told me when I was 9 or 10 years old. It was her sweetie-pie-Catholic-mommy answer to my question, 'Where do babies come from?' She told me that sex was how 'men gave women the seeds for babies' and then the 'babies grew inside the women.' I remember starting to find generic-looking pills or maybe an unpopped corn kernel and wondering if that was a seed for a baby. I saved them just in case."

Melissa Mosby, black, Word on the Street writer for InkTank

"How I learned about sex? The hard way, I'd say. I didn't have the luxury of a life with the Huxtables, so I learned about sex the same way I learned about my period — it happened. I was sexually abused by a family member. I **wasn't WAS?(even?)** 8 years old and, unlike when I started my period, I couldn't ask questions.

"I don't recall thinking about sex before I experienced it. I'd asked my mom where babies came from, and after she said 'their mommies' I was satisfied. I learned a lot about sex after I had it. It was always done in secret, it was never talked about and whenever they wanted it I did it.

"I don't think I ever talked about sex with my mom except when she began dating my ex-boyfriend, but I was grown when that happened and of all the cool things about sex, I knew that wasn't one of them."

Tristan Taormino, 35, white, "equal opportunity," writer and sex educator

"My mom's approach to sex ed, which is just very my mom:

There were explicit books about sex on the bookshelf in plain sight and, when they disappeared for long periods of time, nothing was said. So my actual first exposure to sex was *The Joy of Sex* by Alex Comfort, and it was the first time I actually saw representations of people having sex."

Anonymous, 36, Hawaiian/mixed race, social worker, straight

"Well, I wasn't told by my mother — other than not to do it — and I knew about the scientific things, like testicles, in 7th grade. But probably I don't think I knew a penis went into a vagina until I was, like, a senior in high school.

"A guy that I dated said, 'Guess what?' and he took out his wallet and was (showing me) all these condoms. I was like, 'Oh my gosh, what are those?'"

"Those are condoms."

"I didn't use them, because I didn't need to, until I was in college."

Anonymous, 29, Korean-American, social worker

"The first time I found out about sex stuff was when I found some of my dad's movies. They had pictures on the outside and they really fascinated me. I knew I would probably get in big trouble if they found out that I had found those. I didn't really know exactly what they were doing, but it seemed exciting because they were naked. I did not connect that they were actually having intercourse."

Jane Durrell, 79, white, straight, writer

"Helen Schaupp told me. 'You won't BELIEVE it!' she said. 'It's TERRIBLE. It's ASTONISHING. It's so, so ... I can't even describe it.' And then she proceeded to give a concise and pretty accurate description of what goes on. We said we didn't BELIEVE it, that it was TERRIBLE and ASTONISHING and wondered in our hearts if we'd like it."

Lynn, 48, white, straight, telecommunications

"I never had the 'talk' with my mother. I love my mother dearly, but we could never talk about anything personal. I first learned about sex from talking with my girlfriends. There was lots of laughing, giggling and comparing notes at slumber parties.

"Then when I was 17 I fell in love — well at least 'in love' for a 17-year-old. So I guess my first learning experience was trial and error. We were both just winging it. All I can say is, 'Thank God for *Cosmopolitan*.'"