

# Smut for Sophisticates

**Publishing entrepreneurs Holly Schmidt and Allan Penn are betting there's an untapped market for sex books that appeal to the kinds of brainy readers who don't normally buy sex books. Barnes & Noble is betting they're right.**

BY BLYTHE COPELAND

We're not exactly the bodice-ripper types in our book club. We tend to lean more toward the bestselling travel journals and highbrow mysteries you find spread out on the table at the front of the bookstore, with a little Shopaholic thrown in during the beach-going months. The most scandalous book we've ever discussed is *Like Water for Chocolate*, which features a scene in which a woman's loins burn so hot they set a shower stall on fire. "I was so embarrassed to be reading it on the T," my roommate said after that. "I was just hoping the person next to me wasn't reading over my shoulder." We nodded in sympathy as we sipped our tea and crunched our sugar cookies.

So nobody knew quite what to do when Chloe, an especially outgoing member of our group, thought it would be funny to pass around *Position Sex* and *The Art of the Quickie* earlier this year. If any of us was curious to know how those two volumes happened to come into her possession, no one was brave enough to ask. Never mind spontaneously combusting showers: These books featured full-on, full-color pictures of sexual positions like the "randy roulette" and the "lap of luxury," alongside graphic paragraphs of how-to explanation. Plus, the models were making these faces that...that...I don't know, just weren't the sort of thing we expect to see at our book club.

"You must be kidding me!" my friend Claire exclaimed. "People do not seriously buy books like this."

Oh, darling Claire, of course they do. Hundreds of thousands of them a year. And now a new North Shore company has come up with a plan to dominate this zesty market. Its cofounder, Holly Schmidt, is certain there's room for a different kind of sex book, one more sensual and alluring than the books that so shocked my group. And Schmidt should know: She used to run the publishing division that put out *Position Sex* and *The Art of the Quickie*—an imprint called Quiver, part of the Beverly-based Quayside Publishing Group.

Last fall Schmidt and her business partner, photographer Allan



VERY,VERY HOT TYPE:

Holly Schmidt and Allan Penn put out dirty books for clean minds. Photo by Tanit Sakakini.

Penn, split from their old firm to head up a publishing company of their own. That company, Hollan Publishing, will release its first sex books next month under an imprint mischievously named Ravenous (which also happens to be the title of a book the two of them worked on before leaving Quiver). Ravenous will focus on producing what Schmidt and Penn see as the next wave in erotica. They're leaving behind the books that send readers like my friends into fits of giggles, that people shy away from buying in public. There's a market, they're convinced, that's too grown-up for Maxim and Cosmo, too modern for the line drawings and excessive body hair in *The Joy of Sex*, too smart to be talked down to in a sorority-girl manner. "We saw an opportunity to combine our strengths," says Schmidt, who's been in nonfiction publishing for more than 13 years, "and take over this category."

For the first three months of its existence, Hollan Publishing operated out of Penn's Gloucester studio. Today, the company is located in a decidedly unsexy office park in Beverly. (Quiver, in a soap-operatic twist, recently moved into the same complex.) The first thing that strikes you when you step into Hollan's headquarters is a peculiar spa scent, with notes of lavender and mint. The floor of the waiting area is covered with a white shag rug.

Schmidt, the mother of two young children, is tall and trim, with a blond bob and a very direct manner. Her office is painted a vivid red, and she sits behind an imposing wooden desk. She may be a publisher of sex books, but she cautions against reading too much into that. "It's not from a personal predilection," she tells me. "I'm a nice girl from Connecticut who married my high school sweetheart!" During my visit, she makes a point of repeatedly mentioning that two-thirds of Hollan's offerings will be strictly booty-free.

In Schmidt's view, most of the sex books on the market right now fall into one of two camps, resembling either pornography or dry instructional volumes: Put your hand here, your leg there, and—voilà! "There's no happy medium," she says. "There's nothing that's smart and clever and intelligent." The Ravenous line will be more inspirational—more travel essay than road map, if you like. It will make you want to have better sex, even if you think you're doing fine already. "We saw an opportunity to approach the subject visually in a way that is better, or different, than has been done in the past," Schmidt says. "A lot of it is instinct and experience, as well as a recognition of the increased sexualization of popular culture."

One of the first Ravenous books, *Sex Drive*, features half-dressed couples caressing each other in that most familiar of locations, the back seat of a car. But the cars in this case include cherry-red convertibles, Rolls-Royces, and classic Corvettes. Another title, *Lovers' Massage Kit*, explains 90 different rubbing techniques—30 for him, 30 for her, and 30 for both. Then there's *Three: The Art of the Ménage à Trois*, in which duos get advice on becoming trios. Next January, Hollan is planning to release *Sensual Crochet* and *Sensual Knits*, capturing the spicy side of the textile arts.

Schmidt began her career buying books for Rodale and later worked for a mind-body-spirit publisher in Boston. In 2000, she moved to Quayside. During a meeting one day, someone joked that the company should start a sex-book line and call it Quiver. Everyone laughed, but to Schmidt the idea was genius. She developed a business plan and presented it to Quayside's CEO, Ken Fund. Seeing the potential, she says, Fund gave the go-ahead to launch the new imprint. Despite that top-level commitment, though, Schmidt found it difficult to convince her colleagues to take her plan seriously. Just as the first books Schmidt and Penn developed for Quiver were hitting the shelves last fall, they left the company—taking two staffers with them—to start Hollan.

At least, that's Schmidt's version of how things unfolded. Mary Aarons, Quayside's marketing and publicity director, insists it was Fund himself, and not Schmidt, who founded Quiver, and that Schmidt and Penn launched their new operation with book

ideas cribbed from their former employer. "They are titles that were brought to publishing meetings here," she says, "concepts developed on our company dollar."

When I press Schmidt on this, she acknowledges Quiver wasn't originally her idea, but maintains she and Penn were the forces that made it successful. (And indeed, two of the books she oversaw there sold more than 50,000 copies each, a phenomenal result for niche-market titles.) "It never would have happened if I weren't in that board meeting, because they all thought it was a joke," she says. "Ken was never really excited about it. It was a battle for me, and I had to champion it consistently." Later, in an e-mail later sent during a photo shoot in France, Schmidt adds that the allegedly purloined ideas had been rejected by higher-ups at Quiver—and had been hers or Penn's in the first place. "There are only so many topics in this category," she says, "and it's inevitable that we will publish some of the same ones. We are trying to do ours differently, though. It's also unfortunate that they are so bitter about us, because there is room in the market for lots of kinds of sex books—and it would be much better if we could peacefully coexist."

However the duo's business plan evolved, exactly, Schmidt and Penn have made a believer out of perhaps the most important man in all of publishing. Not long before they left Quiver, a mutual friend managed to get them a meeting in New York with Barnes & Noble CEO Steve Riggio. They struck a deal that very day. Hollan would produce content for at least 25 books a year—eight to 10 sex titles under the Ravenous imprint, with the remainder involving less blush-inducing activities, such as origami and shopping for engagement rings—and Barnes & Noble, through its own Sterling Publishing, would take care of production, marketing, and sales. Schmidt says Barnes & Noble senior buyer Edward Ash-Milby, who decides which titles appear in the chain's self-help, biography, psychology, and health sections, reacted enthusiastically to news of the deal. "Edward told me he thought what we were doing was the most exciting thing in publishing right now," she says.

The arrangement with Hollan was a natural in many ways for Barnes & Noble, considering the growth that the chain's Love and Sex section has been enjoying. Ash-Milby wouldn't confirm as much, but I have it from a solid source who requested anonymity (nobody wants to upset Barnes & Noble) that it's one of the most popular areas in the retailer's stores. And Sterling Publishing does have plenty of experience with sex books, which it euphemistically calls "romantic lifestyle" books. Along with the blockbuster *The Cosmo Kama Sutra* and its somewhat perplexing spinoff, *Cosmo's Aqua Kama Sutra*, the company has also delivered titles like *69 Ways to Please Your Lover* and *Diary of a Sex Fiend*.

Charles Nurnberg, Sterling's CEO, says the Ravenous books will have initial print runs of between 15,000 and 40,000 copies. But—and here's the catch—just because Barnes & Noble owns Sterling, there is no guarantee the individual stores will stock Schmidt and Penn's books. Nurnberg says their titles will have to compete for shelf space the same way those from any other publisher do. Some of that competition will come from the pair's former colleagues: Quiver plans to release three sex titles of its own this fall, including

Threesomes (there's apparently a real appetite for this subject) and The Orgasm Bible.

At this point I should probably make a confession, if it's not clear already: I've never bought a sex book before. To be honest, it's never even occurred to me—and when I poll my friends, most say the same. But we're the target audience, and if Ravenous's books are going to sell, it will be because they're novel enough to attract new consumers like us.

To test that potential, I go to the palatial Barnes & Noble in Burlington to conduct a little field research. (Two of my fellow book clubbers also come along, to offer moral support and one-liners.) When we walk in, finding the Love and Sex section is about as easy as finding love in real life. It's hidden in a back corner of the second floor, tucked behind the self-help books. On the Sunday we visit, the section is empty, except for the three of us and a guy in his early thirties. He's wearing a navy blue jacket and flipping through a book; when he sees us, he gently puts it down and slips off. What we've scared him away from, it turns out, is *Pure Kama Sutra*, which gets us wondering just what moved him to pick it up. A demanding girlfriend? No girlfriend? Anyway, he's the last man we see anywhere near our corner. This gives us plenty of room to count several other versions of the Kama Sutra (the array is really quite striking), including *Carma Sutra: The Auto-Erotic Handbook*, as well as a few non-Kama Sutra titles, such as *Sex for Dummies* and *Modern Love: A No-Nonsense Guide to a Life of Passion*, published by the AARP. The overall impression is of an industry suffering from a lack of imagination. It seems Holly Schmidt is right about the current crop of sex books: It's all instruction, and very little inspiration.

Still, I can't exactly picture my friends—in their late twenties and early thirties, married or single, with kids or without—wading through these myriad versions of the Kama Sutra or the section's entire wall of erotica just to find the more elegant books Schmidt and Penn expect us all to buy. Later, in the checkout line, where

I'm standing between a grandmotherly lady and a dad with his junior high-age daughter, I have to wrestle with whether I should turn the fluorescent pink title of the book I'm buying, *Supersex*, face out, toward the grandmother, or go with the back cover, which features two intertwined naked people. Thankfully, the clerk, a young Clark Kent-ish guy, rescues me with a call to his register. Seeing the book I'm carrying, he promptly drops his eyes. He's perfectly polite, but the only time he speaks to me is to ask if I have a Barnes & Noble card (I don't). I'm working up the nerve to ask if he thinks *Supersex* is a good choice, but then, as soon as it begins, it's over: the fastest retail transaction of my life—a real wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am.

Schmidt says it'll be different with Ravenous's titles, that not only will buyers not feel awkward purchasing them, but they'll also feel no need to keep them hidden away when they get home. "They're gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous books," she says. "They're the kind of books that an open-minded, kind-of-hip, passionate person would put on their coffee table, because they're gorgeous."

I like gorgeous things as much as the next girl, and I'm all for being hip and open-minded. But, really? The coffee table? Even when Nana's coming to visit? I don't think I'm ready to go quite that far—though book club nights might be another story.