

Book Reviews

The science of sex

|By Joseph Wilson

BONK: THE CURIOUS COUPLING OF SCIENCE AND SEX by Mary Roach (W.W. Norton) 288 pages, \$33.08 cloth.

Rating: NNN

In her third book, science writer Mary Roach moves away from her previous fixation with death (Spook, Stiff) to the topic of sex.

She has a very casual style of writing, yet it lends itself well to science reporting. She begins by surveying the world of sex research, from the work of Alfred Kinsey in the conservative 50s to the later publications of Masters and Johnson, discussing their procedures as well as some of the more salacious details of their personal lives.

She delves back further into the history of sex research, taking on everyone from Hippocrates to Marie Bonaparte (great-grandniece of Napoleon), who, in pursuit of more pleasurable sex had surgery to move her clitoris closer to her vagina. (It didn't work.)

Roach is definitely a good sport, and her sense of humour lends itself to her practice of active participation in whatever she's observing. She brings her reluctant husband to a sex clinic where the two perform for ultrasound technicians eager to catch the couple in action with their "coital imaging" apparatus.

She also spends an intimate evening with a photosensitive probe in her vagina to measure her physiological responses to porn videos.

In some sections, her humour comes across as a bit flippant, or as a defense mechanism against digging into contentious topics. An intriguing chapter on sex machines begins with a meeting in San Francisco but is cut short when Roach dismisses their creators as a bunch of weirdos. Disappointingly, the book barely skims the topic of homosexuality.

In general, Bonk leans too far toward the clinical and doesn't embrace the psychological dimensions of sex nearly enough. Her tour of clinical oddities and experiments isn't really complete until the link is made to the sexual lives of everyday humans and how we feel about ourselves.

