SEX, SEX, SEX—that’s all men ever think about, right? If you’re a girl, you’ve always gotta be ready to fend off an unwanted advance, and if you’re a boy, you’ve always gotta be plotting a move. I mean, isn’t that what we’ve all been told since the moment we emerged from the womb and were identified as having one set of genitalia or another? We hear it from other people, we see it in the movies and on TV, we read it in glossy magazines and pop psychology books. Men always want sex, and women rarely do. Women become sexually attracted to the men they love; men fall in love with the women they find sexually attractive. Women want commitment; men run screaming from it. Women are naturally monogamous; men not only crave variety but are evolutionarily programmed to seek it out.

Recent feminist thought has given much attention to destroying the stereotype of women as sexually passive and emotionally needy. Get down: I’ll be first in line to take a whack at the image of the marriage-minded, no-sex-till-I-get-what-someone-told-me-I’m-supposed-to-want, Rules-readin’, John Gray—worshippin’ gal. The thing is, though, that this dichotomous gender construction also makes men out to be nothing more than lying, cheating, uncaring, sex-obsessed louts—and that side of the coin hasn’t gotten a whole lot of attention. Traditional heterosexual masculinity—and let me make it very clear that by this I do not mean actual men; I mean the perception of what it means to be a straight man in our current cultural/

popular imagination—has not yet been examined with an eye toward dismantling stale notions of unceasingly high libido and disregard for emotion.

Superhet men’s lifestyle magazines, with their instruction-manual tone and we-have-the-secrets-of-the-good-life manner, quite literally teach masculinity: They tell men how to act, what to look like, and what to buy in order to be men. And their focus on sex is uncomplicated and unstinting. Any guy who is any less—or more to the point, any more—than a rote sex machine will feel like less of a man after reading one of these things. According to Esquire, men are “unfeeling brutes” because of their serotonin levels; GQ proclaims, “Sex. That’s what [men] want and we’ll do anything we have to do to get it,” and advises a guy with a lower libido than his girlfriend to see a shrink.

And then there are the implications of cluelessness and infantility. That’s what we get in Men’s Health’s “Tonight’s the Night: A moment-by-moment guide to getting it right the first time.” Do men really need to be told, “8:05: Offer snacks. Finger food is good,” or “9:24: Close ranks. Move your chair closer to hers”? The fact that some magazine editor thinks—even in an oh-look-how-self-deprecating-we-are-doesn’t-that-make-us-charmingly-funny way—that men can’t figure out for themselves to “be nice” and “not ask her to wash up while you catch the fourth quarter” (those are at 7:33 and 9:22, by the way) is pretty insulting.

What else have popular narratives given us lately? The neo-morality tale Fatal Attraction featured a man who couldn’t keep it in his pants no matter how much he loved his wife and kid. And just look where indulging his “natural” compulsion got him—the terrorized owner of a boiled bunny. (Not coincidentally, the strong, sexual woman in this film is not cool and independent, as she first seems, but rather incredibly needy and, it turns out, psychotic.) The television show Men Behaving Badly (well, the name says it all) features commitment-terrified men with sex drives that override even such basic human qualities as tact and coherent speech. Jokes circulate on e-mail painting men as perpetual children with only one thing on their minds (“Age and favorite sport—17: sex; 25: sex; 35: sex; 48: sex; 66: napping. Age and ideal age to get married—17: 25; 25: 35; 35: 48; 48: 66; 66: 17”). Oh, excuse me, I guess that would be two things: mindless pursuit of sex and blind refusal of commitment. The proliferation of brutal and gra-
tutious rape scenes on film paints male sexuality as rapacious and violent. That we’re often meant to see the rapists in, say, Showgirls and Leaving Las Vegas as disgusting, amoral, and corrupt doesn’t really matter. There’s a sense of plodding inevitability about these scenes: This is the way men are, they suggest, and this is just what happens.

And then there’s mainstream pornography—soft-core airbrushed fluff such as Penthouse and Playboy. The folks makin’ this stuff do men and their range of desires a disservice; their implication is that anything outside the “big hair, fake tits, tiny waist, no pores, limited body hair” aesthetic is deviant, weird, not normal—and not something that a red-blooded American man would be interested in. The common boys-will-be-boys explanation for porn—that men get turned on visually (in contrast to a “feminine” mode of arousal, which is mental and emotional)—is nothing more than an insult, making men out to be Pavlovian dogs who salivate uncontrollably and strain at their trousers upon contact with nude pictures.

Antiporn arguments, however well-meaning, are no better. Folks like Catharine MacKinnon also believe that men are inherently drawn to porn. And to them, porn is by definition violent, suggesting that it’s somehow in men’s nature to be aroused by hurting others. Furthermore, antipornography activists think that porn leads men to commit violence—as if men have no self-control or capacity to separate fantasy from reality, as if an erection is a driving force that can’t be stopped once it’s started. (I’m not gonna bother pointing out that most porn is about mutual pleasure and not violence, and suggesting that sexual representation is inherently harmful to women is infantilizing and wrongheaded . . . Oh, I guess I just did.) Actually, the antiporn conception of the rabbidly sexual man is suspiciously close to the hormonal overdrive lionized in magazines like Esquire and GQ. The only difference is one of perspective: Antiporn folk believe that male sexuality is always threatening, while men’s-magazine editors think it’s always fabulous.

What all these examples have in common is the severing of male sexuality from any sort of reflection at all: To be a man who is emotional about sex or even one with thoughts more complex than “Yeah! More!” on the subject is not to be a man at all; that’s female territory.

My friends and I have seen the havoc this wreaks in our sex lives. Let’s see, there was the guy who thought I was needy and unstable because I wanted to have sex with him as often as possible and was kinda disappointed when he turned me down (which would be a perfectly acceptable male reaction to being rebuffed by a woman). Because of this guy’s commitment to rigidly gendered sexual behavior, he didn’t believe me when I assured him that my desire wasn’t tied to some big emotional thang. And, adding even more trouble, if he could’ve gotten past his disbelief, he would’ve had to come to terms with the fact that there are women with higher sex drives than his—thus threatening his manly-man status as an all-sex-all-the-time kind of guy.

Then there was the one who was disturbed by my simple request. One morning after—ahem—my needs had not been met, I tried to initiate sex. “I can’t,” he kept saying. “I have to study.” When pressed, he admitted that it wasn’t lack of time that was the issue. “I’m not used to women being so aggressive,” he told me. When I forced him to be honest, instead of letting him make excuses, I ruined the nice little arrangement we had going: him as someone who wanted sex, me as someone who graciously accommodated him. He was angry that I expected to be forthright about my desire; I left and never went back.

After being told (one way or another) all their lives that they will always be the aggressor in a sexual situation, and they will always want more sex than their partners (assuming, as always, that their partners are female), it’s no surprise that men freak out when they are confronted with a woman who wants sex as much as or more than they do. They’ve been taught that female sexuality is weak—so if a woman’s desire matches their own, that must mean that they’re (oh, no!) weak, too.

We need to open up definitions of masculinity to acknowledge the reality that we are all sexual, some of us are more sexual than others, and just how sexual we are has about as much to do with gender as it does with breakfast cereal. Instead of being taught that boys have only one thing on their minds, men need to learn that their sex drives, whether raging or trickling, are just fine the way they are—and that they’re still men, regardless. This is certainly a feminist project: In order to achieve both gender and sexual equality, we need to acknowledge the ways men are stifled by the equation of masculinity with constant desire for and pursuit of sex. Men
are no more hyperactive skirt chasers always looking for a quick roll in the
hay than women are passive, sexually resistant creatures who use their gen-
itals only as sticky traps in which to catch wedding rings. Until we turn as
critical an eye toward stereotypical voracious masculine sexuality as we
have toward sanitized, emotional female sexuality, no one of any gender
will be truly free to act on genuine desires—in or out of the bedroom.