The last volume of the Hite Report is full of shocks, according to Rosalind Brunt.

The most shocking thing about the new Hite Report, released earlier this year, is likely to be, for women, anyway, the shock of recognition. For what is covered here is deeply familiar territory: the surprise is that it has not been explored so systematically before.

This is the last in Shere Hite’s massive trilogy of reports on women’s and men’s sexuality. It is based on detailed questionnaires completed by a sample population of 4,500 American women and mixes statistical data with “qualitative” evidence — the women’s own words — and Hite’s commentary. But the book is buttressed by profuse expert testimonials to Hite’s scientific integrity and a florid tribute to her own husband and these provide an edgy reminder of past accusations of “man-hating” research.

My own interpretation of the report is that it presents the most damning and comprehensive indictment of men’s treatment of women who love them that I’ve ever read. At the same time, it is nothing new and immediately recalls all the stories that women tell. But what makes it so devastating is its scale and consistency: so many voices from such varied circumstances saying such similar things.

Over all the report’s findings is a sense of the sex and gender times being completely out of joint: a massive emotional and attitudinal disparity between the women and men; with men still encased in character-armour — in every sense, stuck rigid — while women have been “on the move”, reassessing personal experience in all sorts of ways that have life-changing implications.

Hite surmises that what prevents men “letting go”, becoming, as she puts it, “emotionally equal with women”, is their fear of losing control, and thereby power, over women. Most women in the report say that most men take little or no responsibility for the development of a love relationship: they won’t “work at it”, lack intimacy with women, are d emeaning, r ejecting and unaffectionate, preoccupied with “more important things”. They tend to treat sex as a primary means of communication and equate sex with love; otherwise, they are emotionally withholding and distancing and offer no emotional support to women. At the same time, without acknowledging it, and while complaining that it is women who do the whingeing, clinging and demanding, it is the men women believe, who are the desperately “needy”, emotionally dependent and passive sex: demanding all the attention, time and nurture from women that they are not providing in their turn. Plus 12% of women in the sample had been beaten by a loved man/men and 57% threatened with violence in a relationship.

In this state of affairs, Hite notes a significant factor in the current American divorce rate (50% of marriages): 90% of the actions are now initiated by women, whereas the men are still getting enough satisfaction from the relationship to want to continue marriage.
Furthermore, she observes a marked trend of 40-plus divorcees now embarking on their first lesbian relationship. The only chapters in the report that express any real contentment are those where women describe lesbian or celibate lifestyles. Hite notes the value women place on friendships with women and how it is often only sisterly support that makes life with men bearable.

So what is going on here? What remains the point of sticking with men? I think the Hite report undoubtedly downplays the role of continuing material and cultural inequality between men and women in promoting heterosexual choice. At the same time, it presents a challenge to those radical feminist analyses that say if women had equal access to the same means of existence as a man then it would indeed be a case of naked emperors. This might well be so if women were claiming only to be buying into the action and lifestyle of men and not, as Hite insistently demonstrates, offering, indeed demanding, to love and be loved by men as well. So doesn’t there have to be “something” about men, besides the real social props of patriarchy, that makes them objects of desire to women, however strange that seems?

The questions that resonate throughout the report remain the puzzles about men that women are always posing to each other: Is he really worth it? What did I see in him? Why ever do we bother with them? And if we reject, as Hite does, the currently fashionable notion that women are masochists who somehow “love too much”, then it is getting rather urgent that we come up with some good answers for why women go on making a heterosexual choice.

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Culinary Conquests

Alexander Cockburn digests the connections between exotic food and imperialism...

We drove south on the San Diego Freeway, past the neon sea of LA International Airport, through the purple twilight to Manhattan Beach and the restaurant they call the Saint Estephe.

I was well armed, for beside me at the wheel of the Nissan Sentra was a man I’ll call Mercator, a professor of political science at UCLA, undiluted in his radical convictions, awesome in appetite; his palate trained in Mexico, Paris, Budapest, Moscow, and the Upper West Side of Manhattan; in the back seat was his wife Augusta, a child of Portuguese colonialism, nourished on the caldo verde of Lisbon, the muamba of Angola, the feijoada of Brazil.

We’d heard of the Saint Estephe a few weeks earlier, with reports filtering in of a successful fusion of New Mexican with New French cuisine. As we rolled along the freeway I brought reports of the food fannies of New York, of gastrofads bursting like comets in the twilight, gone in an eye-blink; the mustard mania, the vinegar madness, the peppercorn frenzy; American tongues darting at the spinning globe, at Szechwan, Osaka, Bangkok, Hanoi, and now, most recently, at Mexico and the great American Southwest.

Mercator addressed the inside of the Sentra as though it were a lecture hall. ‘You ask, why this frenzied food faddism, this orgy of gastroglobal eclecticism? Consider. There is a