

Sex.

For some people the thought of those in their middle-age having sex is one of life's many taboos. When it comes to Alan Bennett's new book, *Smut: Two Unseemly Stories*, there's no getting away from the moans and giggles heard through the wall of your parent's bedroom; no putting your fingers in your ears

Mrs. Donaldson, the eponymous character of the first of the two short stories is a widow, who has long since relinquished her libido Her previous sexual experiences with Mr. Donaldson were strictly vanilla and unfulfilling. She works as a Simulated Patient at her local hospital, demonstrating a variety of ailments to be diagnosed by young medical students. To supplement her income she takes on two student lodgers, a couple called Andy and Laura. As rent day arrives and her new lodgers find themselves short, they propose an alternative payment: giving Mrs. Donaldson a demonstration of their own. Despite their erogenous offer, Mrs. Donaldson "still wasn't sure she might have preferred marigolds." The sex ensues.

As things heat up: "His hand buried between her [Laura's] legs she [Mrs. D.] found herself looking at the floor and wondering if it was time she had the carpet cleaned.' And highlighting the true intimacy of the moment:

"On her hands and knees across the bed Laura found her face only a foot or so from Mrs. Donaldson's. They smiled. "Men." said Laura conspiratorially as Andy pumped and panted behind her. Mrs. Donaldson smiled understandingly."

The second story, 'The Shielding of Mrs. Forbes' is one of skewed family dynamics and the apparent ambiguity and fluidity of sexuality, or something like that. Graham, Mrs. Forbes' son, is a closet gay man who marries plain looking, wealthy Betty in order to achieve promotion at the bank. A police officer with a sideline in male prostitution, extramarital, inter-familial sex, and bribery all follow. Mrs. Forbes harbours some sort of reverse-Oedipal crush on her son Graham, and is disappointed with his choice of wife, "For Graham's mother there was little to choose between Jews and Catholics. The Jews had holidays that turned up out of the blue and the Catholics had children in much the same way." And it's not just the prospective bride's religion she's concerned about: "At least it's not a white wedding," said Mrs. Forbes..."She's so dark people might think she was Asian."

Secrets unite both of the stories. Everyone seems to be having sex and everyone hides this fact from one another; except of course for Mrs. Donaldson, who makes love

vicariously. Both also reveal the middle-aged, well-to-do attitude towards sex, both the act and even just talking about it: "I heard you say 'tits' the other night at the Maynards. You're too old to say 'tits'."

*Smut* is a hilarious and short look at the sex lives of people that, as Mrs. Donaldson describes, are usually 'invisible.' They might be invisible to most people but don't doubt that they're out there *doing it*. It's probably now safe to take your fingers out of your ears.

*Smut: Two Unseemly Stories* by Alan Bennett is out now in hardback (Profile Books, £12.00)