

Sexual pioneer

By Joanne Laurier
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Kinsey, written and directed by Bill Condon

Alfred Charles Kinsey (1894-1956), the author of two landmark volumes, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), is the subject of the admirable new film *Kinsey* by American director Bill Condon (*Gods and Monsters*).

Kinsey's groundbreaking research on human sexual behavior was attacked in the 1940s and 1950s by McCarthyite right-wing forces and vilified by the gatekeepers of morality, such as evangelist Billy Graham. About Kinsey's work on female sexuality, Graham declared hysterically, "It is impossible to estimate the damage this book will do to the already degenerating morals of America!" Condon's film is an intelligent and humane look at the scientist—dubbed the "American Freud"—who at the time of his death was the world's most renowned sex researcher.

After a brief sequence indicating Kinsey's technique training his sex interviewers in the 1940s, Condon backtracks and introduces us to the future researcher as a boy, watching birds, a budding naturalist. Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, he comes of age during the late Victorian era. His father (John Lithgow), an engineering professor at the Stevens Institute of Technology, is an overbearing Methodist obsessed not only with the moral rectitude of his family, but of the entire neighborhood. The film's initial sequences depict him using his son to entrap a local storeowner who has been selling cigarettes to minors and inveighing against the zipper, which "allows easy access to every amoral act."

Rebellion against his repressive background will be a critical factor in Kinsey's future work on human sexuality. Against his father's wishes, he decides to attend Bowdoin College in Maine (a school, incidentally, with a free-thinking and democratic tradition and deep connections to the Civil War), where he studies biology and psychology.

Condon's treatment of Kinsey's adult life opens when the latter begins teaching zoology at Indiana University (he had previously received a Doctor of Science degree in taxonomy from Harvard). Kinsey (Liam Neeson) immerses himself in the study of the gall wasp, whose North American varieties were almost completely unresearched. Over the next 20 years, he amasses the world's largest collection (over 1 million) of the insect, becoming its leading expert.

At Indiana, he meets Clara Bracken McMillen, nicknamed "Mac" (Laura Linney), a brilliant chemistry student and fellow botanist, who shares his interest in insect evolution. He asks her to marry him, but she hesitates at first. "I'm a free thinker, and you're so churchy," she says. The irony is not lost on the viewer.

The young couple, both virgins on their wedding night, suffer painful difficulties related to inexperience and ignorance, and seek a solution through open-minded investigation. Astounded by the lack of resources available and the prejudices and misconceptions that dominate sex education (and prevail among his own students), Kinsey begins to teach a "Marriage Course" at the university, which becomes enormously popular. He introduces a lecture by stating, "There are only three kinds of sexual abnormalities: abstinence, celibacy and delayed marriage."

Propelled in part by the desire to overcome his own confusions and inhibitions, Kinsey—with the same single-minded drive exhibited in his entomological research—sets out to discover the facts of what people do

sexually. He assembles a carefully vetted research team comprising Clyde Martin (Peter Sarsgaard), Paul Gebhard (Timothy Hutton) and Wardell Pomeroy (Chris O'Donnell). The group begins the process of taking the detailed sexual histories of individuals—eventually totaling nearly 18,000—whose collective aim is to record, with as much accuracy as possible, the sexuality activity of the population. The film pays particular attention to Kinsey's careful development of a non-judgmental and non-moralizing interviewing technique.

Traveling throughout the country in search of diversity, Kinsey and his colleagues go to prisons, gay bars, and urban and suburban areas to obtain "sex histories." At the time Kinsey obtained sex histories, much of what his informants were doing was against the law. Homosexuality was illegal in all states, as was any form of oral sex. In Indiana, it was an offense to "incite to or encourage masturbation."

Condon, basing himself on biographers, depicts Kinsey and some of his colleagues engaging in sexual exploration and experimentation that at times yields unwelcome and painful consequences. Physiology runs headlong into psychology. Nonetheless, throughout their marriage, Kinsey's wife Mac is a supporter and facilitator of her husband's work. (She is reported to have amused visitors with the quip, "I hardly see him anymore at night since he took up sex.")

The publications of Kinsey's two volumes on male and female sexuality generate an intense reaction in the US and internationally.

In fact, Kinsey had chosen a "respectable" medical publisher in Philadelphia, which planned a 10,000 press run but increased that to 25,000 as interest grew. One must recall this was an imposing academic tome, running 804 pages and weighing some three pounds. Its price was \$6.50 (\$50.00 in 2003 prices). To the surprise of everyone involved, the book shot up the best-seller list. Within 10 days of the book's release, the publisher was obliged to order a sixth printing, making a remarkable 185,000 copies in print.

Kinsey becomes a celebrity. Reporters surround him and demand to know if a Hollywood film is likely to result. He cannot imagine any interest in such a project and tells reporters to make better use of their time elsewhere.

The final section of the film treats the problems and pressures that arise as a result of the Kinsey project's very success. His work becomes the object of right-wing attacks. The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover demands that Kinsey help him expose homosexuals in the State Department, a proposal that horrifies the scientist. A Republican congressman organizes hearings into tax-exempt foundations. His real target is the Rockefeller Foundation, which is financially supporting Kinsey's research. Under pressure from the right-wing politician, the foundation withdraws its support.

(Ironically, as biographer James H. Jones reveals, Kinsey was a social conservative, an opponent of the New Deal and the "welfare state" in general, who reportedly voted Republican in the majority of elections.)

To convey Kinsey's growing isolation, the filmmakers show the Indiana University trustees rejecting an appeal from the school's president for continued funding for his project—although, in fact, the trustees ultimately granted the request and the Kinsey Institute still exists at the university. The scientist's tensions and anxieties, exacerbated by a

weak heart and an overuse of medication, gravely undermine his health. “The enforcers of chastity are massing once again,” Kinsey laments late in the film. It closes with Kinsey and Mac ambling through a sequoia grove—a non-verbal moment of reconnection.

In creating *Kinsey*, the filmmakers have brought attention to a largely forgotten figure, who courageously enhanced the body of knowledge about a vital aspect of the human condition.

The warmth of the performances testify to the commitment of all the actors—leading as well as supporting—to the project. Neeson, a Golden Globe nominee for his performance in the film, is outstanding in his rendition of the character. Complex and difficult emotions are given relatively nuanced expression. Linney as Mac also stands out. Lynn Redgrave was so moved by the subject and the script that she signed on for a cameo role, one that reveals something about the liberating influence of Kinsey’s labor. The brief scene serves as an antidote to the isolation felt by Kinsey at the height of his persecution.

Kinsey presents a fairly complex portrayal of the scientist. It attempts to dramatize its central character’s rather astonishing transformation, summarized by biographer Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy (on whose book the filmmakers most closely relied): “[I]n the space of less than a year this middle-aged academic (in 1938 Kinsey was 44), a respectable and respected entomologist at a middle-rate, Midwestern university, was more or less to abandon the work of 20 years, in which he achieved the highest scientific distinctions possible, and hurl himself recklessly into sex research—not so much a profession as a dubious, almost *demi-mondaine* activity, neither respectable nor respected, indeed regarded by many people as shocking and even immoral.” What was in the social and intellectual air that made this transformation possible is less well treated by the filmmakers.

Nevertheless, in contrast with the thoroughly formulaic character of most contemporary biographical films, Condon creates a more or less convincing drama within which his central concerns emerge with some degree of spontaneity. There is simplification, some of it almost inevitable, and “poetic license,” but on the whole the filmmakers have done a commendable job of condensing a complex life and career.

Kinsey undoubtedly changed the way in which Americans and others thought about sexual activity. “Only variations are real,” he asserts in an early scene, referring to gall wasps, but the implications are clear. He helped make known what had been kept secret, that human sexual behavior was extraordinarily diverse and complex and that the religious-based, officially sponsored version of sex was a debilitating fiction, “Morality disguised as fact.”

Uncorrupted by money or fame throughout his career, Kinsey was determined to challenge the conventional notions of right and wrong. “Biologically, I see only two bases for the recognition of abnormality. If a particular type of variation is rare in a given population, it, perhaps, may be called abnormal.” A “physiologic malfunction” was his second criterion for abnormality. “In that sense, cancers and tumors may be called abnormal,” he reasoned.

He was critical of those psychologists who reasserted “society’s concept of what is acceptable in individual behavior, with no objective attempt to find out, by actual observation, what the incidence of the phenomenon may be.” He further asserted that in the organic world, nature achieves progress through individual differences. His belief was that “In the differences between men lie the hopes of a changing society.”

Kinsey had his shortcomings as a positivistic thinker and perhaps as a statistician, but he did not come under attack from the right for his weaknesses.

Gathorne-Hardy points out that Kinsey was also the first scientist to obtain information on sexuality from the working classes and the black population in America. Past researchers, “assuming the classes to be homogeneous had all relied on college-level samples to represent

everyone.” Kinsey collaborator Wardell Pomeroy wrote that Kinsey proved that race was not a factor in human sexual behavior. This was an important assertion at a time when the civil rights movement was beginning to gain momentum.

The US underwent vast changes in the years between Kinsey’s birth and the commencement of his sex research. Anthony Comstock, reactionary zealot and leader of the censoring brigade, still wielded considerable power at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900, Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* was essentially suppressed for its depiction of extra-marital relations and the author’s refusal to make “vice” punished. In 1906, Comstock, in his position as special “postal inspector” raided the Art Students League in New York for its use of nude models. He denounced George Bernard Shaw as an “Irish smut dealer.” Shaw observed that “Comstockery” confirmed “the deep-seated conviction of the Old World that America is a provincial place, a second-rate, country-town civilization after all.”

American Puritanism and provincialism received serious blows in the first decades of the twentieth century from economic changes and world events (the First World War, the Russian Revolution), above all, as well as the efforts of cultural innovators such as Dreiser and H. L. Mencken. The devastation of the Depression and the social and intellectual upheavals of the 1930s only further discredited the hypocritical, official morality preached by the ruling elite.

Kinsey’s first major work on sexuality appeared during the first years of the Cold War, on the eve of the McCarthyite witch-hunts. A frantic effort was being made to put the genie of social rebellion and criticism back in the bottle. Conformism, stagnation and opportunism were on the order of the day. With its liberating and “leveling” impulses, its statistical evidence (despite whatever sampling errors Kinsey and his team might have made) that all forms of consensual, adult sexual activity were practiced in the US and needed to be treated as “normal,” how could this work not have come under attack from the most reactionary, backward social elements?

And the attacks continue. Condon’s film has provoked outrage from conservative Christians and “family values” groups, who have been picketing cinemas in New York, Los Angeles and other cities. In an act of particularly disgraceful (but predictable) cowardice, New York City’s Public Broadcasting television station, WNET, bowed to the Christian right and killed a spot for the movie just three weeks after the November elections.

Sexual research funding is under attack in the US. In 2003, a Republican-backed bill to cut \$1.5 million of National Institute of Health funding for sex research was defeated by only 212-210. Some 150 NIH-funded scientists attacked by congressional Republicans last year have been essentially blacklisted. University budgets for sex research have steadily shrunk since the 1970s. The Republican right, virtually unopposed by the liberal establishment, has embraced the reactionary and repressive fantasies of fundamentalist Christianity as its own.

Kinsey was misguided in supposing that human beings would be liberated simply through ridding themselves of sexual ignorance. That liberation is first and foremost a political and economic act. However, as the ongoing controversy demonstrates, he was not wrong in believing that uncovering the truth about human behavior helps undermine conventional morality and, one might add, the ideological grip of the powers that be.

References:

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Kinsey: Sex the Measure of all Things by Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy

Dr. Kinsey and the Institute for Sex Research by Wardell B. Pomeroy

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