



The Voyeur

RICHARD PRINCE INTERVIEWS NAOMI HARRIS, NEW YORK CITY

According to American film, television, and commercial pornography, the only people having sex in the United States are young, lean, and cosmetically perfect. Naomi Harris begs to differ. In her four-year exploration of America's sexual underground the Canadian photographer found that those with the wildest sex lives are not Hollywood mannequins, but the ordinary folks next door: that nice lady at the bank, your family doctor, the friendly waitress, even your Sunday school teacher. Call it swinging, "the lifestyle," or indoor sports, married couples engaging in consensual extramarital sex may be the fastest-growing hobby in America.

To penetrate their world, 34-year-old Harris joined the swingers on their home turf, often working in just sneakers and a tool belt to hold her camera gear. In 48 months she photographed 38 parties, crisscrossing the country from Mahwah, New Jersey, to Pleasanton, California; Big Lake, Minnesota, to Washington, Texas.

She attended Christmas parties, Halloween parties, Valentine's Day parties, Super Bowl parties, and a very naked Thanksgiving dinner. She photographed fornication in pickup trucks and on luxury yachts. She met doctors, lawyers, farmers, ministers, schoolteachers, and full-time moms, and found all of these unlikely sensualists warm, welcoming, and more than eager to show her the real shape of American sex.

Studies from the early '70s estimated that around 1% of married American couples had engaged in swinging at least once. In 1995 the North American Swing Club Association revised that

estimate to 15%. Today there's no telling how many couples have dabbled, but as the lifestyle grows, the demographics remain essentially the same. For the most part, swingers today, as in the '70s, are:

- ★ Middle to upper-middle class
- ★ Between 35 and 55 years old
- ★ Better educated than the average American
- ★ Caucasian
- ★ The product of religious Christian homes
- ★ Less jealous than most
- ★ Liberal only in their attitude towards sex

From personal observation I would add that swingers are unusually sociable, believe strongly in unconditional love, embrace the sanctity of marriage, and consider their mates to be their best friends. They also believe strongly in fidelity; they've simply redefined the word to include sex in the presence of one's spouse. For swingers, fornication is a shared hobby, like snowboarding or stamp collecting, and considered safe as long as a couple's emotional bond is honored. Simply put, the secret to successful swinging is trusting that love conquers all.

It's a sweetly romantic concept of love seemingly at odds with fucking the neighbors, but swingers are, for the most part, old-fashioned folks. These are people raised on traditional American values, the couples who in generations past stayed together for the sake of the children when the passion died. Today, they keep the passion alive through

swinging, and more and more of them are going public with their lifestyle.

Those who prefer the airbrushed fantasy of commercial sexuality may wish they'd stay in seclusion, but as Naomi Harris says, "The media may not consider them sexy, but they consider themselves sexy, and because of that confidence they are having better sex than the rest of us. I'm jealous of the orgasms these people have and I admire their freedom to try absolutely anything and to be so comfortable in their bodies."

Who among us wouldn't like the kind of confidence that allows you to walk into a roomful of strangers, drop your clothes, and know that you're going to score? This is the reality of swinging in America, and as realities go, it ain't half bad. Artist Richard Prince discovered Naomi's work in TASCHEN's *The New Erotic Photography* and asked to interview her for this book. Following is Harris on her fascination with swingers, getting naked on Miami Beach and the difficulty of organizing a 26-person gangbang.

—Dian Hanson

Richard Prince: First ... let's get some of the background out of the way ... Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Naomi Harris: I was born in Toronto, Canada, on May 26, 1973. We lived in a suburb of Toronto called Downsview, where my parents still live today, nearly 40 years later. It was an extremely Orthodox Jewish neighborhood, and though we were observant of the Sabbath and other Jewish traditions, we certainly were not in the same league as many of our neighbors.

In fact, many of the children in the area called me a goy [non-Jew] because I wore pants and they wouldn't play with me.

High school, college, graduate school?

I went to a Jewish day school for nine years, where we were taught English studies half a day and Hebrew studies the other. I was accepted to York University, which is a school in Toronto, and lived at home for the four years I studied for my bachelor of fine arts.

On a trip to Europe in my third year of school I took photos and decided this was what turned me on. I applied to New York's International Center of Photography for their documentary program and, lo and behold, I was accepted. It wasn't until I moved to New York City at age 24 that I left home for the first time.

When did sex first enter the picture?

I kissed my first boy, gave my first blowjob, had a boy go down on me, and lost my virginity all in the span of one month. All with the same guy, mind you. I was just barely 16 and it was the summer of grade 10. I had just left the awkward stage of adolescence, meaning I lost about 20 pounds and sprouted up about six inches. I had a newfound sense of confidence, one I have never quite seemed to capture again, and once I began to experiment, didn't see the point to stop. It wasn't that I was "fast" or anything; I just didn't put the same kind of weight on "waiting for marriage" or the right guy. I was curious, he was

around, and that was it. We lasted all of about a month and then he broke up with me.

I was "one of the guys" in high school; I suppose I still am. I didn't date much, just occasionally hooked up with people, and even then didn't do that so often either. Funny, you would think most guys would be all over the liberal idea of having a good time without dating, but guys are prudes.

Are you married, single, boyfriend, girlfriend, divorced, kids?

I am single. Hard to date when people find out what you photograph. Intimidates the good ones and attracts the wrong ones. I would like to find the person who checks in on me when I'm on the road, whether or not that is the result of marriage. And I would like to have children—but not by myself, as so many of my married friends suggest I do, because I think the whole appeal to having children is to watch them learn and take on both your traits.

What about the nudist thing ... When did you first start going to nudist beaches? Were you comfortable with being nude? What's it like and why do you prefer to be without clothes ...?

Nude beaches. I was living in Miami and heard about this place called Haulover Beach. That was in December 1999, so I was 26. I actually went to welcome the millennium there at a nudie New Year's party. I would go by myself when I didn't have any work and sit alone off to the side. There would be big groups being crazy and having a blast and I was just too

shy, partially because I was naked, but more so because I didn't know anyone.

One day I rolled over from my belly to apply sunscreen on my back and noticed some pervert filming me with a video camera hidden under a towel between his legs. The camera was aimed right at my birth canal. I was mortified. I decided I best make some friends quick and joined this nice little group that was there every weekend.

Dorie and her gang were true nudists in the sense that they were there for that love of being nude and not for anything sexual. They would have potlucks for all the holidays and welcomed me into their fold. I felt extremely comfortable with them. I witnessed things like people injecting insulin, flossing their teeth, all normal things one does everyday, but they looked so funny doing it nude that I had to start bringing my camera. Now since I too was naked most people didn't have a problem with me photographing them, but of course I always asked permission first, as I still do.

What's the best part of being on a nudist beach?

I hate shopping for bathing suits and get depressed while trying them on. I also hate tan lines. Go naked and voilà, the anxiety is gone. I guess my motivation for being nude is totally vain rather than sexual or naturalistic.

I know a lot of families go to those nudist camps ... But aren't there a lot of people at these camps in it for the sex?



Unfortunately, the day of the family nudist camp in America has died. Many of these nudist resorts that were geared for families have changed their focus to survive.

Last summer I was at a beach in Far Rockaway, Queens. Now the law in New York says that it's OK for a woman to be topless. A police officer walked by and I asked if it was OK; he gave me his seal of approval. Within 30 seconds of me taking my top off, this obnoxious woman began screaming at me: "Put your fucking top back on, there's fucking children here, they shouldn't have to see your tits. We aren't in Europe." I responded that her potty mouth was a far worse influence on children than seeing a pair of breasts, but then another woman said she didn't have a problem with someone being topless but that I had "saggy-assed tits," which I can assure you I don't. I was mortified, but later that afternoon the bitch who cussed me out began dry humping her boyfriend in front of her kid after smoking cigarettes and drinking all day. So, it's OK to practically have sex on the beach, just do it with your clothes on?

What's your reaction to seeing someone without clothes on? Is it a question of equality, the fact that no one has clothes on puts everybody on the same level? My own experience with public nudity is that it calms me down... Any thoughts on what it makes you feel?

I love it. I love that people have the confidence and security to do what makes them feel good. Quite frankly, you'd think many nudists would be too embarrassed to take their clothes off in front of others, but the fact that they don't care

and even prance around proudly makes me applaud them. I love to stare. I love to see the wide variety of body types.

Being relatively young and still in fairly good shape puts me at an advantage. Sometimes I feel uncomfortable about my body, that I've gained weight, am out of shape, and then I'll go to a nude beach and feel like Miss America. It's good for the ego.

You told me that someone approached you on one of these beaches and asked you to go with him to a swingers' party... Is that how you were first introduced to the "swinger" subject?

It was there at the beach that I met "Roger," a man in his 60s who was also a swinger. I didn't know it when I first started coming to the beach, but a good proportion of these nudists were also swingers and they would throw orgies on the beach when the sun was setting. I had to wait to be invited as a "key" to a club called Trapeze in Fort Lauderdale.

So one Sunday night, shortly before I moved away from Miami in 2002, I picked up "Roger" and we went over to the club. It was in a strip mall in a very commercial part of town. Non-descript, downright seedy from the outside, but inside there was a dance floor and a large buffet complete with a chef in white with a big chef's hat, carving roast beef and serving scalloped potatoes. We stuffed ourselves and then 20 minutes later went to the back room where all the sex was going on. You were not permitted to enter the back dressed; you had to change into a towel. As a nudist I was fine with that; as a young lady I felt like a piece of sirloin.

We went in the group sex room, which was more or less a row of about six mismatched beds pushed together. This was the first time I had ever seen anyone having sex in person. "Roger" leaned over to me and said, "Isn't that hot?" and I nodded in agreement, but it was all I could do to contain my laughter. I don't know if it was because I was about to explode from dinner or because I was in so many ways still a child, but I found the whole thing to be hilarious. And everyone was taking it all so seriously.

We stayed and watched for a couple of hours but neither of us did anything. That was the understanding; I was his guest but he had no expectations of me whatsoever. When we left I knew I had to start photographing this, because no one would believe me when I told stories of what I'd seen, like the woman at 3 in the morning picking food from the breakfast buffet stark naked but for heels.

Aside from getting permission... how long were you in the picture when you photographed that girl getting her birthday present?

I was in the room for about three hours. It was her 26th birthday and she was supposed to get a 26-person gangbang. I photographed the first couple and watched her being prepped for anal and her actually taking it from behind. Her husband was out recruiting others but since he was a mess from GHB he wasn't very successful. After her first couple, she got together with that gorgeous young girl and they used strap-ons on each other. All I could think about was how much

rough sex she'd already had and how was she going to survive 24 more people? I guess she was actually fortunate that her husband didn't come through with any others, and frankly, I had had enough at that point myself.

I'm assuming someone like Diane Arbus is a favorite of yours, but is there anyone else who doesn't come to mind that you really dig as a photographer?

I adore Diane Arbus. I love the fact that she was attracted to people who others chose to ignore. It's obvious that she had interactions with the people she photographed; one doesn't get those sorts of photos by being merely an observer. I also really love the English photographer Martin Parr, the Swedish photographer Lars Tunbjörk, the early work of Richard Billingham and Nick Waplington. Also Bellocq, Disfarmer, and August Sander. I suppose you can see the pattern here: I love the obscure and realism. I adore seeing what goes on behind closed doors and love the photographers who are able to get access to really tough situations.

You don't strike me as someone who thinks about sex a lot... My reading of you is that you're "regular" and not very "wild" or "different" and I think that this reaction to your "ordinariness" makes you particularly sexy... When I look at one of your swinger photos what I'm looking at is mostly you "outside" the picture looking at what you're photographing... It's you that I'm focusing on even though you're not in the picture. You standing there, half naked,

all naked, taking these photos of next-door neighbors having sex is something that turns me on... So I guess my question is... what turns you on?

I think I'm just worn out or way too busy. When I was much younger I had a real wild streak. I would love to have sex in public places, to rush home from dinner to get at each other, or actually have sex during dinner. I don't know if it's a side effect of watching so many people have sex, but my libido is all but shot. I don't crave it; I don't masturbate much; and I don't really miss it. I'd rather have a piece of chocolate cake. I was always under the impression that when women were in their early 30s they hit their sexual peak. I'm still waiting. But I talk to my friends, married, mostly mums, and none of them want sex either. They'll give their husbands blowjobs to avoid having intercourse. I used to love giving blowjobs. Turned me on.

I'd like to think I'm just dormant, like a bear hibernating for the winter, and when the right guy comes along I'll be ferocious. I want to be that sexy librarian again, the one that may not be much to look at in public, but once you get her behind closed doors, watch out. I did love sex and plan on doing so again. I think it's mostly a matter of finding that person who actually knows how to push my buttons. I guess the long-winded answer to your question about what turns me on is this: a man who's not scared to use a little force when necessary, can deduce what I'm thinking and needing without asking, and makes me laugh until tears roll down my cheeks.

A strong wit: That's my greatest turn on.

