Conclusion
Victorian Ignorance

This book has focused on the sellers of sexual knowledge. By examining their activities, hopes, and anxieties, I have aimed to bring into focus challenges that agents across the political spectrum encountered as they sought to sell sexual knowledge in print. *Selling Sexual Knowledge* has shown that print was, and was understood to be, crucial to circulating knowledge, advancing causes, consolidating collective identities, and establishing moral and epistemic authority. It has also illustrated how difficult would-be authorities in sexual matters could find exploiting these affordances of print in a context in which it could always be co-opted, recast, and misunderstood. And it has charted how they sought to remedy problems they encountered by managing print and interpretation. By way of conclusion, I want to turn to a figure that has haunted this book but rarely been the focus of its attention: the reader. More accurately, I want to more closely consider the meaning of the history this book has traced for readers of two kinds. One is the Victorian reader: the kind of non-expert reader who would have seen, bought, read, lent, borrowed, hidden, thrown out, or ignored works mentioned in *Selling Sexual Knowledge*, from *The Secrets of Nature Revealed* to *Sexual Inversion*. The other is the kind of reader that this book is intended for: the scholarly reader trying to make sense of the past by sifting through its remains.

It was my interest in what and how ordinary Victorians read to learn about sex that led me to the research that informs this book. That such readers' stories ended up appearing in it infrequently is partly a result of the challenges of finding them. Reading is a process that is often internal and always ephemeral. Evidence of reading experiences – like evidence of sexual acts – is hard to locate, and difficult to interpret.[1] This is true even of accounts in letters, diaries, and autobiographies, which frequently record acts of reading decades after the fact, and do not document reading experiences evenly. There are far fewer accounts of reading about sex from the Victorian period than there are accounts

[1] See, respectively, Robert Darnton, "First Steps toward a History of Reading," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 51, no. 2/3 (2014): 152–177 and Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

of reading Shakespeare.[2] Indeed, scholars had discovered so few by the early 2000s that Jonathan Rose, an indefatigable historian of reading, concluded that the circulation of sexual information in cheap print must have been very constricted.[3] Early twentieth-century accounts from readers looking back on the Victorian period are more plentiful, but most do little to trouble this view: they invariably focus on their authors' confusion about sex, recalling the Victorian era as an era of extreme sexual ignorance.[4]

These elements of the historical record would seem to contradict the picture that *Selling Sexual Knowledge* has painted of the Victorian print world: a world in which the constant, unruly circulation of information about sex and reproduction was a source of great anxiety for groups working hard to establish themselves as authorities in these matters. Here, I want to consider that picture in relation to readers' claims about sexual ignorance, claims that also flowed from the pens of sexologists in the last chapter of the book. To do so, I will draw on the work of Kate Fisher, whose notion of an "epistemology of sexual ignorance" is enormously helpful for understanding of how a period that witnessed massive expansions in the production and circulation of works on sexual matters could have been remembered for so long and by so many for its dearth of sexual understanding.[5] This will enable me to offer a deeper reflection about what the changing print culture that *Selling Sexual Knowledge* has examined meant for Victorian readers. It will also offer me an opportunity to say a few words about the larger significance of the book's argument for scholarly readers.

Fisher argues that claims about sexual ignorance are a modern phenomenon that have less to do with what or how much people know about sex than they have to do with how sexual knowledge is constructed. To "conceptualize knowledge of sex and reproduction as requiring a journey out of ignorance derives from a distinctly modern understanding" of sexual knowledge, Fisher writes, an understanding that only makes sense "once an emphasis on core facts has replaced a premodern view of knowledge as a pluralistic mix of natural wisdom, bodily awareness, scholarly learning, lore and experience."[6] When "sexual knowledge" came to mean "biological facts," sexual ignorance became

[2] For a repository of traces of reading experience, see UK RED: Reading Experience Database, Open University. Accessed August 26, 2023, www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/.

[3] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 207.

[4] Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 209–211. See also Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 214–218 and Lisa Z. Sigel, *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), 45.

[5] Kate Fisher, "Modern Ignorance" in *Reproduction: Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Nick Hopwood, Rebecca Fleming, and Lauren Kassell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 471–472.

[6] Fisher, "Modern Ignorance," 471–472.

a natural state. From the late eighteenth century, to become knowledgeable about sex meant acquiring empirical information. One needed to scrutinize a model or a specimen in a museum; consult with an expert; or read a book written by an expert to *know* about sex, even – as anatomical museum owners' entreaty to visitors, "Know Thyself!" suggests – to understand one's own body and desire.

Opportunities for learning about sex in this way were everywhere during the Victorian period: works that addressed reproduction and sexual health were cheap, plentiful, and visible. And yet, it is not difficult to imagine that the kind of print culture described in this book would only have made many people feel more ignorant.[7] We should consider that medical works typically demanded prior knowledge that people did not always possess. Significantly, most accounts of reading about sex during the Victorian period are accounts of *first* experiences, the experiences of children or teenagers who had not experimented much sexually.[8] As we have seen, however, the vast majority of medical titles in circulation assumed sexual experience. They aimed to enlighten grown-up, sexually active readers about the physiology of reproduction, the symptoms of venereal disease, means by which pregnancy might be prevented, or the nature of desire. They did not usually explain what heterosexual, let alone homosexual, sexual acts were, how they were performed, or exactly how they related to pregnancy or venereal disease. It was only in the last decades of the century that those who claimed authority in sexual matters began to consider such knowledge "scientific" and necessary to offer to the public in print. In this context, it is little wonder that Victorian accounts of youthful reading speak so often of confusion.

Many medical works also used terms that were not universally understood. Alan Clark, the son of Bolton textile workers, found language and diagrams in the medical textbooks that he perused at the public library "incomprehensible."[9] I have argued that the increasing specialization of the language in such works made experiences like Clark's more and more likely. However, it is not clear that many works aimed at popular audiences would have been much more understandable to working-class readers, particularly in the early decades of the Victorian period, when they were routinely made by cutting and pasting parts of more specialized publications. Even medical terms in Holywell Street catalogues could confuse, as marginalia translating "labia" to "cunt" suggests.[10] And although middle-class men

[7] Fisher surveys some of these effects in broader terms than I do here, covering a longer period, in "Modern Ignorance," 480–483.

[8] Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 207–211; Flint, *The Woman Reader*, 214–218.

[9] Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 210.

[10] *A Select Catalogue of Books, Facetious and Amorous* ([London]: s.n., n.d.), DA 676, box 6, item 51, MSCE. This may explain the popularity of *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, a work that addressed procreation in older and probably more accessible terms.

like George Bedborough easily deciphered terms increasingly used in advertising, such as "curious," "from life," and "skin diseases," as Fisher points out, such euphemisms could bewilder the uninitiated.[11] Medical works on sexual matters were cheap and plentiful, and information about how to acquire them was everywhere. Yet, purchasing them and understanding what they contained both required specific kinds of literacy.

The ways these works were framed is equally, if not more, significant. Like making sexual-scientific authority, the narrower activity of selling information about sex and reproduction necessarily involved producing ignorance. Sellers of sexual knowledge interpolated readers with very different levels of interpretive agency. However, as I emphasized at the end of the last chapter, they all portrayed sexual knowledge as something that they had and that others lacked. This framing played a major role in the promotion of popular medical works during the first decades of the Victorian period. Pornographers framed such works as containers of "secret" knowledge, even in cases when they had circulated for centuries. Consulting surgeons framed their manuals as containers of elite knowledge that was only now being made accessible to the common man or woman. That these works were distributed by post in sealed envelopes – sometimes, advertisements suggest, to people ordering them under assumed names – also seems significant. Such modes of marketing and distribution, as Fisher argues, could make sexual knowledge feel rare, forbidden, and suppressed even when it was none of these things.[12]

In the hands of late nineteenth-century sex reformers and sexologists, this framework was adapted in ways that offered sellers of sexual knowledge a still more powerful justification for their ambitions.[13] Medical publications had long been portrayed as containers of knowledge that could enable people to manage their bodies, desires, and relationships in better ways. Now, they were portrayed as containers of knowledge that had the power to dispel a deep-seated cultural ignorance of sex that destabilized relationships, fostered confusion, guilt, and shame, and even produced "abnormal" sexual behaviour. This representation of sexual ignorance as a kind of social disease and of sexual-scientific knowledge as its cure was a fixture of sex reform and advice literature through the first half of the twentieth century. By the end of the 1940s, as Matthew Lavine has observed, authors' perennial diagnoses of sexual ignorance and perennial claims that they were "the first to shatter the taboo" by dispelling it had become such tired tropes that they practically parodied themselves.[14] Exhausted, they faded amid the rise

[11] Fisher, "Modern Ignorance," 481. [12] Fisher, "Modern Ignorance," 481.

[13] Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918–1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66; Fisher, "Modern Ignorance," 475.

[14] Matthew Lavine, "'Advanced Marriage Technique': Sex as a Perfectible Skill in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Marriage Manuals," *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 4 (2021): 476.

of the so-called sexual revolution. Modern Britain was cast as a sexualized society, one in which – for better or, in the eyes of many, worse – everyone knew about sex. In this context, personal claims of sexual ignorance began to fade too.

What lingered on was the history of sexual knowledge that was established alongside the tropes that Lavine describes. That history, as Havelock Ellis's "The Revaluation of Obscenity" suggests, identified the Victorian period as the nadir of sexual understanding in the West, an era marked by an anxiety about sex that was so potent and so pervasive that sexual discussion was almost entirely repressed and, where it could not be repressed, was suppressed. Major elements of this narrative have been debunked time and again. As Lesley Hall has noticed, hardly a year goes by before another popular history appears to tell us that the Victorians knew about sex, and that they had a lot of it, in a lot of different ways.[15] For most of the time I spent working on this book, I had no desire to join the chorus. Arguments against the idea of Victorians' ignorance of sex have become almost as shopworn as previous arguments for it. Over time, however, I came to believe that aspects of the narrative that Ellis helped construct remain influential, even in sophisticated scholarship on Victorian sexuality. Michel Foucault's argument that viewing a period in the relatively recent past as an era of sexual repression is appealing because it enables us to see ourselves as liberated offers one explanation for its stubborn stranglehold on popular culture.[16] However, I would argue that what remains of its influence on scholarship has more to do with the hall of illusions that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century contests for sexual authority produced.

One of the most significant challenges that historians of sexuality have faced – a challenge famously identified by Foucault in the 1970s – is figuring out how to interpret historical claims about sexual knowledge and its circulation. Interpreting claims about sexual ignorance, as Fisher argues, requires a fine-grained understanding of the frameworks in which sexual knowledge was situated. Without a detailed grasp of how sexual knowledge was conceptualized and how it was mediated, all we can do is take historical claims about sexual ignorance at face value. And taking these claims at face value is easy to do when the cultural narratives that we have received from (late) Victorians tell us that we should. *Selling Sexual Knowledge* has argued something similar of Victorian claims about obscenity and censorship. Scholars developed sophisticated understandings of how obscenity was constructed decades ago, showing that Victorian models of obscenity relied on paternalistic ideas about reading that framed certain groups as especially vulnerable to media influences.

[15] Lesley Hall, "The Victorians: Our Others, Our Selves?" in *Sex, Knowledge, and Receptions of the Past*, ed. Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 161.
[16] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; repr., New York: Random House, 1990).

However, like claims about sexual ignorance, Victorian claims about obscenity are too often accepted at face value as uncomplicated expressions of belief, and claims about what was censored on the grounds of obscenity too often accepted as fact. And it is easy to accept these claims, because they affirm another idea that we inherited from late Victorian sellers of sexual knowledge: that the Victorians were uniquely anxious about sex, and that this anxiety translated into concerted (if not always consistent or successful) attempts to regulate the circulation of knowledge about it.

This book has made my case for the idea that understanding Victorian claims about medical obscenity and censorship requires understanding sexual knowledge's situation in print. My work often led me away from topics typically associated with work in the history of sexuality. When I shared early, messy drafts of this book, some colleagues expressed frustration that I seemed more interested in medical practitioners' debates about what an advertisement was than I was in how works at issue in obscenity trials represented sex. Yet, as I hope I have demonstrated, understanding how medical print culture operated in practical terms furnishes a richer context for interpreting Victorian claims about obscenity. It enables us to understand that the circulation of sexual knowledge did become the subject of highly politicized debates as it was consolidated as a field of medical expertise, debates that often focused on young, male, and working-class readers and their supposed vulnerability to the influences of print. Yet, because they offered ways of managing how books, people, movements, and institutions were understood, claims about obscenity and censorship were deeply entangled with contests over what constituted expert knowledge, who could make it known, and for what purposes. Alongside sexual ignorance, medical obscenity and medical censorship were to a great extent produced by would-be authorities to sell sex as a field of expertise and direct its applications.