

Shere Hite, Who Challenged Myths of Female Sexuality, Dies at 77

By Katharine Q. Seelye

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Her 1976 book, ‘The Hite Report,’ touched off ‘a revolution in the bedroom’ and has sold tens of millions of copies. But harsh criticism drove her to self-exile in Europe.



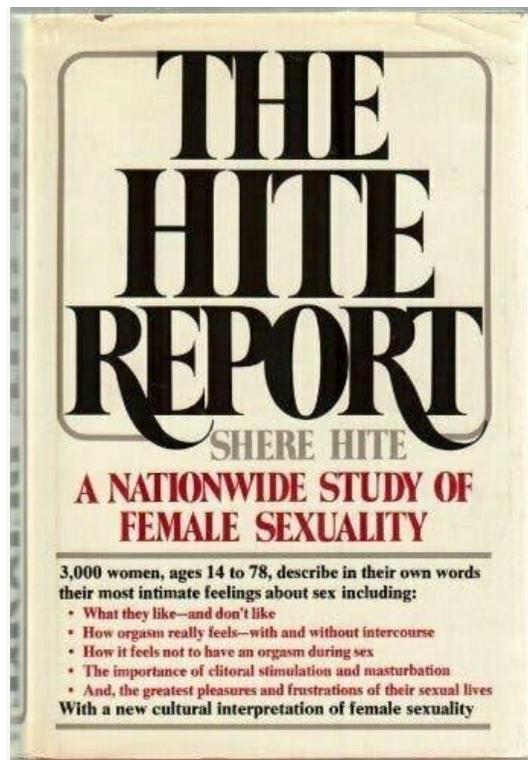
Shere Hite in 1976, the year her book “The Hite Report” helped awaken women to their sexual power and advance the Second Wave of feminism. Credit...Arthur Schatz/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images
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Shere Hite, who startled the world in the 1970s with her groundbreaking reports on female sexuality and her conclusion that women did not need conventional sexual intercourse — or men, for that matter — to achieve sexual satisfaction, died on Wednesday at her home in London. She was 77.

Her husband, Paul Sullivan, confirmed the death to The Guardian. The newspaper quoted a friend of Ms. Hite's as saying that she had been treated for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

Her most famous work, "The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality" (1976), challenged societal and Freudian assumptions about how women achieved orgasm: It was not necessarily through intercourse, Ms. Hite wrote; women, she found, were quite capable of finding sexual pleasure on their own.

seismic at the time and "sparked a revolution in the bedroom," as Ms. magazine reported. For all the women who had faked orgasm during intercourse, the Hite Report helped awaken their sexual power and was seen as advancing the liberation of women that was rapidly underway.



The book became an instant best seller and has been translated into a dozen languages. More than 48 million copies have been sold worldwide.

What set the Hite Report apart from other studies were the questionnaires at the heart of it. More than 3,000 women were given anonymity in answering the queries, allowing them to write candidly and open-endedly — not in response to multiple-choice questions — about their experiences.

"Researchers should stop telling women what they *should* feel sexually and start asking them what they *do* feel sexually," Ms. Hite wrote. She described her questionnaires as a "giant rap session on paper."

In revelatory first-person testimonials, more than 70 percent of the respondents shattered the notion that women received sufficient stimulation during basic intercourse to reach climax. Rather, they said, they needed stimulation of the clitoris but often felt guilty and inadequate about it and were too embarrassed to tell their sexual partners.

United States, marked a sharp turning point after the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s, which essentially had given women license to have no-strings sex with as many partners as men had always had, but which had done little to change the male-centric dynamic in bed.

“Most of the respondents to Hite’s questionnaires thought that the sexual revolution was a myth, that it had left them free to say yes (but not to say no),” Erica Jong, [author of “Fear of Flying”](#) (1973), wrote in reviewing “The Hite Report” for The New York Times.

These respondents, Ms. Jong added, felt that “the double standard was alive and well, that the quantity of sex had gone up, not the quality.”

If women felt liberated, many men were alarmed. They regarded Ms. Hite as an unwelcome messenger who was telling them that they had been doing things all wrong. At the same time, the rising Christian right saw her championing of women’s sexual pleasure as contributing to the dissolution of the family.

The Year’s Obituaries

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Notable Deaths 2020

She was further accused of using flawed methodology and skewed sampling, and was castigated in vicious personal terms. Playboy magazine, for which she had once posed topless, called her work “The Hate Report.” Some said she should change her name to Sheer Hype.



Ms. Hite in 1987. “Researchers should stop telling women what they should feel sexually and start asking them what they do feel sexually,” she wrote. Credit...Bettye Lane/Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

Ms. Hite continued to write, following the first Hite Report with “The Hite Report on Men and Male Sexuality” (1981), in which she analyzed questionnaires from more than 7,000 men and concluded that repressed anger and infidelity were common features of American marriages.

She rounded out her trilogy with “Women and Love: A Cultural Revolution in Progress” (1987), in which questionnaires from 4,500 women led her to conclude that women regarded their relationships with men with “increasing emotional frustration and gradual disillusionment.”

Both later books were [widely criticized](#) as relying on unrepresentative samples of respondents. After the publication of “Women and Love,” which Time magazine said was simply an excuse for her “male-bashing,” Ms. Hite received death threats in the mail and on her answering machine.

Many dismissed her as an angry feminist, though she had come to her feminism in a roundabout way. As a graduate student at Columbia University, she earned money for tuition as a part-time model. One of the brands she posed for was Olivetti typewriters, which showed her as a leggy blonde caressing the keys. But when she saw the ad’s

tagline — “The typewriter so smart, she doesn’t have to be” — she was horrified and soon joined a group of women picketing the Olivetti offices against the very ad she was in.

That led to her attending meetings of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women. At one meeting, by her account, the topic was the female orgasm and whether all women had them. There was silence, until someone suggested that Ms. Hite look into the matter. When she saw how little research had been done, she began what would become “The Hite Report.”

The tidal wave of anger and resentment against her inspired 12 prominent feminists, including Gloria Steinem and Barbara Ehrenreich, to denounce the media assaults on her as a conservative backlash directed not so much against one woman as “against the rights of women everywhere.”

And it fueled Ms. Hite’s decision to give up her American passport, leave the country and settle in Europe, where she felt her ideas were more accepted.

“I renounced my citizenship in 1995,” [she wrote in 2003](#) in *The New Statesman*. “After a decade of sustained attacks on myself and my work, particularly my ‘reports’ into female sexuality, I no longer felt free to carry out my research to the best of my ability in the country of my birth.”

The *New York Times* [caught up with her in Germany in 1996](#) in the apartment she shared with her German husband, Friedrich Horicke, a pianist, in Cologne. “The hunted look she had during her last years in the United States has long gone,” *The Times* wrote, “and she has regained her sense of humor — but only because she is, at last, being taken seriously.”

Shirley Diana Gregory was born on Nov. 2, 1942, in Saint Joseph, Mo., to Paul and Shirley (Hurt) Gregory. Her mother was 16 at the time, and her father was a serviceman. The marriage ended soon after World War II did. When her mother remarried, Shirley took the surname of her stepfather, Raymond Hite, a truck driver who had adopted her, and started calling herself Shere (pronounced share). After that marriage failed, Shere was raised chiefly by her grandparents, and when they divorced in the mid-1950s, she went to live with an aunt in Florida.

Ms. Hite received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in history from the University of Florida at Gainesville in the mid-1960s. She attended graduate school at Columbia, where she started to work toward a doctorate in social history but left when she was told that she could not write her dissertation on female sexuality.

Ms. Hite married Mr. Horicke, who was 19 years her junior, in 1985 in New York. She moved to Europe with him in 1989, and after relinquishing her American passport in 1995, she became a German citizen. They later divorced, and she settled in north London with her second husband, Mr. Sullivan, who is her only immediate survivor.

Ms. Hite lectured at universities around the world and wrote several more books, including a memoir, “The Hite Report on Hite: A Sexual and Political Autobiography” (2000). It was her attempt to set the record straight about her life and work and answer her critics.

In its review of the memoir, The Guardian lamented that a woman who had set out to defy sexism had been condemned as vain and narcissistic.

“Strip away the sneers,” the newspaper wrote, “and what really scares people about Hite is the fact that she is a beautiful, clever, sexy, self-made woman.”