

# Sexy-genarians: the over-60s still in search of love

**Like Jane Fonda, H el ene Pascal's  
lust for life and men is undiminished  
by her age, she tells Valerie Grove**

**F**rench-born, university educated, intelligent, attractive, a lover of art and gardens; attentive to others, a reader of books... So H el ene Pascal described herself in the lonelyhearts ads she placed in *The Times* and other broadsheets. "French-born" proved alluring. She sometimes added "spirited". Her description was a true one, except for her claim to be 51: she was in fact 59. But disguising one's age is normal in soulmate-seeking circles. How else to indicate that she was no old biddy with a grey perm?

Blonde, chic and youthful, Pascal, now 72, sits in her garden in Belsize Park, northwest London, and offers a refreshing bowl of cherries; her cat stretches out alongside her. "I'm such a clich e," she laughs, "the spinster with her cat."



Actually she has been married twice. And she is not the first to write an honest and often hilarious book about her dating adventures. Jane Fonda, 73, attributes her own youthful looks to an active sex life in her new book *Prime Time*. Explaining her decision to write about her love life, she said: "I'm still sexually active. There are certain things that change as you age and I wanted to talk about that."

Fonda is in a relationship with music producer Richard Perry, 69, and claims that sex later in life is key to looking and feeling young. "I see people who aren't traditionally beautiful," she says, "but if they're having good sex, you can tell."

Fonda and Pascal both reflect a fascinating new demographic: Pascal wrote *Two's Company* at 66; an increasingly popular age for the pursuit of love. "Haven't you looked at your paper on Fridays?" Pascal asks, waving a recent Encounters page in *The Times*. "Count them: of 133 men, 87 are over 50. Of 131 women, 82 are over 50. More ▶

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## liferelationships

◀ people get divorced in their sixties than any other age. Their children have gone, they look at the spouse and think, "Can I spend another 30 years with this person?" A million over-sixties join internet-dating sites every year."

There was no internet dating when she first sought a companion, a fellow-adventurer. "Join groups," friends told her. "Go on courses." She did: and met other single women (who vanish when they find a man). So she resorted to the ads, examining the handwriting and phraseology, so revealing, in the replies.

Pascal is a bright woman, a former teacher who writes rather good poems, a culture-vulture whose ideal man would be able to discuss the novels of Anita Brookner — a tall order — and Hilary Mantel. "Someone expressive, who can communicate with his eyes, who is articulate, sincere. Someone to have nice long walks with and chat, and climb small mountains and see plays and share suppers and laugh with."

Such romantic notions make her account deeply sympathetic, as she navigates soaring hopes and plummeting disappointments: "The weekend is nearly at an end and he hasn't rung. Damn him." Even the promising respondents ("well-travelled, intelligent arts lover" and "Cambridge graduate, 58, who enjoys human nature, conversation and irony") can turn out to be cold-hearted, white-bearded, pompous and self-centred, capable of petty meanness and off-putting sartorial errors. And men are so prone to macho boasts: "In my experience small women mean big trouble!" "I know how to treat a lady..." "In my garage stands a Mercedes..." "At 67, hair and teeth still in evidence!"

James, from Devon, was wildly appealing on the phone ("I love his laughter, loud and male") but failed to call again. Prompted by her, he suggested meeting at a distant motorway service station. She was aghast, but they met: and it went brilliantly, with much harmonious laughter. Next day she was convinced her life had taken a new turn and felt rejuvenated. "My thoughts are full of him, full of surprise and wonder and also of dreadful sick-making hope. His face, his blue eyes dance in front of me, his irrepressible laughter."

Then silence again. Eventually, "as is



The author H el ene Pascal: "A million over-sixties join internet-dating sites each year"

**“Men are so other, so foreign — yet I still wanted one in my life**

usual with me, I'm afraid", she rang him, reproachful. Bad move. If there's a lesson in her book, it's that men still recoil when pursued.

Once she ditched someone, telling him he was "antisocial, contemptuous, arrogant". He promptly readvertised: "Antisocial, contemptuous, arrogant man wants to make amends with pretty, intelligent woman." "And some women wrote to him! And he was an absolute caveman!" Men, she writes, are "so other, so foreign — yet I still wanted one in my life".

"Maybe I am difficult," she adds. "I don't feel I am ordinary, and I don't want an ordinary man."

One man impressed her with his gift of a single rose. He was in fact living on benefits in a council flat in Birmingham. He moved in with her; she bought him a computer to set up a business, and supported him through heart surgery. By the time she got rid of him, she had lost most of her savings and had to sell her house. ("Well, he was a nice man," she says, "and French too, we were compatible in temperament, we rubbed along.") Today she'd be far less tolerant. While finishing her book,

she came across "the murderer" — a man lately out of prison for murdering his wife, looking for a new woman to share his country cottage.

Curiosity impelled her to meet him: "He was dislikeable enough to be interesting," she says. "As a trained counsellor I know that you can become as nasty as that only by being damaged, and he said he would tell me his story" — which made him good copy. She even came across the "Lion of Longleat" who sought "gentle consort, for grooming" promising "TLC under the baobab tree, conversation and wine with the zebra, Bath." The Marquess of Bath seeking to replenish his stock of wifelets? She rang, and heard a high, tremulous voice: she suspected a decoy. And there was no call back.

"The one I liked best," she says, "was the Irishman. He was lovely. He was broke but he thought life was beautiful." She liked his voice and wit. "I know we would have got on well." (Mick made a date, then cancelled at the last minute.)

Pascal had a true love when she was 15, a boy who died at 18. His smiling photo still sits on her desk.

Since then she admits to being a bad

picker of men, including the second husband, father of the daughter she had when she was 41. "None were capable of giving any affection," she says, "including my father. The fairies at the side of your crib have decreed your fate." Her lawyer father wanted his wife at his heels, dinner on the table, his two daughters compliant. Her mother, intelligent but frustrated, could be tyrannical; her love was "needy, anxious, conditional". "I could start writing properly only when my mother died, in 2003," Pascal says. "She had been, rather uncomfortably for me, 'sitting on my head' till then."

She's candid about the isolation of the solitary life and the consolations of going out for a large Danish, or an afternoon movie alone with a bag of jellybeans. She knows the dating game has become a literary sub-genre — she found *A Round-Heeled Woman*, by Jane Juska, who set out at 67 to have lots of sex, "entertaining and well-written" — but she felt she had to write about what it really feels like "and because I am a straightforward person I am not ashamed of showing need. I'm sorry nothing happened for me. I didn't intend to remain on my own, it's not fun."

Will she carry on looking? She'd need more energy and emotion than she has now, she says. "But [laughing] at least I've got a book out of it, and two plays I'm working on." The feedback from many friends who are fellow singletons is good: they find her book "resonant, powerful — and sad".

"That response reassured me," she says, "that I hadn't drowned it all in bouncy jollity."

*Two's Company: Love Again, a Woman's Journey* by H el ene Pascal (Tivoli Books) £8.99 at Amazon and other bookshops; [helenepascal.co.uk](http://helenepascal.co.uk)

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