



SEX *in the* SUBURBS

*Your neighbour's backyard party
might involve more whipping
than sipping, according to Sydney
author Stephanie Clifford-Smith*

"Kinky sex and fetishes
are more widespread than
anybody could predict,"
says Clifford-Smith
(posing for WHO).





G'day, sorry I'm not in uniform," said Baby Jennie, answering the door at a townhouse on Sydney's North Shore, where journalist Stephanie Clifford-Smith had arrived to research her book about sexual fetishes. Instead of wearing white towelling nappies, as she'd expected, her burly interviewee was dressed in a pink-and-white striped T-shirt, white gabardine shorts and pink ankle socks, with his black hair pulled back in a pink Alice band. "Come on in,"

he said, smiling. "And this is Baby Angelica."

"Baby Angelica" turned out to be a man in his thirties, who whispered hello in a soft lisp and curtsied before hopping up onto a "change table," where a female "helper" fitted him with a frilly pink nappy. "Then Angelica comes and sits at my feet, sipping from a baby's bottle," recalls Clifford-Smith, who asked what he was drinking. "He said, 'It's Coca-Cola with a little bit of Southern Comfort mixed in.' I nearly died laughing!"

It was hardly your usual afternoon tea, concedes Clifford-Smith, 47, whose book *Kink* (Allen & Unwin, \$29.99) investigates fetishes and their place in everyday relationships. "I had so many eye-popping experiences through the course of writing the book, but an afternoon with two adult babies was pretty full-on," says the author, explaining that infantilism—a fetish for wearing nappies and/or behaving like a baby—comes under the umbrella of BDSM, sexual practices involving bondage, discipline, sadism and sado-masochism. In the case of Baby Jennie, a successful professional in his forties, his kink "led to several divorces."

For Clifford-Smith, a Sydney-based travel and food writer, the decision to explore the often sordid world of fetishes was driven by her curiosity about their role in relationships. Over lunch with a friend in 2004, "we were just wondering if you were into something very unusual, sexually, how would you bring that up for the first time with your partner?" she recalls. "I wasn't so much interested in the nuts and bolts of fetishes, I wanted to know how they worked in relationships and if marriages survived the introduction of a fetish. Is there coercion—

one person going along with it because they have to?"

Within days, she'd placed a brief ad in her local paper: "Turned on by something unusual? Interview subjects required for ultra-confidential research ...". It was the beginning of a confronting, funny, creepy and occasionally dangerous adventure for Clifford-Smith, who will never forget when an appointment with an interviewee turned sinister. After meeting the man at a suburban shopping strip, he asked to speak inside his car. Clifford-Smith refused, but suggested they sit in her own car, though her skin crawled at the idea. "He was one very creepy guy and to be sitting so close to him in my car was an insanely stupid situation to have put myself into," she says. As "Dean" sat in her passenger seat discussing his penchant for B&D, the author smelt alcohol on his breath and noticed how he squirmed and began to sound breathless as his story unravelled. When he suggested a demonstration of his sexual response to being controlled and watched, Clifford-Smith swiftly wound up the interview.

Of all the hair-raising moments during her research, "this was when I felt most in peril. It was quite terrifying, to the point of feeling nauseous afterwards," she reflects. "He could have pulled a knife or a gun and forced me to drive us somewhere remote.

Looking back, I still know why I did it, though: I didn't want to lose the interview."

Through writing her book, Clifford-Smith snuck into a secret world where a vast spectrum of unusual sexual proclivities play a big part in the lives of everyday people. She met folk with fetishes for feet, shoes, sewing needles, spectacles and even amputation stumps, and she cites domination/submission scenarios among the most common kink she encountered. At a fetish party she attended in Sydney's seaside Clovelly, men and women wearing leather and latex stood around discussing how their kids were going at school and the merits of various camping spots as they waited for the floor-show to start. After a master took to his slave with a whip, "people had barbecue chicken and pasta salad for dinner," says Clifford-Smith, who felt safe and at ease at these meticulously organised gatherings. But the kinks got darker and dirtier the deeper she delved. The author says that while her two sons (now aged 21 and 24) were blasé about her assignment, her husband had big reservations.

"He was very worried about my welfare. He didn't want me to be doing this, and he wouldn't talk to me about it. It was really difficult because that's not what our relationship's like," she says, adding that he has since "come to terms" with the project. As to whether the research spiced up her own private life, Clifford-Smith says no—and that's OK: "There was every opportunity to have my interest piqued, but it all just confirmed my view that I'm vanilla," sums up the salsa-dancing enthusiast. "Still, good, straightforward sex is a wonderful thing. What's not to like?"

■ *By Karina Machado*

"An afternoon with two adult babies was pretty full-on"

—Stephanie Clifford-Smith



"I did think I was unshockable and discovered that I wasn't," says Clifford-Smith (left, at her book launch on Feb. 9 with interviewee Marcia Switch Bitch).



Photograph by TOM HOLLAND

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LOCATION: LOCAL TOWNHOUSE, DARLINGHURST, NSW; MODEL: ROMEO @ ALAFOAM MODELS; INSET: COURTESY OF STEPHANIE CLIFFORD-SMITH