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FEMALE OF THE SPECIOUS: LIAR, THY NAME IS WOMAN

By CHRISTINE B. WHELAN

April 6, 2008 -- Silda and Eliot Spitzer. Dina and Jim McGreevey. Michelle and David Paterson. Recent headlines have been ablaze with lies, extramarital affairs and scandal. And while the media focus has been on the men's deceptions, Susan Shapiro Barash's new book "Little White Lies, Deep Dark Secrets" argues that it's women's lies that are the most complex.

A man lies as a quick fix, claims Barash, while a woman carefully guards her secrets to create opportunities, keep friends and preserve family harmony. Indeed, lies and deceptions are integral part of the public persona women show to the world. "For the majority of women, the hard work of the lie is the payoff - as long as we pretend to be good girls, cleverly covering our tracks," Barash says.

But why? "Are women afraid to appear as we actually are in our overextended lives?" she asks. White lies - to help us get through the day with a bit less stress - should become less frequent tools for modern women "if we demand that our families and friends become tolerant of our needs," she writes.

With a mix of anecdotal vignettes, pop-culture references and original research from an online classified posting on craigslist, Barash offers up deliciously compelling stories and confessions of the many lies women tell the world - and themselves.

Some lies are defensible because they protect loved ones, like the woman who lies to her friends about her husband's arrest for drunk driving. Other lies are enormous and all-consuming, like the mother who never told her husband their third child isn't his. "It's a secret I'll take to the grave," says Sarah, a 39-year-old waitress. "But every day I look at my son's face and I think about it." Still others are silly or reckless, like the woman who fibs about her age, or the one who hides the truth about her credit card debt.

Women bend the truth in matters of finances, love, sex, success, eating disorders, abortions and gambling addictions. "I would go up and down in weight and my mother loved it when I was thin," begins one vignette. Another: "I never thought of myself as

someone who was obsessed with sex until I had this illicit relationship with someone much younger." Women lie about matters big and small, and Barash's compilation of these confessions makes the reader feel complicit in these acts, offering a perverse thrill.

That women lie about sex isn't surprising. But to read admissions from women who lie about their joy at motherhood, who can't tell their husband or their friends that they wish they never had children, exposes deep social taboos.

Men's lies are simplistic and less interesting, writes Barash, who spends little time discussing the other gender's fibs. "It isn't that men don't need to have secrets, but their skills at keeping the secret and their choice of secrets seem rudimentary compared to a woman's," she claims.

Perhaps the dualistic roles and social expectations of women - be a good girl, yet be successful in business; be a demure lady, yet a vixen in the marital bed - encourage women to bend the truth, and be more clever while doing it. Women's lies are more interesting because our society still clings to a pure and chaste ideal of womanhood.

Yet recent political scandals have demonstrated that men, too, experience conflicting emotions and create complex lies to get what they want, while pretending to meet social expectations of propriety.

Barash's statistics - that 80% say that women are better liars than men, and 75% of women report that they lie in the workplace to keep their jobs - should be taken with a grain of salt: Her data comes from a self-selecting group of women who responded to her craigslist query, and can't claim to be a representative sample. But it certainly confirms the conventional wisdom: Women are well-practiced liars.

Barash argues that women learn to lie from their mothers - and that these easy lies and subtle deceptions are passed on within the sisterhood as the unspoken way to get ahead in an unjust, demanding world.

If so, then modern women learned outdated lies: For women craving to escape "the problem that has no name," lying about a secret shopping spree or feigning contentment while baking treats for the Little League game might have been the best alternative to living alone. But for today's educated, liberated young women to mimic these lies is not only unnecessary, but damaging to the goal of gender equality. And that's the truth.

Christine B. Whelan is the author of "Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women."