

Double standards

Sleeping Around: Secrets of a Sexual Adventuress

by Catherine Townsend
John Murray, £7.99

I ONCE wrote a piece repeating gossip doing the rounds of the political dinner party circuit alleging that Tony Blair was known as Dobbin at university because he was hung like a horse. Alastair Campbell loved it. But I'm not sure how Gordon Brown's spinners will react when they learn that their master pops up in Catherine Townsend's racy new memoir.

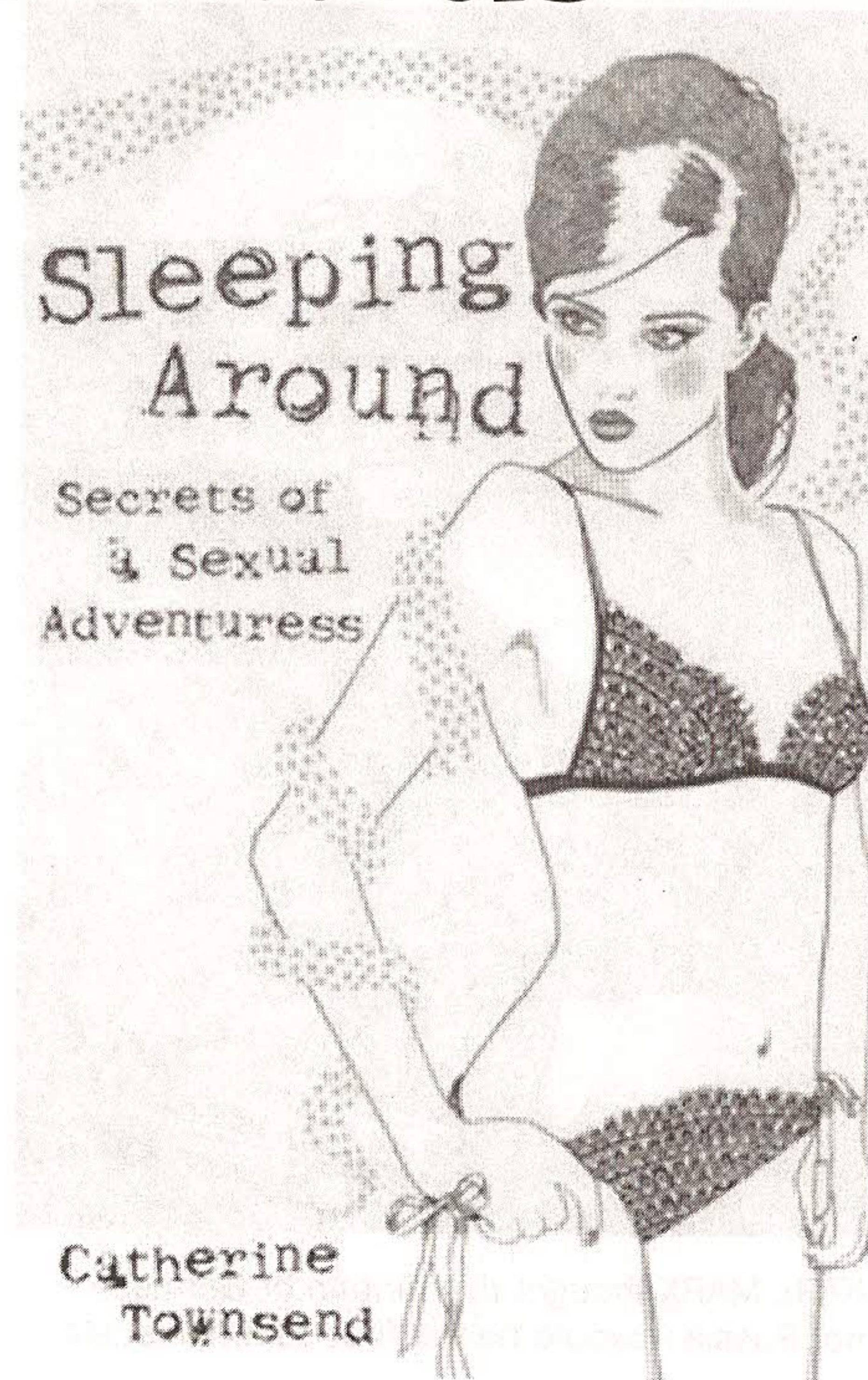
By page 8 this self-confessed "part slut, part hopeless romantic" is having erotic dreams about the man who is now our prime minister and, later, she is stamping on him with her stilettos although, it should be added, not for sexual purposes. It was at a reception at Number 11 Downing Street and she stepped back, not noticing that the then Chancellor was behind her, and her stilettos got tangled up in his trouser leg.

Lest you think that the author is making this up, there were three amused *Tribune* writers present at the time to attest to the veracity of her account. So when Townsend tells us that *Sleeping Around* is a true story, I'm inclined to believe her.

For those blokes who wonder why it is so difficult to get a woman into bed for casual sex yet once having done so are often a pushover thereafter, Townsend provides the answer. It's because women don't like to up their head count, so to speak.

Though with 60 or so lovers under her belt – and not yet 30 – that does not seem to worry her overmuch. And if there is a theme to this book, it is to question why there should be such different sexual standards between the genders.

Townsend writes well, in a style which is easy, straightforward and direct, although her couplings – or, indeed, her triplings – are sometimes matter-of-fact and



mechanical. Ironically, this might have been a much sexier book without some of the sex that's actually in it. But the author, a sassy American transplant to our shores with a rather wry sense of humour, comes across as so likeable – and vulnerable, because there are father abandonment issues here – that the reader cares about what happens to her. She is clearly good company in or out of bed and her romp of a book is an ideal holiday companion and light summer read.

And, as you might expect from *The Independent's* sex columnist, there are of course some interesting tips on sexual techniques, but this is not the place to repeat them. To find out more, as they say, buy the book.

Nigel Nelson

Harvest of strange fruit

The Pomegranates of Kandahar

by Sarah Maguire
Chatto & Windus, £9

SARAH MAGUIRE, who edited *Flora Poetica: The Chatto Book of Botanical Verse* and whose last collection was *The Florist's at Midnight*, is a remarkable writer on all things horticultural. She is drawn to the way in which the cycle of the seasons, a perpetual narrative of life and death, sheds light on the human condition.

In the powerful title poem here she reflects on the way the legendary orchards of Afghanistan, famous for their pomegranates, which look like little bombs, have been laid waste and how the farmers harvest land mines now.

She has a wonderful way with words – "the loosening fabric of desire" and "an idea bruising/the far horizon, as a cold mist tightens into rain" – and the best poems – *The Grass Church at Dilston Grove*, *Wolves are Massing on the Steppes of Kazakhstan*, *Almost the Equinox* and *Hunger* – turn exoticism and the regenerative ordeal into a form of political engagement.

Keith Richmond

Heat by Bill Buford
Vintage, £8.99

THE title of Bill Buford's new book has nothing to do with the celebrity magazine and everything to do with the adage: "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Because Buford, a former fiction editor of *The New Yorker* and editor of *Granta*, has swapped the Stanley knife and terraces of *Among The Thugs*, his compelling study of football hooliganism, for the Sabatier knives and