

## **WHEN SEX ISN'T SEXY**

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Writing About Sex without Corrupting the Story

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There is nothing quite like curling up with a good book or sitting in a dark theater and escaping into a story. It's easy to forget everything else and become part of an enthralling new world, to fall in love with a character or, just for a while, make a new best friend. Writers strive to tell their stories in a way that allows the reader (or viewer) to enter this mysterious state of fantasy and connection. In order to do this effectively, writers must ensure that their audiences are not distracted from the most important elements of their story. Incorporating sex scenes can enhance a story – allowing the reader to engage with the characters and their relationships. These attempts sometimes work, however it is more common for sexual interactions to detract from and derail a story, thereby turning off readers. There's nothing worse than reading a bad sex scene.

How does one create a good sex scene? We can start by looking at some examples that are effective. The Reader, by Bernhard Schlink, is a novel which describes the relationship between Michael, a young German boy, and Hannah, a thirty-six year old tram conductress who lives alone. They meet and almost instantly begin a heated sexual relationship. The author uses dexterous language to describe the encounters between Michael and Hannah. The goal of the words is clear: to describe both the physical and psychological sequence of events as it pertains to the two characters, their environments, and their perspectives on the events that unfold. In other words, he doesn't write about sex for the sake of writing about sex.

Michael visits Hannah in her apartment very early on in their relationship, before Michael and Hannah really know each other at all. Hannah sees Michael watching her from the doorway, and he knows that she is aware of his presence. Here is the scene that follows: “Two stockings were hanging over the back of the chair. Picking one up, she gathered it into a roll using one hand, then the other, then balanced on one leg as she rested the heel of her other foot against her knee, leaned forward, slipped the rolled-up stocking over the tip of the other foot, put her foot on the chair as she smoothed the stocking up over her calf, knee, and thigh, then bent to one side as she fastened the stocking to the garter belt.” This writing is mesmerizing; sensual, sexual and exciting. It is successful because the details are innate to the story itself, and give the reader a portal into Hannah’s psyche.

Coming soon after the stocking scene is the first shared sexual encounter in the book. There is a natural build up which allows the reader to prepare and look forward to the moment: “...she let the towel fall to the floor. I didn’t dare move. She came so close to me that I could feel her breasts against my back and her stomach against my behind. She was naked too. She put her arms around me, one hand on my chest and the other on my erection. ‘That’s why you’re here!’ I didn’t know what to say. Not yes, but not no either.” The writing exposes the characters as real people with contradictory feelings and actions. The sexual moments happen as part of the story, and as a result, seem natural and not expose. Unfortunately describing sex doesn’t always happen this artfully.

It’s usually very easy to recognize gratuitous sex in films. The movie Cold Mountain, a civil war epic, chronicles the story of Inman, a young soldier who is

struggling to find his way home to Cold Mountain, North Carolina. Ada, a woman he hardly knows but with whom he's shared a brief connection, waits for him to return and help run her farm. There is a reunion scene which could have been the perfect opportunity for sensual expression. Instead, two naked bodies (viewers must assume they are Inman and Ada) are shown making love in a bed, and for several long minutes, the bodies thrust as the camera pans up and down. During this time, movie viewers are treated to a close-up view of the two actors' genitals – footage that could easily appear in a pornographic movie. After the scene ends, the sex is neither discussed by the characters nor shown again.

What is the problem with this technique? Cold Mountain is one of countless examples where a sex scene is “thrown in” in order to make the movie more marketable to viewers. The sex is commonly very graphic (for no clear reason), and doesn't add to the story or the characters' personas in any useful way. Beyond the moral and ethical issues which are too subjective to discuss here, there is a basic structural problem with “using” sex this way. If the author's intension is to “spice up the story” or to sell more copies, it's obvious. The sex is an artifact, and is seen as separate and removable from the work itself. The American writer Gore Vidal touches on this type of writing in an essay about the memoirs of Tennessee Williams: "In the Memoirs Tennessee tells us a great deal about his sex life, which is one way of saying nothing about oneself. Details of this body and that body tend to blur on the page as they do in life." Yes, sex scenes might help tell a story or shape a character, *but sex itself is not a story.*

Literary writers are just as guilty as screen writers when it comes to writing about sex. Sometimes sex is added to a story for the wrong reasons. Readers are too smart not to notice and, whether they enjoy the sexual content or not, they are taken away from the story itself. It isn't unusual for even the most brilliant writers to fall into this trap. They use sex, not to move the plot along, or show us the essential character traits (or flaws), but instead as an "extra" – it is added to the story in a misguided attempt to enhance the writing and enjoyment of the reader.

In The Almost Moon, author Alice Sebold creates what at first seems to be a very unlikely story (a woman kills her own mother). To make the story feel authentic, the author uses characters, well-crafted details and structure. Ms. Sebold is a gifted author who writes with integrity, beauty, and layered complexity. Over the course of her novels, the characters come to life and - likeable or not - easily exist in the mind of the reader. This book is no exception, though there is one plot element that is unlike all the others in the story: the sexual exploits of the main character. Most of this book centers on the story of Helen, her mother, and her ex-husband Jake. Strangely, there are some very graphic sexual scenes that don't seem to fit. In these scenes, Helen suddenly, without reason, decides to have sex with her friend's teenaged son. She sleeps with him on two separate occasions within twenty four hours after she's killed her mother, though the sex is never repeated after that - nor is her reasoning explored. These events are sporadic and superfluous. They do not move the plot forward, nor do they enlighten us as to the nature of Helen's character. The reader is forced to wonder why, in the midst of everything, Helen keeps leaving the action to have very explicit sex with a teenager.

Ms. Sebold's language in these scenes, typically lyrical and vivid, is unusually terse: "I wanted to fuck him. I closed my eyes and waited... I felt his erection against me, the tops of my feet jostling the middle of his shins, his face to my right... His lips were pendulous, ridiculous, young. I bit my lip. I writhed. 'Fuck me,' I said, and hoped that no one's God was watching." It's not that the writing is bad. The problem is that it's not clear why Helen is doing this. As a result, the reader might assume they're missing something or spend time questioning whether this plot element will ever truly become part of the story. Either way, it fails.

Another recent bestseller, Water For Elephants, suffers from this same malady. A vividly written novel with a compelling narrative, the book tells the story of Jacob, a young veterinary student at Cornell University. After losing both of his parents in a car accident, Jacob decides to start a new life and jumps onto a train which happens to house the Benzini Brothers "Most Spectacular Show on Earth" circus. Jacob ends up joining the circus as an animal trainer, and comes into contact with an assortment of interesting characters. As with The Almost Moon, the problem with this novel is neither the writing nor the storyline – rather, the narrative is slowed down by artificially inserted sexual scenes. During the course of the story, the reader must experience a masturbating dwarf, a graphic breast slapping, a nipple-licking prostitute dance, and many other titillating vignettes. Jacob, a virgin who can't wait to have sex one day, isn't sure if he did the night a prostitute had oral sex with him. These are just a few of many examples of unnecessary sex that pervade this book, many that don't serve the characters or plot at all. This story

would be enhanced with less sexual details, and more focus on the innate inner-workings of the many interesting characters.

Writing about sex is challenging for another reason: it's difficult to describe sex in a purely physical way, especially in English, as there are not a lot of distinguishable words in the language to describe anatomy and sensations. This leads authors to use similar, mundane words to describe sex. We all laugh at romance novels which routinely describe breasts as "pale milky white," an erection as "his manly form," and a couple's lovemaking as "thrashing like waves in the ocean." The truth is that it's hard to describe sex without it sounding like a romance novel.

Again, we can learn from Bernhard Schlink in The Reader. His descriptions of sex are fresh and new, and more importantly, they feel genuine. In the following passage, Michael describes sex with Hannah in his own voice: "I explored her body with my hands and mouth, our mouths met, and then she was on top of me, looking into my eyes until I came and closed my eyes tight and tried to control myself and then screamed so loud that she had to cover my mouth with her hand to smother the sound." Schlink uses no unusual words or anatomical descriptions. He does, however, communicate the characters traits and the way they interact with each other on more than a sexual level. Yes, they are having sex, but this isn't the point, and it's evident to the reader.

In another passage from The Reader we learn about Helen's character: "When we made love, she took possession of me as a matter of course. Her mouth took mine, her tongue played with my tongue, she told me where to touch her and how, and when she rode me until she came, I was there only because she took pleasure in me and on me."

The way Hannah makes love to Michael illustrates their relationship without having to describe it. It's the old adage: show, don't tell. Sex merely provides the author with a vehicle for the showing.

Sometimes the best way to describe sexual acts is to use metaphor or analogy. Comparing sexual anatomy and sensations to other experiences helps communicate the deeper meaning to the reader in unique and realistic way. In The Reader, the character Michael compares his lover to a horse: "We were lying snuggled close together, my head on her neck, my neck on her breasts, my right arm on her behind. I ran my arms and hands over her broad back, her hard thighs, her firm ass, and also felt the solidity of her breasts and stomach against my neck and chest. Her skin was smooth and soft to the touch, the body beneath it strong and reliable. When my hand lay on her calf, I felt the constant twitching play of muscles. It reminded me of the way a horse twitches its hide to repel flies." The horse metaphor shows the reader how Michael views Hannah in a deeper way than just a simple description of his feelings; it's effective and essential to the story itself.

Her Last Death, a memoir by Susanna Sonnenberg, tells the story of a young woman, whose mother is a sex addict, and who explores her own sexual addiction. Sex is one of the main themes in the book. The descriptions of Susanna's early sexual exploits tell us volumes about both her character and her quest to more deeply understand her mother. In the following scene, Susanna allows her teacher Wyatt to play the role of seducer in their first sexual encounter. "He pulled the drapes shut across the picture window in the living room. My body started to shiver with eerie nerves, and I couldn't

stop... From a closet, Wyatt pulled out a towel, which he spread on the carpet, then a sheet on top of that. 'Take off your clothes.' His voice was warm, firm. He was natural with instruction. Naked, I watched him undress, this big man whose sports jacket I studied in class, stripped to skin and shoulders, pelvis, hair." This scene is effective since it both adds to the story and illuminates the character of Susanna to the reader.

The best way to think about writing sexual content is to understand that it's not really different than any other good writing. The writer should ask herself two questions. First: is the sex really necessary in order to move the plot forward or illuminate the characters and their relationships? Second: is the language used to describe the sex effective in communicating the important elements of the story to the reader? "I think by the point at which writers are considering options for genitalia terms, it's time to opt for mystery and discretion. The main reason is that the more explicit the writing, the less evocative and powerful. Suggestion is seduction," says writer Robin Vaughan. Less is more, especially when it comes to writing about sex. In most cases, the sexiest scenes are those that don't involve anatomy at all.