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How to write a romp that avoids a Bad Sex in Fiction award

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How to write a romp that avoids a Bad Sex in Fiction award

Abstract

Catherine Cole Professor in Creative Writing, Liverpool John Moores University Academic rigour, journalistic flair The annual Bad Sex in Fiction award is enough to put any writer off writing a sex scene. This year's examples are as cringeworthy as those of previous years. It's not that the authors aren't trying to get it right; a good sex scene is just very difficult to write. Writers often find themselves caught between the cloying pages of a Harlequin romance and the thrust and grind of porn.

Keywords

bad, avoids, sex, fiction, romp, write, award, that

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Cole, C. "How to write a romp that avoids a Bad Sex in Fiction award." *The Conversation UK* December (2017): 1-3.

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



How to write a romp that avoids a Bad Sex in Fiction award

December 1, 2017 9.24pm AEDT

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The annual Bad Sex in Fiction award is enough to put any writer off writing a sex scene. This year's examples are as cringeworthy as those of previous years. It's not that the authors aren't trying to get it right; a good sex scene is just very difficult to write. Writers often find themselves caught between the cloying pages of a Harlequin romance and the thrust and grind of porn.

Its what lies between these that's so difficult to capture – those nuanced moments that are funny or silly or tender or playful and deeply personal to the couple involved. But how can those moments translate into well written scenes?

American Christopher Bolland took the honours this year for a paragraph in his novel *The Destroyers* in which his protagonist compares his genitals to a billiard rack:

She covers her breasts with her swimsuit. The rest of her remains so delectably exposed. The skin along her arms and shoulders are different shades of tan like water stains in a bathtub. Her face and vagina are competing for my attention, so I glance down at the billiard rack of my penis and testicles.

Judges commented that: "They were left unsure as to how many testicles the character in question has."

Bolland apart, many of the examples in this year's shortlist might also cause a few laughs – but there's something surprisingly "right" about many of them. Sex lends itself to hyperbole, especially those first awkward, hyperventilating moments with someone you really lust after. Real life men and women fall into the exact trap the nominated writers have fallen into. We are dazzled, hungry, we behave unlike ourselves. The moment is electric. We are open in all possible ways to new experience. We are nervous, vulnerable, romantic. We blather about stars and moss and philosophy. Therein lies the problem. Just attempting to describe this very human experience guarantees bad prose.

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Examples of bad writing in awards such as this are always highly subjective. I actually thought that some of the scenes were quite clever. Take the example from *War Cry* by Wilbur Smith (with David Churchill). A man on a beach, places his coat on the ground and his girlfriend lies on it:

‘Christ!’ he muttered, placing himself on top of her. ‘It’s bloody cold. I might get frostbite on my cock.’
She gave a low purring laugh. ‘Silly man. Why don’t you put it somewhere hot?’

This, I would argue, is realistic sex – as anyone who has had sex on a beach or in a park or the backseat of a car would attest. Sex outdoors is always uncomfortable and the man is quite right to be worried about frostbite. What makes the scene well-wrought for me is the wit of his companion. Good on her for steering his thoughts away from the chill. It’s funny and sexy and the woman is demonstrating female sexual agency. What’s wrong with that?

Lie back and think of Kierkegaard

There are pros and cons to all the other examples, too. Thinking of Socrates or Kierkegaard at a heightened moment might seem sexually inappropriate, but why not? These might be the common thoughts of one of those bearded philosophers you run into in philosophy departments in universities where such places still exist. He’s probably got a mug that says “Philosophers do it better” or “I think therefore I come.” That makes the scene and the inner musings appropriate to character – something we’re always advising emerging writers to do along with “show, don’t tell”.

The awards also don’t take account of the role sex scenes such as these play in adolescent sexual development. As a teenager, I was enthralled by DH Lawrence’s sexual beings – especially in the likes of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Women in Love*. I also learned a lot from Grace Metalious’s novel, *Peyton Place*. As far as sex scenes go, both writers managed to blur the lines between good and bad sex. Today, I’d describe their sex as so bad it’s good. There’s something silly and fragile and exciting and educational in it – and it was especially useful in the days before more open social attitudes.

A few, err, tips

So what advice would I give to a budding writer who wants to write about sex but is worried they’ll end up in awards such as this?

First, choose how you want to choreograph your scene. If you don’t feel comfortable about it and it doesn’t come naturally, draw a curtain on the scene and move on to the next day. And if you want to write openly and honestly, go down the path of realism. Why be afraid to call the body parts by their real names? Metaphors and similes have a place but they may leave you open to ridicule.


Remember, humour is good. Good sex is often funny. Humour also offers the reader a lot of a character. Powerful men and women may be decidedly unassertive in their sexual relationships. There’s a lot of comic potential in pet names and hidden peccadilloes.

Sex is also all kinds of other things that don’t always have a lot to do with the sex itself. Great tenderness is shown between people who haven’t seen one another for a long time or who have finally escaped from a squalling child. Relationships surprise and delight, whatever our sexual preferences or partners, and through sexual attraction we see how much we all just want to be loved or just sexually fulfilled, educated, amused.

As Jarett Kobek says in *The Future Won’t Be Long*:

We made love and we had sex and we had sex and we made love. But reader, again, I implore. Mistake me not. I am not your Pollyanna, I am not your sweet princess. We fucked, we fucked, we fucked, we fucked, we fucked, we fucked.

And with that, Charlotte Bronte, eat your heart out.

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