

The Literary Writer (Female) and Sex

by Heather Fowler

When last June V.S. Naipaul remarked "women writers are different, they are quite different. I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me...My publisher, who was so good as a taster and editor, when she became a writer, lo and behold, it was all this feminine tosh. I don't mean this in any unkind way," my first thought was that he was an addled, simple man, a relic owned by the patriarchy of the voices in his head—but my second thought was that I dearly wished he were nearer, to meet the upswing of my mobile knee. Then I calmed and realized—his invisible privilege as a male writer blinds him to seeing that the literary world of mainstream publishing and societal expectations on women regarding appropriate conduct are exactly what creates the illusion of soft "women's writing," of "domestic narratives without alpha females," of "contrived domesticity and traditional sex roles"—and does so largely by censorship of alternative female voices and, more frequently, by more easily condoned distribution of income to women writers willing to embrace the bit dripping apple of "genre work" that will make their expressions essentially void of impact in the larger world of letters.

Yet there are many women writing exciting prose exactly as skillfully rendered as that made by male counterparts, work that will often be requested to be revised or modified into more acceptable, publishable, simpering, and lackluster confines--should it ever want to see the light of day. Just as one example, I recently wrote a magical realist, humor, feminist, literary, noir novel that had every sample reader I sent it to laughing out loud. "This should be a movie!" many said. Yet I was told by an agent that the big houses likely wouldn't touch it—that the edits we'd do would definitely

differ, and might be less intensive, should I go with a reputable independent press instead. Which way did I want to shoot at the moon, for love or for money?

Did the devil ever have a more excruciating choice to proffer? Has Naipaul even read women writers who publish in the independent press scene—those generally ruled out, by nepotism and politics, from many of the larger rewards big houses can offer? If so, is it still just “feminine tosh” he perceives with that super-human nose he possesses that creates, for women's work, a mild stink of inferiority? Ah well, I really don't care what that man thinks. I never have.

But the bigger issue is that there is a two-step conundrum that keeps women from the top lists in the literary field of recognition; this chokehold on women's voices is caused, in my view, by two factors: 1. The fact that to be a woman who writes as openly as Henry Miller about sex is to almost automatically be typecast, or miscategorized, with “erotica” or “romance” in order to sell such work—just a few adjustments and scene removals will do the trick, and 2. The secondary fact that a woman author who confronts counter-culture sex with her work, deviancy, real world experience, infidelity, prose not softened by stereotypical pink romantic lenses of the woman who does not resist transvaginal probes or “minor” infringements of all her reproductive rights, will be placed into the shunning fire of personal condemnation, judgment, and perceived autobiographical connectedness to her fictive work in a way that V.S. Naipaul cannot begin to understand. If he could understand such things, as a person who confronted them, I might place him in a floral dress in his house every day for a month, a house in which he might sit in fear each day as he tried to write his next great work and muse aloud, “No rapists in the plot today. No excessive casual sex. No scenes that could be damaging to my reputation. I can't have people thinking I do that.” Then he might cross his legs, lift one high-heel sandaled foot over his other knee and sigh before saying: “Oh, I have so many words to share. But I don't know where to put them. Who will take them?”

Perhaps, in this imagining, I amuse myself too much. But what do women often do, those who write openly about sex but cannot find large houses to publish them as “literary” and do not really fit the genre rubrics? Often, we create hybrid works. We find venues for such hybrid works in such places as independent literature, porn, erotica, romance, mystery, and so forth, where our differences can lead to profits or at the very least be seen. Sometimes we write under pseudonyms or the distracting masks of other genre classifications. Perhaps, as Shirley Jackson was, we are called “literary” only after the fact of our publishing heydays, sometime after a few brave souls are honest enough to admit that we were always literary, at a higher level, with our texts. We conform to what others want us to say, or depict, just enough to slide our subversions into the marketplace in ways that are not so easy to observe yet are different enough to cause a ripple effect of renewed consideration. Perhaps we perpetuate the myth that we are soft and retiring, as a gender, and predominantly concerned with home matters-- because this is what we are accepted for doing whilst writing. But above each kitchen cutting board is a knife. You tell me it is not just as visceral to watch the beheading of a chicken on the countertop as it is to see the slash and gore of a horror movie. The blood still flows.

We pick our words carefully.

Many times, we blend. Since the industrial revolution has allowed us to go to school, college even these days, we are gifted with the same curriculum as many men writing in our fields. But the greater problem is not our ability to compete with the big boys regarding caliber of prose; as mentioned above, it is in finding venues that will take our more challenging work and publish it *as it was written*.

Still, women are endlessly inventive, as the struggle for our rights and privileges continues. We often accept that, like in the workforce where women often do equivalent work for lesser pay, society as it stands will create our need to enter differently into coveted rooms where only men have routinely, historically, been admitted. If we are smart and driven, we will find the escape hatches. We will learn how to use them.

Because the truth is that Naipaul's voiced view is neither special or unique—and was shocking only in the overt manner with which he was willing to declare himself. No one refutes, after all, the male novelist's obvious dominance as iconic presence on top lists of works of “real literature,” as is evidenced by the numerous Top 100 Novels groupings where women are almost always infrequent additions, making the minuscular minority count every time, despite that many of the reading public's favorite novels and literary works are love stories, a subject with which women excel, tales essentially feminine in their impulses—*Anna Karenina*, for example. *Lolita*, for another. *Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenter*, for a third. Case in point, both Salinger and Nabokov, two of my favorite male scribes, had they been women, would have both been eviscerated with scorn and public condemnation for some of the work that they've published, if they could have even arranged to secure its publication, or, at the very least, been more actively censored and repudiated for obvious deviant content--pedophilic undertones, absent or flickering loyalties to significant others, bizarre discussions of familial relationships that bordered on incestual—rather than revered, as they are now, as the gods and measured heartbeats of modern literature.

Only Flannery O'Connor and a few other women routinely make such lists, those such as Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton... But these women are like occasional daisies on a hillside firmly populated by rocks. If you read these women, even small passages from their work, you will often discover they were women whose tendencies, *just one room of my own and some money please*, made them rebels early, and often, in their lives.

So why are the top novel lists of all time, nearly all of them, practically devoid of women, and, more particularly, devoid of writing about sex fashioned by women? Here is a theory: The lists are delineated “cock heavy” as a friend often says, not just because it has been historically more difficult to publish aggressive women's work due to the political climate itself, but also because it is more acceptable for women to be labeled with lesser tiers of genre classifications that do not put them at peer-level with other

intellectuals, do not claim to be literature with a capital L, and, especially, do not make a claim for equality of prose quality or depth, or attempt to disturb the status quo.

An appropriate use of genre-blending has its place in subterfuge and infiltration. Often, those literary women actually making inroads onto these lists of prominent novelists have entered through the back door, through the side door, through the gate that leads to the cemetery and into the hidden gardens. Well, really, this is a historical novel. Except it is also an amazing literary feat. See Toni Morrison. Well, really, this is a magical realist text—except it is also force of nature and compelling study of passion between the sexes: Hello, Isabel Allende, nice to see you! Well, really, this is a mystery, sort of, a popular novel with intrigue—except years later it is accepted as a text made to last the duration. I see you, Ms. Shirley Jackson. Yes, yes, yes.

And where does the sex come in, because not every woman writes it? It comes in for even fewer of the female novelists cited for greatness or known as the literary canon—as if, sometimes, women have de-sexed their work on purpose to get there, or alienated themselves from the sexual act by using strangely sexual male characters as narrators so as to androgenize their prose and elevate it above frequent places of female submission or subjugation in exchanges. Consider *Wise Blood*—hardly any sex, and frankly, Flannery's main novel is far more about territories that don't pertain to romantic passion, more relevance given thematically to the ideas of false prophets or the righteousness of being.

Yet via the transport of genre-blending discussed above, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, Kathy Acker, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter—all of these women have brought the sensual to their work, have escaped the labels of romance writers or erotic novelists through their cunning approach to creating literature, and have succeeded, in my view, where many fail.

This is where we, as women, can take lessons from our predecessors, can work to lessen the gender gap. As a literary woman writer who writes about sex and love, noting these examples,

I, too, have often sought the lure of finding an alternate place of entry into the male-dominated club of literary lists. The first two books I've published, for example, are classified as magical realism, which is by nature and label literary: *Suspended Heart* (Aqueous Books, 2010) and *People with Holes* (available for pre-order now, Pink Narcissus Press).

As my many brilliant predecessors have done, I have found my way around and through the barriers by sidling in, which is also how I get away with writing about sex, bluntly, from a woman's perspective, publishing in areas where I may slide and feint more easily by genre-blending than by submitting my traditional literary work, in which my differences may be seen and cauterized more instantly. Often, as a woman, when publishing work that has edge, I've felt like a representative from a jaded kingdom in which my anatomical or interactive descriptions have left much to the imagination on purpose, unlike a porn narrative, to somewhat preserve the reputation of literary—while at the same time branding me as a part of a set of dangerous writers that does not comprise, oh unfortunate shock and awe, all those writing in my field. Not everyone, after all, enters a couple's angst-filled bedroom after a swinger's gathering gone awry, like a story I recently published entitled “Let Us Pretend” in June of 2009 at PANK Magazine—or is willing to imagine the effect of an insurance employee hallucinating sexual organs upon everyday objects, like my piece “You Are One Click Away From Pictures of Nude Girls,” originally published in *Word Riot* in May of 2008 and available in my second magical realism collection.

This is not to say that many modern women writers don't have such things to discuss. Some authors, many, specialize in family narratives, stories of career acquisition, tales of one's father or one's mother, or one's dreams—making all such discussions with a slightly more Apollonian cast that eschews the use of bodily fluids as war paint. The Kathy Ackers and Erica Jongs and Jeanette Wintersons are admittedly rather few, and if there is one thing that bothers me about the “literary writing” many women do publish these days, that

writing with or about sex, it is that more often that we choose to approach the acceptable hazard, the pain, the violation of the female body, as our vehicle—as in the extremely overdone rape of the innocent girl scenario—and are accepted and lauded for it: *Yep, a deep and meaningful narrative about rape. It's a horror, so it's okay for her to talk about trauma*—but when approaching the kingdom of enjoyable sex-oriented interaction in which women have and make choices, in which women are sometimes smarter than the men they interact with, in which two complicated characters meet and join thoroughly in both love and physicality, too few of us are brave enough, or liberated enough, or foolhardy enough to elaborate on the description of the love act's exquisite joy or mete the *en scene* complexity of entering our truly tangled sheets.

I submit that the idea of perceived genre is one every female writer confronts each time she lifts her pen to enter the *chthonian* space of her sex brain, as Camille Paglia might consider it: What can make her romantic or sexual narrative be considered more literary than romance, more Apollonian, publishable and laudable as D.H. Lawrence was publishable and laudable—as opposed to being shunted into Romance, Women's Fiction, Chick Lit, Erotica, Vampire Novels, or YA territories--sleek, enjoyable, profitable as they may be? Should she make entertainment that is subversively literary and simply not care about getting one listing or another? If she was not born in another country, should she research and make a stab at a multi-cultural narrative, since the exotic has been prized as far back as the mundane has been limited--and is a vehicle for departure, too, albeit that she acknowledges she may not do so realistically or guiltlessly unless it is a part of her experience or birthright? Or should she happily make literature that is initially labeled as entertainment--and let time alone tell the story of its worth—even if while doing this, she fights a fierce battle to hold her ground on which edits she is or is not willing to make and saves versions of her files, B-sides if you will, or finds smaller publishers willing to take more risks with disseminating her work, not only *as she wrote it* but also *as she intends it to be read*?

On sad mornings, bad mornings when I acknowledge the difficulty of equalizing the lists in terms of gender, I admit I can see the draw in simply selling out. As a woman, I can enter the genre fields, create salable prose, sell work for profit that will provide such things as vehicles for my children and windows for my house. Not that I think such writing is easy or painless, involving as it would much research, much modeling of plot point structures, much energy spent to capture the spirit of the best books of all popular reading genres that are used for casual vacation fodder.

However, on good mornings, on hopeful mornings, I remember the debts owed to those women who have already diligently (and and at great personal exposure and risk) paved the way for new literary women writers, and I do not want to dishonor their sacrifice and toil. This being the case, as a ravenous reader who has occasionally enjoyed romance novels as light reading, as well as numerous erotic texts that have inspired certain elements in my work (see *The Story of O*), I have made a sort of rubric for myself about what my work is, or is not, allowed to do. For the sake of conversation, here is where I map the "literary" versus "genre" differences, as I perceive them:

In Romance Novels: Writing is characterized most often by a close or distant third person female POV, wherein a man gives a female protagonist chase and obstacles in the form of his ego, his status as a playboy, or his own reluctance or financial troubles, except, always, after about 200 pages of picaresque and staged friction, her overwhelming unique and sexy draw slays him and he eventually coughs up a diamond and confessions of forever love. OR, with omniscient POV, writing depicts a man who suddenly assumes power in a woman's life due to circumstances out of her control, which makes her have to pay attention to him while he cumulatively decides he wants her more and more--in a book-length narrative where sexual tensions are discussed as bed partners to limited love dialogues, without generally delving deeper psychological issues outside of amorous exchange, just before said book culminates in the "love acquisition," feel-good ending that was once characterized

exclusively by marital vows, as is seen in many traditional sources such as the end of all Shakespearean comedies, but is now also represented by allusions that both parties are kismet met, perfect for each other, and due to stay together forever, married or not. Maybe in a trailer in Cheyenne. See the crooked finger of the woman in the final pages, luring him into the bedroom where they will stay.

Such novels may take place in remote locations where there are few obvious competitors for the female protagonist's time and affection—because the book is all about HIM and HER discovering each other, not too much family drama. Newer editions of such tales may involve more modern elements of children from past marriages, or ranches won and lost in ski tournaments. May involve competition with other beaus, usually not more than one. Does not involve threesomes or counter-culture sexual entanglements or dark promiscuous histories (consider the three men or less slut rule) or anything that goes outside of a hetero-normative narrative encounter. Leather may be involved, such as that used to saddle horses.

But these books, listener, are written out of consideration as literature because there is too much unfounded perfection in their outcome—and often the language is practical but not beautiful.

In Erotic Novels: Writing is characterized by the sheer and enormous count of orgasms, orgasms aplenty, where each scene serves the exact purpose of drawing the reader into the next physical entanglement of the characters conveniently located in boudoirs, or on kitchen floors, or in courtyards, where transitions or sections of dialogue function mainly as a bridge between sex acts, where the primary purpose of these oeuvres is to demonstrate as much visually represented copulation as possible, with only dramatized punishments or repercussions allowed via a purely sexualized role-playing domain. Such books should be embarrassing to have discovered on one's coffee table. May be good bathroom reading. May lack for deep motivations of a psychological or spiritual dimension. If not, may express views on psychological

aspects of sex that are not standard in terms of mainstream expectations--and often represent repressed fantasies most people cannot experience in their mundane worlds.

Essentially, erotic novels function as safe-space enactments with words and bodies that exist to pulse forward and allow the reader the enjoyment of reading the dirty words and mentally doing the things done by dirty characters/caricatures in prose, and being, for a time, removed from the real emotion and consequences of continuous sexual congress with lovers or strangers.

Some novels like this, when written by men, get the gratuitous label of literature, should they possess a modicum of prose-sculpting skill discernible by the average reader.

I still feel that the easiest way to be female and erotic and considered high, unimpeachable literature is often to be long dead. Sappho is fine, for example. No one will steal her mantle or defame her under today's standards because she is viewed in the protected envelope of another history, another time, another reality. Because I write sex, admittedly, I think about sex a lot, and censorship. About what kind of sex is permissible to write or publish before I have the major house and history of large sales, essential corporate sponsorship for obtaining real income. About whether what I have already put out there thus far is a recipe for massive judgment and negativity that will swell in a backlash of retributive consequence, even if I should have a book or books of less incendiary content go viral—because I am a writer of many themes. I can go traditional as well as write whatever strange narrative strikes my fancy.

But I am not Sappho, or, for the sake of this discussion, comfortably dead. I must, as a woman living in a male-dominated literary society, consider these things like reputation and exposure to character assassination that have held back other women authors, countless times, from publishing more explosive work—even under false names. Having been asked before if I worry that the sexual content in my work will be a concern (when addressing my craft later to my children), I have always responded No. Sex is natural. I'm not worried about my kids knowing I either had it or wrote it.

Yet, I am the minority in this and lucky and liberal enough that I don't care about such issues--though I easily understand how, with a less permissive hometown or family environment, society and an author's familial bonds can affect what any given author is willing to say in his/her releases, either fictive or non-fictive.

A writer does not simply write without considering the lives of those who may be affected—a theme I see echoed time and again in Erica Jong's excellent new anthology *Sugar In My Bowl: Real Women Write About Real Sex*, which I read this weekend. In the book's narratives, I can see many similar concerns voiced by the anthology's participants, those women who confront what sex means when they write it and try to write it both literary and real. The need for such an anthology, as it was mapped in the book's introduction, asks a question that I welcome all readers to answer: What makes women writing sex in literature necessary and what void does it fill? If you are a woman who wants to take her work in these directions, how can you navigate? On this topic, not necessarily brilliant but having definitely experienced both the publication of sexual narratives and the judgment laid upon women authors regarding the writing of sex, since I've been censored before, I offer some food for thought: I believe that women writing sex should make their own choices for what is appropriate to include. In my view, this is an important discussion that every female writer who approaches the topic of sexuality in her themes must have with herself, honestly and vigorously.

The most important thing that female literary writers should do when embracing a topic as natural and fraught as erotic exchanges is to attempt not to depict the sex act as an act sterilely, involuntarily, or traditionally rendered--nor give back stereotypical depictions of what we've already seen a thousand times or more with stock characters--but to provide the representations of where the female mind meets the responses of the female body, where desire flourishes, where need and pain and the crucial interaction of two separate beings comes together in the meetings of body, heart, and mind. Passion, we want, in literature to last the duration: The

kind of interaction where much can be lost and much can be gained. The siren's reaction, real, to her objectification. The strong woman's confession of her own need to objectify the man wherever necessary. The searing awareness to be reached that one person can be sexually transformative, both positively and negatively, to another's psyche. A fully articulated devotion or lack thereof. Passion, I'll say it again. Complexity. Human drama. And the knowledge that a caress, once given, can become definitive for all caresses in a sexual future—because the story is complex and full of night dreams and secretions and truth—like trust, like hope, like love, like life.

And, as women, I think we must relinquish our fears and be bold about whatever it is we want our work to discuss. Personally, I don't even really know, specifically, what Naipaul means by “feminine tosh,” because I feel so equal that I am ready to criticize my peer for his lack of cogent articulation and discussion.

While I'm at it, I also invite other women writers to take a stand with embracing the intellectual content in their work, expanding it, defending it—sharing their experiences via literature, sexual or otherwise, with their own voices that, while less impressive by sheer numbers, can be just as important to intelligent readers as those of their mostly male predecessors.

My wants are few, clear, and easily specified: I want more women on those lists of great literary novels, getting there in whatever way they can and continuing to accrue until obtaining an equal measure. I want to hear women speak to sex and war and childbirth and yard work and whatever else they have to say, whilst receiving the same caliber of consideration and literary rewards as those granted male peers at comparable levels. I want women writers today to create with their sexual work the same quality of permissive honesty and available instruction (or transport) that is present in all great books that include sex or discussions of sex, via the beautiful maelstrom of seducing with individuality, with skillful persuasion, a reader who can be pulled in, awakened, consumed, taught differently or taught again—one who can regard, in prose, the chaos and beauty of true

passions reflected that live within the authentic erotic footprint of human sexual interchanges.

The word hero in literature exists for a reason.

The word heroine in literature exists for a reason.

The more diverse these representations can be, the more reward a writer, or writers, can give to an intelligent reading public. Thus, about V.S. Naipaul's commentary, I'd say to him this, "Can't we all just get along? Without intelligent heroines, you'd be pretty lost, my friend. I'll have no more of your masculine tosh today. No, not again. But I don't mean to be unkind in any way."

(Women, please pick up your pens and write more. Now.)

