

Erotic Fiction, Puritan Censorship And Gynaecological Detail

Jack Fritscher, the award-winning author of hundreds of stories and articles and 20 books, is about as informed as anyone on the history of erotic fiction, its importance, and the state of erotic publishing today.

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Jack Fritscher is the award-winning author of hundreds of stories and articles, and 20 books including *Gay San Francisco*, *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*, and his memoir of his bicoastal lover, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*. He is the

founding San Francisco editor-in-chief of the legendary international leather magazine *Drummer*. He is about as informed as anyone on the history of erotic fiction, its importance, and the state of erotic publishing today. According to him, religion and nipple clamps were invented for the same reason, namely that everyone likes being bottom of the domination pile.

Vice: What do you think of the old joke about the difference between erotica and pornography merely being a matter of the lighting? Exactly where does the boundary lie?

Jack Fritscher: Boundaries are frontiers. Trapped in Bloomsbury, Lytton Strachey dared say “semen” and changed London. What was porn yesterday is literature today.

Fanny Hill, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Naked Lunch*, and the leather lyrics of gay British poet Thom Gunn have all become pop-culture child’s play. I waffle my linguistics between porn and erotica depending if I’m talking to a sex seminar or to church ladies. I’m not concerned about labels. The endless debate about erotica and porn is an Occam’s razor important mostly to politically correct academics and to religious fundamentalists.

Vice readers, living in the slipstream of fundamentalism sweeping the world, might take action to ensure that censorship does not bring back the “old school” closet of having to “read between the lines”.

In the American fundamentalist theatre of the absurd, seven of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs were put on trial in Ohio during 1990 to determine if they were erotica or porn. I have a certain insight in that I was Mapplethorpe’s bicoastal lover, and, as editor of *Drummer* magazine, I assigned him his first cover before he was world famous. While I thought Robert’s content and style beautiful, I doubt to this day if, for all his vaunted “porno”, anyone has every masturbated to a Mapplethorpe photograph. All seven were deemed to be non-pornographic.

Regarding the seesaw between erotica and porn, my longtime pal, the London art critic Edward Lucie-Smith, pointed out, “A Mapplethorpe photo of a calla lily hanging in the dining room gains *frisson* from the Mapplethorpe fisting photo hanging in the bedroom.”

So, basically, there is no definite line to draw between the two?

About the impossibility of defining pornography, Justice Potter Stewart, in the most famous phrase ever uttered by the US Supreme Court, said he couldn’t define it, but “I know it when I see it.” Porn is personal. I’m an author without borders. I write gripping tales for prehensile readers. I don’t write porn. I write literary erotica that begins in the head and works its way down. In the alchemy of eros, if readers cum, it is they defining what is erotica and what is porn.

You earned a doctorate for your dissertation *Love and Death in Tennessee Williams*. Was that the start of your interest in erotic writing, or was it the culmination of an amateur interest that then became a profession.

As the conformist 1950s became the liberated 1960s, I read Tennessee Williams to learn about sex because I was an innocent student stranded in a Catholic seminary. After reading five Williams plays, I ended my 11 years of study, exited the seminary, came out into the world, and met Tennessee Williams. He was an archetypal artist making sexuality intelligent and literary in *Baby Doll*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. In the ironic alert inherent in censorship, when

I was eight years old, a shrieking priest in a pulpit had inadvertently made me aware of *Forever Amber*, the bestselling novel of the 1940s that was condemned by the Catholic Church's delirious *Index of Forbidden Books*. Growing up like most Catholic intellectuals, I made the *Index* my reading list for classic literature.

Censorship, conveniently citing page references, guided me to the forbidden passages in Flaubert, Balzac, and George Sand. The *Index* condemning all works by De Sade, Zola, Sartre, Moravia, and Gide, was also threatening Tennessee Williams when its Inquisitional reign of terror was stopped by Pope John XXIII.

Pumped up on the *Index*, the Catholic Legion of Decency listed films whose viewing would send me to hell, or at least to the library to borrow the filthy books adapted by Hollywood. When the priest who was my high school English teacher lectured on Walt Whitman, he said *Leaves of Grass* was literature, but too dirty for boys. I immediately wrapped the book in a plain brown wrapper. Expecting a sex panic, I fell into aesthetic rapture that exposed the sex hysteria in my bourgeois education. Excited in my Speedo, I was Whitman's "twenty-ninth bather" swooning with lust. That shock of recognition is the heart of erotica when sex and desire validate identity with the great "Yes!" of a cum shot: "OMG, I really am gay!"

Could you name some "classic novels" that many people might read without considering their importance to erotic writing?

I was a very aggro lad attuned to whispers about sex; I moved on to scanning between the lines of brilliant filth by James Joyce, Genet, Nabokov, Radclyffe Hall, William Burroughs, James Leo Herlihy, Anaïs Nin, and my late friend James Purdy. These writers, and Henry Miller and Camus and Ginsberg at Olympia Press and *The Evergreen Review*, taught me the rhetorical tricks of the trade. With dick in hand, I learned how to spell hard-on. At age 14, my kickstart in erotic writing was job masturbation. I wrote to make explicit what I found missing in the erotic undertow of novels. I had grown up frustrated in movie palaces during World War II when, during a love scene, the camera cut away from the kiss to waves crashing on shore. I didn't want to write that way. I wanted the full Monty.

So do you favour subtlety or directness? My dad told me, "Some of the most erotic writing of all is in Alberto Moravia's novels and short stories. These tend to describe gloomy afternoons behind net curtains in apartments in Rome." What are your views on subtlety versus gynaecological detail in erotic writing?

I love the extraordinary films *Two Women* and *The Conformist* adapted from Moravia's novels. Enlivened on the screen, his sexual realism on the page had heat back in the day of Mussolini's fascist censorship before sexual liberation, but now that the net curtains have parted.

Born 30 years after Moravia and Tennessee Williams, I was the next generation. I respect that the hustler-sex of Tennessee Williams' *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* had to occur behind the hotel portieres. Erotic pioneers, like Joyce in *Ulysses*, Moravia and Williams slowly stripped the dance of the seven veils using six, then five, then four veils.

Since 1964, in the US, when the written word became protected by the Constitution, my generation hasn't had to drape the windows of sex. Teasing in sex writing can be a turn-on until it becomes all talk and no action. I don't want to write the menu of sex. I want to cook the food. I want it hot. I want to deliver it. I want to fuck the takeaway customer. I'm a very direct male. I channel sex. I write declarative sentences. I don't write twee description. As an erotic stylist, I find poetry in Anglo-Saxon

words; I use common words. I write with explicit nouns and verbs. Unlike academics that misspell come, I spell cum.

However, I can zip up my fly and write romantically. To test my own agility to see if I could write as “camp” as Paul Rudnick or David Sedaris, I penned a drag style in my comic short story “Stonewall: June 28, 1969, 11 PM”, which is nominated for a Lambda Literary Award. Priapic detail? Gynaecological detail? I can do that. I have written explicit lesbian and straight erotica for major publishers like Larry Flynt.

I take it, from what I have read, you think erotic fiction is of a totally different level of importance to the gay community than it is to the heterosexual community?

Even though I was conceived and raised by heterosexuals, my sense is that straight erotica veers quickly away from male-female intercourse to that other dimension of kinky sex whose escalating degree of difficulty is akin to Olympic skaters trying to cut a figure eight backwards on an ice cube. Commercial straight erotica is not about missionary sex. It more often about power and being fisted in bondage by the archetypal Ilsa, she-wolf of the SS. There is a hardly a taboo left standing.

Perhaps an essential difference between the erotic fiction of straights and of gays is that GLBT folks regard erotica as an identity art form. By its essentialist nature, queer erotica puts its finger on what makes the gay community different from the straight: identity sexuality. Growing up, straight kids are, simply, straight. Without such surety, gay kids must search out definitions of themselves. Pop culture magazines and media indicate that straight men use porn to satisfy their alternative sex urges and fetish tastes between bouts of breedership, and not for sorting their sexual identity in the bathroom, where gay identity emerges singing pop tunes into a hairbrush.

Erotic writing is as necessary to gay culture as rap is to black culture. Without sex, and, radically, without sex that makes the reader cum at the roots, gay writing has no gay soul. It is just alternative safe mainstream corporate writing. The anti-sex self-censorship in the politically correct GLBT community is a self-hating scandal, and many famous gay fiction authors who are professional homosexuals at work in the fields of academe do not even have the skill sets to write erotica.

While editing *Drummer* magazine for a quarter of a century, I have noticed from feedback that the lesbigay readership is nearly 100 percent sexual bottoms. Therefore, all the gay erotica I write and photograph is created to dominate the reader and viewer. Straight erotica sells the same dominance. It seems everyone straight and gay on the planet is looking for a top who will fucking control them. That’s how religion was invented. And nipple clamps.

So, yes, it is more important then?

Without erotic literature, straight culture could arguably march on. Without erotic literature, however, gay culture would not have its essentialist training manuals. Specifically, straight culture does not need *The Catcher In the Rye* to survive, but perversatile gay culture absolutely requires thousands of detailed coming-out and coming-of-age stories.

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How do you view the differing treatments between heterosexual and homosexual erotic literature by the mainstream?

Booksellers enforce their own “Don’t ask, don’t tell”. Mainstream publishers are corporations run by conservative Puritan businessmen who marginalise gay erotic literature because they fear fundamentalist religionists might threaten a boycott as they did with the benign *Brokeback Mountain*. The children’s powerhouse publisher Scholastic recently banned from elementary-school book fairs a kiddy-lit book featuring lesbian mums. My own books published by dedicated gay presses, especially the hardcore *Leather Blues*, are often confiscated when sent through Canadian customs.

There is a double standard. The quintessential difference between perceptions of hetero and homo literature is that the mainstream thinks that specifically erotic straight books are individuated from other straight books, but in a triumph of global homophobia, the mainstream thinks that ALL gay writing, whether about sex or not, is somehow erotic... and dangerous.

If a straight photographer and a gay photographer identically photograph a nude male at the same time and place, the verdict is that the straight photo is art and the other is gay porn. If Mapplethorpe had been straight, he would never have been censored, and he might have become famous for little more than fathering the children of Patti Smith.

Big-box bookstores display straight-sex magazines on their racks, but their begrudged gay book section is closeted away on four or five bookshelves, and features lesbian writing more than gay male writing because, insofar as lesbians are women, they are of safe fetish interest to straights. Just as the straight mainstream is twisted over gay literature, the GLBT mainstream is twisted over gender. When my publisher sent a copy of my award-winning comic novel *The Geography of Women* to *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, the editor wrote back that he did not know how to review a book about women written by a man. I sent him a note and asked him how he would review *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

What about specialist shops—surely they avoid these problems?

The few surviving GLBT bookstores focus mostly on feminist, ethnic, and politically correct titles, heavy on the academic, the self-help, the biographies—all of which are subsidised through the sale of gay greeting cards, male pin-up calendars, and porn magazines. The best mainstream ally that GLBT erotic literature has ever had is the new breed of online booksellers who mail all titles off in discreet packages to the smallest towns. Even so, anti-gay censorship can happen quickly at a corporation. During 2009, Amazon suffered an attack of “gay panic” and dropped all gay titles from its site. When GLBT customers protested, Amazon blamed a computer error, and, after nearly a week of excuses and apologies, returned to selling gay books.

In 1968, you wrote your first erotic novel *Leather Blues*. Since then you have written countless stories, articles, memoirs, and histories. Do you feel the fiction is still as important in representing the gay community as academic writing or biography? Has the internet undermined erotic publishing?

Fiction is all-important. Fiction reflects soul. But fiction is sinking slowly in the west. Ninety percent of titles nowadays are nonfiction. Fiction, like scripted television, has fallen victim to reality shows and blog postings. As a humanist, I’m disappointed because the current fad of politically correct academic writing is, among some other toiletries, reverse sexism, reverse racism, and twaddle psycho-babbled by newly minted academics who are themselves often sadly educated and desperate to publish or

perish. Most academics should be given a drink-driving test before being allowed to write anything about homosexuality.

So what is it about fiction that is so important?

Storytelling is important to the human psyche. It is quintessentially important to GLBT culture in its final uncloseting. In the 1970s, gay magazines worked to develop gay authors. *Drummer* magazine helped create the very leather culture we reported on each issue. Now killed by the internet, that fertile magazine culture that churned out new material every 30 days has been replaced by dozens of annual gay-fiction anthologies of the splendid kind invented by the Canadian critic Richard Labonte and edited by, for instance, the legendary Susie Bright in her straight-and-gay mixer *Best American Erotica*.

I am an academic who immigrated from the university ivory tower to the corporate world, and to the gay *dolce vita* of GLBT publishing. Those who can, do; those who can't, teach. In my hybrid career, I've written academic books and papers, biography, history, and fiction, and directed films. These days many gay fiction authors are trending toward publishing autobiography, biography, and non-fiction history. In 1968, I was impelled to write *Leather Blues* as an erotic-fiction novel and send it to a publisher. In 2009, one is more likely to shoot a video documentary about S&M leather and post it on YouTube.