ROUNDUP

The Naughty Bits

Writing about sex can be uniquely powerful — and perilous. A group of novelists and poets tell us about working blue: what novels first inspired them, what nouns they strive to avoid and who they think writes sex best.

Why is writing about sex so difficult?

SEX SCENES ARE DIFFICULT TO WRITE partly because the choice of verbs and nouns is so limited. You can mint new verbs — one of Martin Amis's characters speaks of having "Mailered" a woman — but this tends to take us into the realm of comedy, and sex, if it's going well, is not comic. Even when it's going badly, i.e., not going at all, it tends to be embarrassing rather than funny. Because having sex with someone for the first time is a leap into another reality — one moment you're having drinks, the next you're doing stuff you have dreamed of since you were 13. It seems to demand a shift into a new register. Except, it seems, if you're writing about gay male sex. In Alan Hollinghurst's novels you get these day-to-day scenes, described in meticulous, almost classical prose, and then, without any change of gear, we are in a demotic tangle of body parts.

Writing my first novel in the 1980s, at the height of the feminist terror, when men were obliged to accept that dungarees were a form of lingerie, anything approaching a heterosexual equivalent was unthinkable. There's a kiss in that book of mine and then, in the style of old movies, we dissolve to black. This was handy but out of keeping with everything else in the book, which was quite explicit: if a character picked up a cup, you could see the coffee in it. So in subsequent novels I decided that if people went into the bedroom, I had to follow and dutifully record whatever went on there. The result? Well, the virtue of pornography is that it makes films like "The Double Life of Véronique" seem vulgarly dishonest by comparison. By these lights the best writing about sex often seems pornographic rather than artful.

GEOFF DYER'S *most recent novel is "Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi."*

I DON'T THINK OF SEX AS ANY MORE DIFFICULT to write about than any other human behavior. Writers fail or soar at anything. Everyone thinks about sex, engages in it. It's the secret we all share. Just acknowledging its constant presence in people's thoughts is a good direction for a novelist. Of the books I like, it could be argued that sex is infused into every cadence, even if never explicitly. And "not explicit" doesn't mean that the prudish kiss leads to the prissy dissolve, but that characters are motored by desire. The authors I admire most seem to render an erotic force field on every page. DeLillo melds nuclear war and Texas college football in "End Zone," and it's hot. Rage, too, is about sex (consider Euripides' Medea). So is despair ("Miss Lonelyhearts"). Then there is plain old unvarnished lust, front and center in many of my favorite works: the poetry of the French troubadours and of Baudelaire, the novels of Genet, the weird louche America of William Gaddis's "Recognitions." It's a nice image that the patchwork quilt at the Spouter Inn matches Queequeg's patchwork-tattooed arms, but what distinguishes flesh from quilt is *touch*: a warm weight thrown over Ishmael. Some writer recently claimed somewhere that "Moby-Dick" has no sex in it. I find that idea strange. See what you want, Melville fan who is blind to buddy love. "Buddy" relates to "bunkie," which means "bedmate," and that is what Ishmael is to Queequeg, in their very first encounter.

RACHEL KUSHNER *is the author of the novels "The Flamethrowers" and "Telex From Cuba."*

IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO WRITE ABOUT SEX. It is impossible. Like its sister intimacies prayer and dance, sex is a live, three-dimensional (well, O.K., four- or five- if your cylinders are firing) happening, and black squiggles on a flat, dry page are, at best, a nostalgic distortion of a done deal — and usually skip the lube. Ouch! As I said, impossible. But being perverted, I mean perverse, I have always thought it would be a good idea to try. Besides, guaranteed failure has a thrilling upside: freedom.

Sex is hard in words. Stories seduce a different part of the brain — the one that, er, thinks — while the erotic brain slithers insidiously toward vile visuals, debauched behaviors, absurd positions and stadium settings, while the merest mention of monogamy or fidelity will render Casanova's cane limp and Cleopatra's Nile dry. The real triggers of lust are rarely the food of great literature, an experience of word-to-mind: sex is body-to-mind.

While the Marquis de Sade, Henry Miller, Pauline Réage (Anne Desclos), Pierre Louÿs, Jean de Berg (Catherine Robbe-Grillet), John Wilmot, Pietro Aretino, Erica Jong, Georges Bataille and ever reliable Anonymous remain the usual worthy salacious suspects, my gold star goes elsewhere, to those who really do it best: horny women. Think of those whose filthy, uncensored fantasies froth forth in Nancy Friday's collections, like Vesuvius upended, silencing the sentimental soft-core of Anaïs Nin and E. L. James in a single eruption. Here, unconsidered desire slices swiftly to the core of lust, and with their — our — trailer-trash orgies of incest, bestiality, rape, pedophilia, domination and submission, whoredom and heterosexual lesbianism we eat our cake before baking it. And leave men reeling in trailer blowback.

Wrong is hot, and great writing, by definition, can just never be quite wrong enough.

TONI BENTLEY'S *erotic memoir, "The Surrender," has been adapted for the stage and will have its American premiere in New York in January.*

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So, what makes a good sex scene?

I AM TRYING TO THINK OF WRITERS who do sex or sexuality in an interesting way: Henry Miller, Pauline Réage, the Marquis de Sade, Jane Bowles, Vladimir Nabokov, Tamara Faith Berger, Edmund White. They're all so different. I think a good sex scene can be written only by someone who has an interesting attitude toward sex — but not only toward sex, toward everything. An interesting sex scene is about the character in that situation, so it's impossible to think of a compelling sex scene appearing in a book in which sex or sexuality doesn't somehow operate throughout. You can't write sex well if you don't think sex is a significant part of life. Likewise, you couldn't write breakfast well if you didn't think breakfast was a significant part of life. I remember talking to the writer Henry Giardina (who identifies as transgender), who said of Henry Miller: "He writes about sex as if he was a lesbian. He's a total lesbian. Because he makes it so much about her. He's looking at a woman with the appreciation that a woman would have for another woman." I liked that. I'd never thought about it that way before.

SHEILA HETI *is the author of five books, most recently the novel "How Should a Person Be?"*

MOST MIDDLEBROW OR HIGHBROW WRITERS avoid sex scenes as somehow tacky or distracting or beyond their powers. I myself like to write them, whether heterosexual or male homosexual, because they strike me as among life's peak experiences, along with dying and death, one's first "Ring" cycle and a first gondola ride through Venice. It's a shocking lacuna to skip them, and the results can be highly entertaining if the writer follows a few simple rules.

Don't try to make sex scenes pornographic, since that will make them formulaic in actions and language, and unbelievable. Include all the incongruent, inconsequent thoughts and amateurish moves. Most sex is funny, if we accept Henri Bergson's definition of humor: the failure of the body to perform up to the spirit's standards, or the resistance of the material world to the will's impulses.

Remember that sex is our most intense form of communication in a language no one can decipher or

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

interpret. What does it all mean? Did a bit of rough lovemaking intend to convey hostility, or passion? Is the tenderness rehearsed, or sincere?

Don't confine the sexiness to sex scenes. Tolstoy's Anna has her wide hips and gliding step; Vronsky has his thick neck. We can never forget their bodies, nor what an exciting couple they must make. Colette is the great poet of the body and the erotic gesture, and she never screens out all the mixed signals lovers send each other. Sex is the brightest thread in the thick, strangely cut fabric of our lives; we can never know what it means, but we're always sure we're certain.

EDMUND WHITE *is the author of some 25 books. His newest, due out in February, is "Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris."*

BECAUSE MOST CULTURES LINK SEXUALITY — especially women's sexuality — with shame, I am drawn to sex scenes that are frank and demonstrate a willingness to be foolish, a lack of too much irony, a sense of humor, which may not be overt on the page but comes across in the telling. Whether a reader mocks the scene or is moved by it can often be less about the scene and more about the reader, and so it doesn't help to try to pre-empt readers' reactions. What works, I think, is to approach the scene with the awareness of sex as beautifully human, and with a lack of interest in airbrushing this beauty. Clumsiness and fluids interest me. Vague waves of passion do not. And plain language never fails. I am wary of excessive or obscuring metaphor, partly because it suggests a kind of shame, and partly because I am unable to enter the world of the scene imaginatively. I much prefer breasts to heaving mounds. Most of all, a good sex scene should allow some sentiment and let in a bit of magic. There's much in the world today that is irony-drenched and cynical; I like sex scenes that choose instead to be honest and open.

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *most recent novel is "Americanah."*

WHEN I WAS IN FOURTH GRADE, SOMEBODY brought a porno paperback to class and I read a few pages. A woman squatted, as I remember — why, I don't know. But my heart started thumping. I thought that "squat" was just about the most exciting notion I'd ever encountered.

A good sex scene needs thwartedness, surprise, innocence and hair.

NICHOLSON BAKER'S *latest novel, "Traveling Sprinkler," is reviewed on Page 23 of this issue.*

I LIKE TO THINK I WRITE EROTIC SEX as opposed to rude sex. Some writers spell out every detail as if they sideline as a gynecologist. That's not for me. I want to turn my readers on — not off. I try to take them so far, then allow their own sexual fantasies to take over. Believe me, it works.

So many people tell me that they started reading my books (filched from their moms) under the covers with a flashlight, and that I taught them everything they know about sex. I tell them, "I hope your boyfriend/girlfriend isn't disappointed." And I always receive a resounding "No way!"

JACKIE COLLINS *is the author of 30 books. Her next novel, "Confessions of a Wild Child," will be published in February.*

WHEN IT COMES TO WHO DOES IT BEST, Marguerite Duras's "Lover" and Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" come immediately to mind, two books I devoured in college, hoping to learn about sex, sexual identity and writing. In the breathtaking passages tracing Clarissa Dalloway's love for Sally Seton, Woolf describes the pain of the closet, the danger of exposure, the lure of the unattainable and the loveliest metaphor for orgasm I've yet read. Nevertheless, this fantastical exposé is typically Woolfian: high-strung, buttoned-up, class-proper. Where Duras (even in translation) feels languid and wanton, hot and bothered, Woolf seems so Victorian, fanning herself and huffing, "Oh my, oh my!" These examples seem just another virgin/whore arrangement, an imperative that women write about sex as if we are all either libertines or prudes, either spread out all over the bed (page) like Duras, or scolding ourselves like Woolf ("Oh I mustn't!") while swooning, scribbling, "She was wearing pink gauze — was that possible?"

The best sex writing must use more of us than that. Like magic, I happened upon a new poem by Natalie Diaz. It's called "These Hands, if Not Gods," and it's a game changer. When I read it I felt liberated, empowered: those feminist adjectives that don't quite scan onto "The Lover" or "Mrs. Dalloway." I felt a longing to be inside my own body reaching out to my beloved, a longing to make my words speak the truth of that. I've outgrown Duras and Woolf, in terms of literary eros. Now when I read sex, I want not just what I used to want. Give me connection, truth-telling and what is. I want glory and attendant articulation of it. I want something new to discover in these old urges. Natalie Diaz gives it all. She's writing sex right.

BRENDA SHAUGHNESSY *is the author of three books of poetry, most recently, "Our Andromeda." She teaches at Rutgers-Newark.*

What was your first illicit reading experience?

WHEN JAMES BALDWIN'S "If Beale Street Could Talk" found me, I was a 12-year-old Brooklyn girl caught between the oncoming world of teenage desire and a religious family promising a fiery end to . . . well, to everything. The closest I'd come to anything even remotely sexual in literature was Judy Blume's Margaret talking about her nonexistent breasts and kissing a boy named Philip Leroy. I imagined Philip Leroy black, which made it a bit more illicit, but mostly I had to settle for the fact that words like "period" were mentioned often throughout the novel. My world of books was as vanilla as the people in them.

From the opening pages of Baldwin's novel, when a teenage Tish reveals to her imprisoned boyfriend, Fonny, that she's pregnant, the book opened a world at once foreign and familiar. I was encountering everything I had been warned against: premarital sex, pregnancy, incarceration. Everything about "Beale Street" was forbidden — from the language used to describe body parts to the brutal Sunday sex of Fonny's parents. I read it secretly — mainly because my sixth-grade teacher said it was for adults and wouldn't allow it in the classroom. But mostly it was a novel with people who looked like me, spoke in a dialect I understood and struggled against the same everyday acts of injustice my own community struggled against. Baldwin taught me so much about how to grow up in a beautiful, sometimes dangerous, always complicated world — and how to live to tell the story.

JACQUELINE WOODSON *is the American fiction nominee for the 2014 Hans Christian Andersen Award. Her most recent book is "This Is the Rope: A Story From the Great Migration."*

KNOWLEDGE OF THE FORBIDDEN CAME to me not in a flash but piecemeal from various sources, largely because — like so many kids — I wasn't sure how sex was different from, say, urination or bowel movements, since it all was happening in the same general area of the body, the area that, if left uncovered, made us officially "naked." I learned little bits of sexual behavior through short scenes in popular novels. And even then, I wasn't always sure what was going on. Why, in Peter Benchley's novel "Jaws," was Ellen Brody talking with Hooper about removing her panties before leaving the restaurant? And why, in E. L. Doctorow's "Ragtime," was Mother's Younger Brother hiding in the closet and stroking his penis while Emma Goldman undressed Evelyn Nesbit? What was "jism"? It took me a while to figure all this stuff out. It wasn't until I picked up my mother's copy of "Fear of Flying," by Erica Jong, that these separate parts came together, giving me as clear an image of sex as a hormonal little middle schooler could handle. It was . . . edifying. I don't know if I was aroused so much as I was illuminated. Enlightened. And, in a way, relieved by the frankness of it. By the time I got to Colleen McCullough's "Thorn Birds," which I read in one long languorous summer afternoon, I was able to fully enjoy the

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heroine Meggie Cleary's obsession with Father Ralph. Mother's Younger Brother had nothing on me.

D. A. POWELL *received the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry for his most recent collection, "Useless Landscape: Or, A Guide for Boys." He currently teaches at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.*

THERE'S A STORY I LIKE TO TELL, ABOUT WHEN my father took me to a used-book store near our home in New Jersey. I must have been 12 or 13.

"Go pick out a book," my father said. "Anything you want."

I scurried off to make my selection. God knows what I was reading then, it was all a jumble. I was drawn to books by big literary names as long as they had somewhat lurid covers. But that day I struck gold: the novelization of the movie "Caligula," by William Howard, based on Gore Vidal's screenplay. Seemed pretty literary to me, and when I opened it up I immediately hit upon a string of quite accessible and extremely lascivious sentences. A few pages on and it was orgy time. I flipped back and forth through the book, togas falling everywhere. And if it wasn't wild Roman sex, it was insane Roman violence. Chocolate in my peanut butter, from my adolescent vantage. I ran up to the register. The clerk saw the book.

"Sir," she said. "I don't think you want your son to have that book."

"Why not?" my father said.

"Well. . . ." she said, and tried to explain.

"The hell with that," my father said. "That's censorship. You can't go around telling me what my son can and can't read."

It was at that moment that I understood what a strange and wonderful father I had. Later, of course, when he realized what had occurred along with the triumph of free speech, he demanded the smutty book back, but I convinced him I'd lost the thing. It stayed under my bed for a long time, like a secret friend who never fails to shock and dazzle, until he does.

SAM LIPSYTE'S *most recent book is the story collection "The Fun Parts."*

ONE OF MY BABY SITTERS WAS A no-nonsense woman who wore steel-toe boots with shorts and kept an unloaded handgun under her pillow in case her ex made an impromptu midnight visit. In her night-stand drawer was a romance novel and a case of bullets — how's that for fantasy versus reality?

Sometimes I'd sneak in to peek at the gun, which I felt an almost maternal draw toward; hidden beneath a pillow, it seemed like a very vulnerable, gestating thing.

The dog-eared paperback was even more interesting. Its cover featured a man and a woman in old-fashioned clothing and embracing at sunset. The man was looking at the woman with a confident smile; the woman was looking at the man with what seemed to be shock and terrified acceptance. It was as though he had just informed her that she'd been poisoned and had only seconds to live, but it was all for the best.

The story was equally confusing. The man kept putting his hands between the woman's legs and saying things like, "So this is what starlight feels like!" And she was just embarrassed that she was so sweaty all over from ironing. Adults seemed to be an entirely different culture, and I kept consulting the book to better understand their strange customs.

ALISSA NUTTING *is the author of the novel "Tampa."*

IN THE SPRING OF 1992, IN AN ARMY camp in China where the freshmen of my university were serving a one-year training, a fellow trainee got hold of a pirated copy of "Lady Chatterley's Lover." This girl, whom I'll call N, had lost her virginity during the winter break. N was the kind of girl who would share the news, even though it was still a puritan time, when most girls our age hadn't touched a boy's hand.

N approached me with Lawrence's masterpiece — banned, she informed me — and asked me to read it and mark the sex scenes.

If you were a 19-year-old, Lawrence should have been the last person you turned to for sex education. If you bracketed every sexual encounter in the book, as I duly did, you'd think sex was the most ludicrous, grotesque and pointless activity.

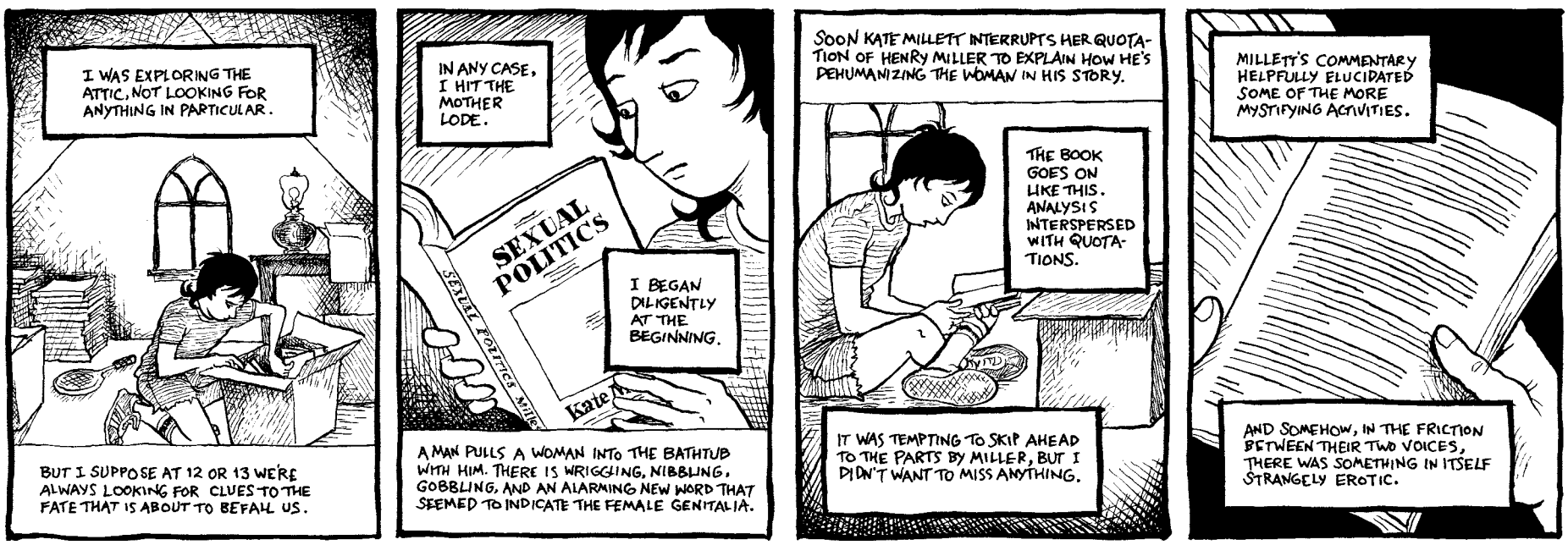
"Why do you want to read these scenes?" I asked. "They make me laugh."

Ever so wistfully, N said that the first and only night she spent with her boyfriend had been so memorable that it had become impossible to remember. "The more you try to recall every single detail, the less you can," she said.

Years later, I read Chekhov's story "The Kiss," in which a soldier, kissed passionately by a young woman who has mistaken him for her lover, related the encounter to his colleagues: "In the course of that moment he had told everything, and it surprised him dreadfully to find how short a time it took him to tell it. He had imagined that he could have been telling the story of the kiss till next morning."

Only Lawrence could've done that, I thought, feeling sad for the soldier, and for the girl who had once searched for her lost memories in "Lady Chatterley's Lover."

YIYUN LI'S *new novel, "Kinder Than Solitude," will be published next year.*



ALISON BECHDEL *is the author of the graphic memoirs "Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic" and "Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama."*