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SEX LIT 101

SEXY. DIRTY. RAUNCHY. SAVAGE.

*With erotic fiction all the rage today —
literally saving the book industry —
TREATS! dusts off some of the best
classic spanking, flogging, blindfolded
naughty tales that readers—and movie
producers!—should be reading now. by
Toni Bentley*

During this age—or at least the current sixteen minutes—of the bestselling erotic book of all time it is worth pondering, even revisiting, some of the best erotic books of all time, which, of course, is not the same thing at all. While *Fifty Shades of Grey* ranks rather low on such a list it must be heartily thanked—or rather spanked—for opening the conversation, yet again. You know, that conversation that bothered Freud so much, at which he so dismally failed, the one that bothers every straight man alive right into the grave: What do women want? (Gay men are, paradoxically, not so interested in what women want and yet so often know the answer.)

I am not offering a “Best of All Time” list—how could I and have any crumb of self-respect remain while leaving out the Kama Sutra and such writers as Boccaccio, Chaucer, Catullus, Sappho, Ovid, Shakespeare, Casanova, and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch right through Norman Mailer,

Philip Roth and Marguerite Duras among others. And don't get me started on the original opus of S/M, the *Bible*, which in its violence and domination, particularly of the fair sex, leaves even the Marquis de Sade scrambling to the safety of his dungeon.

Then, of course, we have dearly beloved Anonymous, responsible for classic, silly, smutty, Birch-in-the-Boudoir Victorian tales like "*Man with a Maid*," and "*The Autobiography of a Flea*." And then there is "*Rear End Desires*" whose title alone suffices for honorable mention. And gives me a smooth segue to my own humble addition to the genre. "*The Surrender*" tells the tale of my obsessive love affair with a man who fucked my fortunate little ass more often than not—though, in truth, it was still not punishment enough for all my goodness. Though I recorded 298 such congresses—I played Democrat while he fucked me right—the truth is that before it was over it was 333. I just wanted to take this opportunity to correct that number in our post-James Frey did-you-lie-in-your-memoir era.

Needless to say what goes round comes around and it is interesting to note that in the following books one finds the Song of Sodomy being sung in every century long before ours —and usually more wickedly. Pietro Arentino, an Italian, writing in the 16th-century, is credited with inventing literary pornography in his sonnets of "*I Modi*," written to accompany a set of sixteen graphic drawings by Giulio Romano, an apprentice to Raphael. The images were banned by the Pope and he ordered every copy burned. Reprinting was ruled punishable by death, and the engraver of the drawings was thrown in the slammer. Needless to say, the PR was fantastic. But with death being little deterrent to lust—it is, in truth, the ultimate aphrodisiac—the engravings were not only reprinted but this time accompanied by Arentino's filthy verse. Then they disappeared for four hundred years.

Arentino's poems are ironic, obscene and obsessed with the prevalent sexual peccadillo in Renaissance Italy at the time: the "*culo*" (ass). "With all due respect to hypocrites," he wrote, "I dedicate these lustful pieces to you, heedless of fake prudishness and asinine prejudices that forbid the eyes to gaze at the things they most delight to see." Touché! In a terrific show of female agency the woman in Sonnet 10 says:

Come on, put it here. HE: I won't!

SHE: Yes, you will!

HE: Has the other place, then, gone out of fashion?

I mean the potta [cunt].

SHE: Not entirely, but behind

The cazzo [prick] finds far greater pleasure.

Arentino, in a fine gesture of poetic justice was said to have died, literally, "from laughing too much."

In the 17th-century John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester held up his end in the sodomy club though he was adept in all salacious rhythms:

Her father gave her dildoes six;

Her mother made 'em up a score;

But she loves naught but living pricks,

And swears by God she'll frig no more.

In the 18th-century the Marquis de Sade turned the practice of sodomy into a philosophy and took it to new lows that have yet to be, well, lowered. Unable to choose his greater pleasure, whipping or sodomizing, time and again he settled for both. D. H. Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and Pauline Réage in *Story of O* hoisted the backdoor to the bedroom yet again into the courtroom in the mid-20th-century, while Lawrence (not D. H.) v. Texas launched the debate into the 21st-century American justice system where it remains, happily, a never-ending point of debate and outrage. How fantastic that despite such extraordinary overexposure sodomy remains an impregnable taboo.

My list of sexy books—above and below—is, I know, somewhat short of women writers (though French women make a notable good showing) but they are woefully also absent from the genre of real, lusty, one-handed erotic writing too —not a discussion I have room for here, though it does bring up a pertinent point that runs like a river through the subject. Sex—in the doing, writing or reading thereof—is never, as Woody Allen meant to say, politically correct if you're doing it right, much to the chagrin of many liberated, though perhaps frustrated, men and women. Though the fact that most women, given our plethora of parts, use two hands to masturbate may have something to do with it.

All that hard-won "equality" between men and women has put a serious dent in many sex lives and the popularity with women of the Fifty Shades trilogy attests—it is a multi-million strong poll—with its 1950's-style (the heroine ends up married with babies) BDSM nice-n'-lite that women are sick of being side by side. Equality during sex is simply *contra naturam*. Someone has to go up on the cross and suffer pleasure and someone has to tie her up there and enforce her salvation. Despite the anointment of the ubiquitous "bad girl" in our culture women still want to

be the sacrificial saint. There is a reason we all say “MyGodmyGodmyGod!!” a great deal more often than the name of the poor bastard doing all the work down there.

The titles that follow include simply my own, very personal choices—and these an arbitrary slice in no particular order of merit. Although *Story of O* is more worthy than most. A paradoxically ascetic tome, it is the driest book ever written about a subject that these days is so literally wet that one could float the QE2 between its usual heroine's legs and find lovers drowning in her moat. A snorkel perhaps?

Anne Desclos became Dominique Aury who became Pauline Réage—what elaborate pseudonymous coverage this French blue-stocking enacted to preserve her identity (one them anyway) in the intellectual circles in which she lived and worked — and how perfect that her heroine goes by the name of nothing: O. A tale of ritualized degradation, *Story of O* has a profound spiritual component that has more in common with the trials of St. Teresa of Avila being pierced by an angel's “spear of gold” than common erotica. “He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart,” reported Teresa from the spiritual battleground, “and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God . . . so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.” O, indeed!

Aury takes her heroine on a journey not of endless multiple orgasms into the bliss of unity with her beloved but rather to ascension through self-abnegation. More an erotic allegory of a female artist and her art than one of romantic love—Marina Abramović comes to mind—it is a story not of oneness but of noneness. The story culminates with O's final request to her Master, Sir Stephen. He is leaving her and she asks his permission to die. He grants it and this noble creature, with her branded skin and labial leash, passes, like St. Teresa, her ego finally crucified, freed. Death being the final fuck. It is so hot.

Then there is Aury's confrere, the inevitable, the unavoidable, the Wagner of the erotic Underworld: **Donatien Alphonse François de Sade**. His prose, in its intensity and relentless violence, manages to assault the reader as if being flogged by the divine Marquis himself. We are his prisoners all, trapped in our grand little notions of propriety.

The acts he depicts of pain, blood, revenge, endurance, with little boys and girls, nuns, clerics, whores, wives, in orgies, duets and triads still leave any erotic aspirant today incarcerated in an impenetrable prison from which they cannot hope to escape, much less write, their way out. Though, of course, we have his books, these weighted weapons, because he was himself imprisoned for his infamy and, like Casanova, it gave him time away from enacting his lusts to record them for us.

Enfin, the mighty Marquis was a moralist and his discussions of the meaning of “virtue”—one of his favorite perversities—fill every page alongside the lashings. He uses his abject perversion to drive both his cock and his mind into the universe. And there he remains, alone, still unchallenged in the violence of his passions like a great erection hovering above the anarchic galaxy of immortal Eros, whip at the ready.

The Erotic Mind by psychotherapist Jack Morin explains exactly how the sexual mind works, and so brilliantly elucidates this process that the book itself becomes erotic as one's own mind becomes increasingly conscious, accepting, and then downright encouraging about all those little Nazi fantasies you've been suppressing. Suddenly they explode in your mind full-blown, lusty and so wrong that it is as though Morin had written them on the page.

I love his basic equation: Attraction + Obstacles = Excitement. So simple, so true and one need go no further to understand why both marriage and monogamy are not, ultimately, conducive to good sex. Or even bad sex, as the epidemic of dead bed marriages attests. Morin explains how instability, impediments, and a certain level of anxiety are intrinsic to desire. Once embraced, rather than removed—as most therapy and SSRIs attempt to do—one finishes Morin's classic with your mind firmly in your own gutter.

Speaking of dirty minds nothing prepares one for Nancy Friday's truly epic collection of real women's sexual fantasies *My Secret Garden* that burst on the scene right alongside Erica Jong's now-classic *Fear of Flying*. 1973 was a good year for women: Friday provided the scenarios to employ during Jong's zipless fuck. Friday's books—she produced several sequels, including *Forbidden Flowers* and *Women on Top*—provide an outpouring that is still astonishing today in its variety: incest, rape, animals (both house pets and barnyard), masses of lesbianism from heterosexual women (very interesting subject here), and plain old super-duper weird. These stories are guaranteed to get you there. Fast.

I offer an unequivocal vote for Henry Miller and *Tropic of Cancer* despite the ever-present trill of protest about Miller's chauvinism. He writes raw and seemingly uncensored and this alone is sexy. His pure energy on the page about sex, or anything else, sends such a wave of immediacy and exuberance that his prose feels three-dimensional. He dared so we dare.

A word here about his lover Anaïs Nin, so often cited for her own writing about sex: I'll choose Henry any day for a good ride. The only thing sexy about Nin's erotic stories is that she wrote them for a dollar a page, like a good little priapic whore. But the edgeless writing stops short in prose that is too “written,” too flowery, too soft-core. Which makes perfect sense when one realizes that her entire persona as a femme fatale living for “art” was a hoax of enormous proportions.

After devouring all her diaries as a teenager she ascended the pedestal as a role model—though always far under Colette, everyone resides under Colette—but when her unexpurgated diary, “Incest” was published in 1992 my disappointment became outright resentment at her betrayal. There one reads of her chilling coldness about an abortion, and that she had simply excised from the diaries that were published during her lifetime the inconvenient fact that she had a banker husband who financed her “bohemian” lifestyle: her veils were Hermès not flea market.

But then, when it became clear that she never even had an orgasm (a decent barometer of actual sexual pleasure) with Miller or anyone else until she was 35, I was outraged at her deceit. As Miller later said of her: Only a crazy person lies in their own diary. Oh yes, and then as an adult, she fucked her father (CBRT: cognitive-behavioral-revenge-therapy) just to seal the deal.

But now I have a different appreciation of Nin as one truly crazy-ass bitch, who also fucked, among everyone else, her famous therapist, Otto Rank—but then, who wouldn't? Imagine the pillow talk: you could discuss your orgasmic difficulties with your therapist—with your therapist. For free! She was a bicoastal bigamist, and overall took exhibitionism and narcissism to a new level for women, a much-needed example of real

chutzpa for the shy and retiring. This genuine bad girl, posing as an *artiste*, managed a kind of immortality with only a mid-range talent — and no talent at all for the truth. Go Anaïs!

Lady Chatterley's Lover is important for three reasons. Lawrence gave us John Thomas and Lady Jane and we have all been naming our genitals with progressively bad taste ever since. Moreover, Lawrence clearly delineates in this story of an aristocratic woman's affair with the earthy gamekeeper of her invalid husband's estate, the powerful erotic component of fucking the totally wrong, the impossible, person—be it the inappropriate age, size, race, sex, status, or education level. (Morin is good on this dynamic and Duras's gorgeous *The Lover* is a terrific example of this: poor little French girl and older rich Chinese man.) Wrong is hot. Entirely wrong is hotter.

Getting it in the *culo*, as Lady Chatterley did, not only brought her down to earth and up to heaven, but the act set the stage nicely for both the British and American courts' ardent debate. "Obscenity" explained our friend Anonymous, "is whatever gives the judge an erection."

While the notorious fin-de-siècle smut-peddler Monsieur Willy didn't exactly lock his child-wife *Gabrielle Sidonie Colette* in a room for hours on end to write pornography, he did tell her, as he turned the key, to make the tales from her school days as spicy as possible. Thus was launched in the first year of the 20th-century, Claudine, the brightest, naughty schoolgirl ever to strut into literature in her uniform, barrettes and neckerchief.

Fifteen-year-old Claudine has trysts not only with her girlfriends but with the headmistress's female assistant. Jealousies abound, love explodes, and Willy got far more than he bargained for during that first lockup: a truly great writer who, in time, would dump his sorry ass for Napoleon III's niece, a cross-dressing woman named Missy. Colette knew of what she wrote: lover to numerous men and women, she was the first woman to bare a breast on the Paris Music Hall stage, and wrote book after book examining the mysterious dance of erotic longing and the ambivalence in fulfillment.

Eerily, soon after writing one of her masterpieces, *Cheri*, about an aging courtesan's affair with a beautiful young man, the forty-seven year old Colette embarked on a five-year affair with her own sixteen-year-old stepson— now those are interesting all-wrong numbers to ponder.

So what was it that Dr. Freud didn't understand? Female orgasm for one thing, which is, both symbolically and physically the event that centers a woman, that forces her back inside herself. So debated, so queried, so tested, so desired and, yet, still so difficult to come by. And, I think, still massively underrated. In this respect E. L. James, the author of the *Fifty Shades* books, does a real disservice to her own sex in her tale of love n'chains. And I'm all for the chains.

Anastasia Steele who, notably, has never had an orgasm in her life proceeds to have not one, not two, but three big O's during her deflowering session with Christian Grey—all in the space of 4 oversized Kindle pages. One solely from nipple tweaking, and two from intercourse, all with barely a passing clitoral wave. Dream on Ladies.

So it goes, with a woman this time, propagating to other women, the notion not only of Freud's elusive vaginal orgasm but that all it takes to have multiple orgasms, is a handsome, demanding, well-endowed, wounded gazillionaire. Oy. Real sex is so much sexier than this.... Now if Christian Grey had used his money to actually pay Anastasia to be his sex slave we might have the start of a story with a real twist and some guts ...

A gorgeous antidote to this overblown hooley is Leonard Cohen's 1992 ballad "Light as the Breeze":

She stands before you naked

you can see it, you can taste it,

and she comes to you light as the breeze.

Now you can drink it or you can nurse it,

it don't matter how you worship

as long as you're down on your knees.

So I knelt there at the delta, at the alpha and the omega, at the cradle of the river and the seas.

And like a blessing come from heaven

for something like a second

I was healed and my heart

was at ease.

Words from our resident Master.

I rest my case.

Toni Bentley danced with Balanchine's New York City Ballet for ten years and is the author of five books—all named Notable Books of the year by the New York Times—including “[Winter Season, A Dancer's Journal](#),” and “[Sisters of Salome](#).” Her book “[The Surrender, An Erotic Memoir](#)” was called a “small erotic masterpiece” by Leon Wieseltier and has been translated into eighteen languages. A one-woman play adaptation — “[La Rendición](#)” — is premiering in January 2013 in Madrid in a production by the Spanish National Theater. She writes for the New York Times Book Review, New York Review of Books, and Playboy. She is the recipient of a 2008 Guggenheim Fellowship.

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