

Between Poetry and Pornography

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In an article for [The Guardian](#) from 2017, Eimear McBride wrote: ‘Of my own area, literature, it’s always said that good sex scenes are hard to write. This is true. Why, is less frequently reflected on.’

In my first term on the MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, my workshop tutor Andrew Cowan remarked that this year our writing was so full of sex. Though there was a lot of sex in my work, I found that most of my references to it were avoidant. This avoidance, it seemed, was second nature. I didn’t circumvent writing sex because it was something I didn’t want to talk about; neither was it something I thought fiction should avoid talking about. Regardless, not writing sex had become somehow inscribed when I wasn’t looking.

The problem extends beyond the fact that it is hard to use words to describe something so non-verbal. This after all is the challenge and task of the writer. The fact is that as a society we do not talk about sex and don’t know how to talk about it. The very words we have available seem ineffectual. In our internet age especially, the language of sex has become permeated by the language of pornography, drenched in cliché and degrading words. Though there are plenty of situations in which omitting or eliding sex in fiction is the appropriate response¹, writing sex is often omitted by default or otherwise draws from a formulaic linguistic landscape.

In June of this year, James Smart and I – at the time two students on the Creative Writing MA at UEA – organised a 1-day symposium to reflect on why good sex is so hard to write. *I’ll Show You Mine: A Sex-Writing Symposium* brought together panellists from across genres – from literary, romance and science fiction to poetry –

¹ I think my own story *The Husband and the Wife Go to the Seaside*, republished this year in Salt’s Best British Short Stories, might be a good example: the avoidance of the sex ‘scene’ here was more the result of it being a story which embraced ambiguity, being filled with things that could both be and not be at the same time.

and featured three fantastic panels which are available [here](#). Listen in to hear Sarah Hall talk about lazy language (beware the second-hand phrase, such as ‘he took her from behind’) and Monique Roffey’s advice that writing good sex requires you to ‘Kill your mother, kill your father’ and anyone else whose eyes might be stopping you from writing sex truthfully as you understand it.

Alongside the symposium, James and I launched the *Show Me Yours* Prize, for which we received over 360 entries. One thing I found significant was how many entries, no matter how ‘good’ the writing, didn’t push themselves quite far enough in engaging with the topic of ‘sex writing’. If anything, the prize emphasised just how difficult it is to write the act at all, let alone to write it well. My personal favourite was Vijay Khurana’s *Notes*, a short piece whose language articulates the experience of sex in a way I have not yet been able to. *Notes* appeared alongside the winners and other shortlisted entries in the *Show Me Yours* chapbook.

Though writing sex is difficult (writing anything is difficult! she shouts), and takes courage, it is not impossible and often the oversight is to omit it by proxy. Within a context which shames writers for attempting to write sex at all (via things such as the Bad Sex Awards), by not writing about sex carefully and with consideration, we are arguably allowing its misrepresentation for many sections of the population to continue. It should go without saying that if there is to be any kind of award for sex writing, it should be one for *good* sex writing and for those who attempt it thoughtfully. But importantly, writing sex is not impossible, and will no doubt start to look more possible the more it is engaged with.

Personal favourite engagements with sex in literature:

Nina Ledger’s recent *The Collection* is full of insights whilst avoiding cliché; G by John Berger; short stories *The Moves* by Miranda July and *Vuotjärvi* by Sarah Hall.