

Nigel Krauth

The Pen in the Ink-Pot: Teaching erotic writing

Abstract:

This study investigates the advice given in print and online sources regarding learning to write erotica. It considers erotica, and writing about sex, in the current publishing climate, and what this means for tertiary teaching. It also canvasses some tertiary classroom situations where teaching the erotic has proven problematic.

Biographical note:

Nigel Krauth co-editor (with Jen Webb) of the online creative writing teaching journal *TEXT: The Journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs* <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text>. His most recent publication (2006) is *Creative writing: Theory beyond practice* (edited with Tess Brady), available at <http://www.snodger.com.au/bookstore>.

This study investigates literary erotica ... and the writing and teaching of it. By 'erotica' I mean writing that may tend to arouse sexual feeling. Defining 'erotica' is no simple matter since it is a type of writing based on effect, and its effect varies with individual readers. Depending on the reader's psychology, background, moral persuasion, mood, and familiarity with the particular text – i.e., the reader's *propensity* at the time of reading – an 'erotic' piece may work in various ways, including not working as erotica at all. Erotic writing is commonly thought to aim deliberately at exciting sexual feeling; but in serious literature, writing about sex in uninhibited ways can be simply and vitally concerned with recording reality and piercing towards truths.

We live in an age of emergence for erotica, albeit still a context where lines of acceptability are drawn. Sensuality and sexuality are less offensive these days than previously; are more accepted in public texts such as advertising, but can still provoke censorial response from hard-liners. Passages in DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), most likely referring to anal sex, today read as principally poetic rather than as abominably immoral:

And it seemed she was like the sea, nothing but dark waves rising and heaving, heaving with a great swell, so that slowly her whole darkness was in motion, and she was Ocean rolling its dark, dumb mass. Oh, and far down inside her the deeps parted and rolled asunder, in long, fair-travelling billows, and ever, at the quick of her, the depths parted and rolled asunder, from the centre of soft plunging, as the plunger went deeper and deeper, touching lower, and she was deeper and deeper and deeper disclosed, the heavier the billows of her rolled away to some shore, uncovering her, and closer and closer plunged the palpable unknown, and further and further rolled the waves of herself away from herself leaving her, till suddenly, in a soft, shuddering convulsion, the quick of all her plasm was touched, she knew herself touched, the consummation was upon her, and she was gone. (Lawrence 2004: Chapter 12)

When Lawrence first wrote this, the acts he described were not generally exposed by texts in the public domain, so the shock of the new description brought forth a barrage of moral and legal challenge. But today, the beauty of Lawrence's writing informs acts already described by countless hacks in an array of poorly-written public texts. In the past, the definition of 'erotic' tended to evoke domains outside the pale of public acceptance. Nowadays 'erotica' exists expansively on the web and as a popular genre category in bookshops worldwide. 'Bonkbusters' (Rickett 2007) are among the leading bestseller titles in the print mass market.

The question of erotica's place in the culture has long been a subject of censorial and revolutionary discourse. But now we have the opportunity to identify it and teach it in classrooms.

In universities of the twenty-first century, the arts don't continue to exist simply for their inculcation of moral good in students. Arts educators of previous centuries – such as Matthew Arnold – saw the place of creative writing as central to the progress and moral quality of the culture and its mandate to civilise (Arnold 1947: 1-33). But we can forget

that forthwith. The Arts is just another industry today, any sublime headiness notwithstanding. The Arts' economic bottom line is the focus for its survival now.

More and more in this vocationally-oriented climate, it seems, it is incumbent on us as teachers of creative writing to inform our students of career prospects in the discipline we teach. There is evidence to suggest that literary writing – serious poetry and novels – has suffered a decline in Australia: sales, readerships, and therefore royalties for novels and poetry are down, and the promise of earning a livelihood in these literary genres becomes more doubtful (Fisher 2006, Tables 4, 5). Writing erotica, on the other hand, offers greater career prospects.

We can compare the statistics. In the UK, hardback first editions of literary novels are down to just 1000 – ‘depressing new lows’, says Andrew Kidd, publisher at Macmillan (Rickett 2007). A first-run literary novel in Australia gets a run of 3000 paperback copies or less, according to Patrick Gallagher, publisher at Allen and Unwin Australia (Gallagher 2007). This constitutes about \$9000 total royalty to the author without a reprint. US first edition runs can be as low as 5000 (Gallagher 2007) but the US population is ten times that of Australia and potentials are greater there. An example is provided by Tina Engler (aka erotica author Jaid Black) who has combined print with online publication of her own and others' works. *Publishers Weekly* reports:

Since 2001, Engler's online venture, Ellora's Cave, has grown from an actual kitchen table-top to a company that releases 25 e-titles and 15 print titles per month. Its biggest seller in 2005 was Black's *The Empress' New Clothes*, which moved nearly 7,000 copies in trade paperback, according to Nielsen BookScan. Its electronic sales also continue to increase, says Engler, who reported first-quarter sales in 2006 of more than 200,000 e-books, an increase to 67,000 a month from 56,000 a month in 2005. (Patrick 2006)

But how well do we prepare our students to write erotica? How many universities offer courses in ‘1069 Writing Erotica’ to cash in on the big sales and rewarding careers in this tumescent industry? It's a serious question: if the focus of viability for a university education rests on the bottom line, shouldn't we be placing more emphasis on the bottom – and the writing of lines about it? There is a plethora of material about how-to-write-erotica on the worldwide web and in how-to-do-it books. It's a domain so far dominated by private enterprise, and one universities need to penetrate.

When I Google ‘Learn to write erotica at university’ only two university sites come up in the first 100 results – one each in the US and the UK. The first involves a course called ‘Erotic Fiction: Writing Sex’, run as part of the Fall 2007 Art Classes in the ASUC Art Studio at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB). Tutored by Philip Huang, a Berkeley-based gay writer, this course forms part of the Public Arts Program of the university and not the academic curriculum. It takes place notably in an art studio – an environment where naked flesh (i.e. life-drawing models) is the focus of ongoing attention. This suggests that visual arts education – in having a tradition of dealing with naked bodies, unlike creative writing – is a more comfortable space for erotica. In his description of the course, Huang says:

The only thing worse than bad sex is bad writing about sex. Does the world need one more description of a throbbing (insert-your-favorite-word-for-genitalia-here)? But how do we write about sex in a fresh, startling way? Students in this six-week course will work on a single piece of short prose, under 1200 words, in which sex is a major or minor feature. Students will also learn the basics of publishing their work: researching Calls for Submission, formatting their work for submission, and networking with editors and publishers. (University of California, Berkeley 2007)

The second site I discover belongs to the Wade College of Creative Writing, a private, accredited tertiary college situated in Fleet Street, London. Their blurb goes:

This university-accredited centre of learning was founded in 1946 and is based in London and Manchester. Wade College of Creative Writing is part of the WPL publishing group.

In welcoming students to ‘Wade erotic’, the Dean, James Barnes, says:

Our Erotic Writing Course is the only serious, online writing course in the world specifically designed for those interested in developing their erotic story writing skills.

It has four key elements:

- Individual lectures and tutorials.
- Exercises designed to ensure you complete the course with a piece of finished, publishable work.
- One-to-one, personal tuition from a professional author.
- Full, back-up support.

The course is indispensable regardless of your current level of ability, and elsewhere on this website you’ll find genuine testimonials from both first-time and experienced writers.

What everyone who takes the course appreciates is the fact that it includes plenty of advice and information on turning your newly developed skills into profit.

Our lecturers will not only show you how to write world-class erotic literature but also show you how to get it published.

One more point. We may be offering you a distance-learning course, but we have real premises! You can always reach us, and we are even happy to see if [sic] you if you care to make an appointment. (Wade College of Creative Writing 2007)

Even though students may call in to the College premises with an appointment, I note that this erotica writing course exists in a setting where face-to-face contact – in the flesh, so to speak – is rare. Problems of actual classroom contact seem minimised from the outset.

Both these advertisements focus on publishing and the financial benefits. They imply their orientation to the mass market, but also they emphasise literary quality. UCB talks about ‘a fresh, startling way’ of writing, and Wade College focuses on ‘world-class’ writing outcomes. If we were told by our Vice-Chancellors to teach erotic writing because that’s where the money is for career-minded students, how do we also teach

good writing? What is there in the writing of erotica that is also useful to serious literary concerns?

An interesting place to start is the annual Bad Sex Awards, run by the UK journal, the *Literary Review*. Here's an account of the 2005 gala proceedings:

Filth and hilarity abounded in equal measure at the annual Literary Review Bad Sex Awards, which went off with the usual bang tonight at the In & Out Club in Mayfair. The evening began in appropriately bawdy fashion with a succession of actresses breathily reciting the shortlisted passages to roars of increasingly champagne-fuelled laughter. The noble visages of soldiers and our own dear Queen Victoria gazed down serenely from the gilt and William Morris-covered walls as the passages got smuttier, the cheers louder and the wine glasses emptier. 'I've never said this before,' the speaker admitted, before a reading of an extract from Paul Theroux's novel, 'but it really is utterly foul.' Dealing as it did with 'demon eels' and 'live slime', one couldn't exactly blame him. (Crown 2005)

Melvyn Bragg and Tom Wolfe have won this 15-year-old award. Gabriel García Márquez, Paul Theroux, John Updike and Salman Rushdie are past nominees. An excellent example of bad erotic writing by an acclaimed literary writer is the 2004 winner, Tom Wolfe. This passage comes from his novel *I am Charlotte Simmons* (published by Jonathan Cape):

Hoyt began moving his lips as if he were trying to suck the ice cream off the top of a cone without using his teeth. She tried to make her lips move in sync with his. The next thing she knew, Hoyt had put his hand sort of under her thigh and hoisted her leg up over his thigh. What was she to do? Was this the point she should say, 'Stop!?' No, she shouldn't put it that way. It would be much cooler to say, 'No, Hoyt,' in an even voice, the way you would talk to a dog that insists on begging at the table.

Slither slither slither slither went the tongue, but the hand that was what she tried to concentrate on, the hand, since it has the entire terrain of her torso to explore and not just the otorhinolaryngological caverns – oh God, it was not just at the border where the flesh of the breast joins the pectoral sheath of the chest – no, the hand was cupping her entire right – Now! She must say 'No, Hoyt' and talk to him like a dog ...

... the fingers went under the elastic of the panties moan moan moan moan moan went Hoyt as he slithered slithered slithered slithered and caress caress caress caress went the fingers until they must be only eighths of inches from the border of her public hair – what's that! – Her panties were so wet down ... there the fingers had definitely reached the outer stand of the field of pubic hair and would soon plunge into the wet mess that was waiting right ... therethere ... (Wolfe 2005)

The 2006 winner, Iain Hollingshead, was a new writer who won the award with his first book, *Twentysomething*. Our students are in contention for this prize, should their work be published in the UK. It's the only prize a novelist doesn't want to win. The writer doesn't receive the £250 pounds – that goes to the reader who nominates the offending passage. The exposed author gets a dodgy statue.

I make a point of this to emphasise that fine literary writers are not necessarily capable of handling erotica – and I wonder why. I am also interested in analysing the case of the erotic passage, and erotic writing in general, to discover how writing well in this genre might help us write well generally.

Acknowledged writers of classic erotica from the twentieth century include Anais Nin, George Bataille, Vladimir Nabokov and Arthur Miller. As with the original erotic classic, Petronius' *Satyricon*, these writers set the erotic in a context of understanding the everyday – there's a quotidian, realist perspective as opposed to a fantasising or escapist perspective (Anon 2003). As Margaret Atwood has said of writing sex scenes:

... [Sex] is not just which part of whose body was where. It's the relationship between the participants, the furniture in the room or the leaves on the tree, what gets said before and after, the emotions – act of love, act of lust, act of hate. Act of indifference, act of violence, act of despair, act of manipulation, act of hope? Those things have to be part of it. (Atwood in Plimpton 1989: 214)

In other words, there's an overwhelming honesty of approach. The sensual is not delivered superficially for its titillation; it is delved into for what it reveals about human behaviour and the human condition. For example, Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) investigates the human aspects of a perversion where an older man is obsessed with a girl, and his *Ada* (1969) explores the nature of sensual love children can have for each other. Each of these topics is profound; and each has been, or still is, censored for discussion by authorities.

The point about erotic writers Nin, Bataille, Nabokov and Miller is that their investigations are valuable to the culture; they increase our understanding of ourselves, our drives, our emotions. And also, these writers wrote extraordinary prose – poetic, robust, durable and complex. The complexity of erotic language is shown by Derek Pell in his short piece titled 'Sexlus' (1994), which he describes as 'A Neutered text, after Henry Miller':

I said it had a marvellous physique. It was full and supple, limber, smooth as a seal. When I ran my hands over its lower portion it was enough to make me forget all my problems – even Nietzsche. As for its thing, if it wasn't exactly beautiful, it was attractive and arresting. Perhaps its thing was a trifle worn-out, but it suited its personality. Of course there was nothing more to it than what you could see or touch. Its personality was as much in its left thing, so to speak, as in its little right thing. It was not perfect – not by

a long shot – but it was provocative. It had no need to flaunt it or fling it about. In fact, one could say it was quite content ... happy just being it. (Pell 1994: 105)

Pell's playful work demonstrates how sensuality is already built into the language; how visuality is contained in cadence; how erotic suggestion does not depend on A-list dirty words, but resides in musical nuancing and diction structures which are inescapable. The case is demonstrated in a passage from Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn* concerning the narrator's friend MacGregor and the nymphomaniac called Paula:

I watch the two of them as they move spasmodically inch by inch around the floor: they move like an octopus working up a rut. Between the dangling tentacles the music shimmers and flashes, now breaks in a cascade of sperm and rose water, forms again into an oily spout, a column standing erect without feet, collapses again like chalk, leaving the upper part of the leg phosphorescent, a zebra standing in a pool of golden marshmallow, one leg striped, the other molten. A golden marshmallow octopus with rubber hinges and molten hooves, its sex undone and twisted into a knot. On the sea floor the oysters are doing the St. Vitus dance ... (Miller 1964: 97)

The passage describes people dancing, and when the words 'rut', 'sperm', 'erect' and 'sex' are used they apply to the music – the shapes the jazz makes – and the shapes of public movement on the dance-floor. The passage is significantly erotic, yet (like a collaged found-piece sculpture) is made up of images and sounds not readily associated with erotica.

Astute perception, honesty of involvement, and passionate connection with language are indicators of all fine writing, including good erotica. To get students to see the complexity – the layered levels of involvement, and how they interact – in Miller's work, would in my opinion be an entirely worthy educational exercise.

Because of the royalty potential, we find today blogs, websites, and how-to-do-it books devoted to the writing of erotica. Websites such as *Smart Bitches Who like Trashy Books* (<http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/>) are intelligent journalistic accounts of romance writing and erotica; Derek Parker's *Writing Erotic Fiction* (1995), Elizabeth Benedict's *The Joy of Writing Sex* (1996), and Susie Bright's *How to Write a Dirty Story* (2001) treat the subject with seriousness and offer surprisingly literary and informed advice as how-to-do-it books. Many issues of interest to all writing learning are discussed in this erotic writing discourse: language and imagery, characterisation, point of view and gender politics, genre structures for novels, the handling of the visual in writing, etc. Even the ever-present argument about the difference between erotica and porn focuses on nuancing language to authentically represent human emotions. And the unsurprising fact that several highly successful erotic romance writers with female pseudonyms are males, or male-female couples, or collaborative groups, foregrounds issues of authorship and writerly process that don't come up regularly in the study of other genres.

Amongst this maze of thinking that informs the world of erotica, I'd like to pick out two issues that concern the tertiary classroom. The first relates to why a student might

seriously wish to attempt writing erotica on the grounds that it allows investigation of deeper feelings and drives – these sexual feelings being often most deeply related to individual identity.

In an interview with Olga Savvidis in *Rage Magazine* in 1997, Frank Moorhouse said:

‘I’m not a perfectly integrated person ... For a while I have been interested in the psyche drama between the masculine and the female in myself ...

‘I started off with an initial preoccupation with sexuality and the uncontrollable nature of it and its tendency to be in collision with concepts of romance, concepts of commitment and the anarchic nature of sexuality when we try to organise it into civilised shapes ...

‘I was investigating it, making it into fiction because writing is one form of integration of these two parts, but the integration is not always present ...’ (Savvidis 1997)

This is a poignant confession on Moorhouse’s part. He indicates that his ‘not ... perfectly integrated’ personality constitutes the very basis of his writing, and that writing, as a ‘form of integration’ provides a way of deeply investigating himself. Moorhouse has always had an edgy, erotic cast to his writing, and there are rumours of a major erotic classic manuscript sitting on his agent’s shelves.

Moorhouse’s confession focuses attention on the fact that key aspects – even crucial aspects – of our personalities are bound up with the erotic, with the playing out of female and male roles within ourselves, with the sensual/sexual battleground/playground this entails. It seems ridiculous to suggest that writing about the erotic is other than quintessential to our existences. That it should be relegated to a smutty corner and is not worthy of university classroom attention, is debateable.

The second of my issues involves classroom dynamics and the politics of writing creatively about sex in the university.

I am aware of a female student who, of her own accord, continually wrote erotica for her creative writing class assignments. This student’s incessant focus subsequently caused the male tutor to become uncomfortable. Take this as you will – the tutor eventually indicated that he couldn’t continue with assessing the student’s work.

I didn’t have to deal with this matter, but I find – in the supposition that both parties were going about their business entirely innocently – that a real problem exists. Universities are so hyped up to matters of sexual harrassment, it’s clear that the concept of investigating sexual feelings in creative writing courses is under threat.

I think in creative writing courses we try our best not to avoid religious, moral and political issues – these are the issues writers must write about. But I have heard of classrooms that have been ruthlessly sanitised in self-defence by their tutors.

In my own case, in Creative Writing 1 tutorials I used to schedule student presentations on topics they chose for themselves focusing on their personal writing methods and processes. During the presentation they had to propose an exercise, related to their topic,

for the class to participate in. (E.g. a paper on how to write the visual might be linked to an exercise involving the blindfolded touching of an object then writing about the experience.) An extraordinary charge brought against me by a female student in this course claimed I had sexually harassed her in a lecture in front of 170 students. The university took up the matter and asked the student to provide substantiation. In her formal evidence she said I had referred to her in person and had spoken suggestively to her in French, a language she was familiar with, and that she had found this sexually unwelcome.

I had to go back to my lecture notes to find that in my Creative Writing 1 lecture on narrative viewpoint I made reference to Dorothy Parker's story 'But the One on the Right' (1929) – apparently the student had been sitting on my right during the lecture – and later in the same lecture I referred to the term *paysage intérieur*, evoking the landscape of a character's mind. Subsequently I was told by the police that this student had a history of making sexual harassment claims against members of the medical profession. Perhaps my having a doctorate confused her. She was expelled from the university.

I suspect it may have been a member of the medical or counselling profession who had in the first place recommended that this student enrol in a miscellaneous course in creative writing, as part of a treatment. Unfortunately, as lecturers in creative writing we are unlikely to find out confidential information about which of our students is doing our courses as therapy. But the case gives pause for thought. We cannot discount the possibility that there are students in our courses who lack the stability to handle topics involving the sensual and the erotic.

Typically Nin, Bataille, Nabokov and Miller were pilloried, mainly as part of the anti-pornography project conservative forces persist with – and probably you will be pilloried too if you try to introduce the study of erotica into the classroom. I like best DH Lawrence's response in *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (1928) – which he originally thought to title *Tenderness*—where the gamekeeper Mellors asserts:

I stand for the touch of bodily awareness between human beings ... and the touch of tenderness. ... And it is a battle against the money, and the machine, and the insentient ideal monkeyishness of the world. (Lawrence 2004: Chapter 18)

This is a superbly perceptive critique. The world itself is the pornographic element when it lays the accusation of pornography against honest and perceptive writing about the sensual aspects of human existence.

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