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Sex is neither good nor bad, but writing makes it so

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Breasts 'barrel-rolling across Ezra's howling mouth'? That joke isn't funny anymore. Kandarya Mahadeva Temple, India. David Tubau, CC BY-ND

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Bad sex. Isn't it enough to have had it without having to read it as well? A poorly written sex scene can be viscerally dreadful. While porn is fundamentally unrealistic, bad sex in prose that's not explicit can be excruciating.

Yesterday, the British Literary Review shone the spotlight on terrible sex writing when it awarded former Smith's frontman and debut novelist Morrissey their annual Bad Sex in Fiction Award for List of the Lost (2015), and truly dreadful writing it is.

The passage that won Morrissey the award is not only a pile of clauses heaped together in an attempt to mimic urgency, it is also ungrammatical:

rollercoaster coil of sexually violent rotation with Eliza's breasts barrel-rolled across Ezra's howling mouth

Surely that should be:

Eliza's breasts barrel-rolling across Ezra's howling mouth.

You can read the rest of the passage – and the other nominees – in a slideshow [here](#).

It is also challenging to follow the action amongst the mixed metaphors. Metaphors can be a real bugger for writers to manage. It's just too easy to get carried away. Morrissey's "rollercoaster" might suggest fear and nausea to some readers.

"Coil" naturally brings to mind rope, and snakes; and after seeing the Lord of the Rings film series, "barrel-rolling" reminds me either of hobbits bouncing down rapids in beer kegs, or men in long aprons rolling the kegs toward the local pub's cellar hatch.

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So what is it about sex writing that's so difficult? There are two essential elements to avoiding turning your steamy sex romp into an unintentional tragi-comedy: metaphor and allusion.

The art of the metaphor



Megan Schüirmann

Metaphors, which are at the crux of bad sex writing, can go so wrong. Literary and spoken metaphors alike, when effective, create a context-specific, momentary likeness by bringing together unexpected and unrelated phenomena or images.

A word that means H is used to suggest X. The effective metaphor strikes a note of unexpected yet immediate recognition for the reader and a pleasing or revealing “truth” about X. A good metaphor enriches the idea of X.

Of course, for the metaphor to work, the reader needs to understand and agree with it to some extent. Much bad sex writing is bad because the metaphors send the wrong message. More than not suggesting anything physically or emotionally erotic and sexy, the metaphors are ludicrous, even nonsensical.

The dead, or over-used and over-familiar, metaphor is responsible for a great deal of bad sex writing. No-one can accuse Morrissey of using “dead metaphors”; they're startlingly original. Unfortunately, this means there's no common ground that lets the reader understand what's happening when:

Eliza and Ezra rolled together into the one giggling snowball of full-figured copulation, screaming and shouting as they playfully bit and pulled at each other in a dangerous and clamorous rollercoaster coil of sexually violent rotation

On the other hand, Ben Okri, the 2014 Award winner, deployed quite a few dead metaphors in his bad sex writing. You might recognise:

When his hand brushed her nipple it tripped a switch and she came alight.

Notice the try-hard exaggeration. Her nipple isn't really a switch. She didn't really come alight. Well, we hope not.

A further element common to bad sex writing, is this tendency to exaggeration and bragging. Not only the hand gestures (just one brush and she's alight), the adverbs and adjectives strain for effect, as in Christos Tsolkas's *The Slap* (2008), nominated in 2010 for the award. The man “crowing out his rapture” tipped that particular passage into



hyperbole.

Describing action is also a challenge. How much to leave in, what to leave unsaid? *The Slap* was criticised for simply having too much repetitively explicit sex.

Alluding to the unmentionable

What to call those private parts? Bad sex writing makes this other big mistake: the characters are not in character, they are not themselves. They don't do what they'd normally do, they don't speak as themselves.

In terms of characterisation, a sex scene should be no different than any other scene that involves action and dialogue, emotion and intellect.

This explains some of the appeal of Elena Ferrante's novels: their veracity. In the internationally acclaimed *The Days of Abandonment* (2002) there are a few scenes that describe bad sex – but it is very good writing.

Ferrante's description of the sex that takes place between Olga and her neighbour Cerrano focuses on the small actions that take place, of whose hand does what when, and so forth. This is because Olga is in that frame of mind: she is unhappy and has no particular desire for Cerrano. Cerrano is an experiment.

She notices what he does and what she is doing because she's not feeling passionate, and is watching herself and him:

Cerrano had just raised my skirt and now was caressing the crotch of my underpants with the palm of his hand, and then he ran his fingers over the material pressing, pushing it deep into the fold of my sex.

British novelist and critic, David Lodge, in *The Art of Fiction* (2011), writes about the importance of implication in narrative, the suggestion of meaning rather than the stating of it.



Henti Smith





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Many of the writers of bad sex could learn from his brief essay which uses as an example a scene from William Cooper's *Scenes From Provincial Life* (1950), in which a woman gestures to her lover to come closer.

It's clear enough to an attentive reader with some experience of the world that fellatio takes place, but it's not explicit. The scene is erotic and playful as the meaning is there in the gaps; it had to get past the censors and could not be graphic.

It's exactly the kind of writing that frustrates the naive reader. (I remember reading *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, 1969, in my early teens hoping to learn a few things. I did, but not what I was searching for.)

The annual Award isn't just a bit of a lark. Past nominees and winners such as Christos Tsiolkas, Richard Flanagan, Michael Cunningham and Ben Okri are serious writers, produced by serious publishing houses.

That the writing identified is so very bad tells us something about how uncomfortable our culture is about sexuality, language, and masculinity.

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