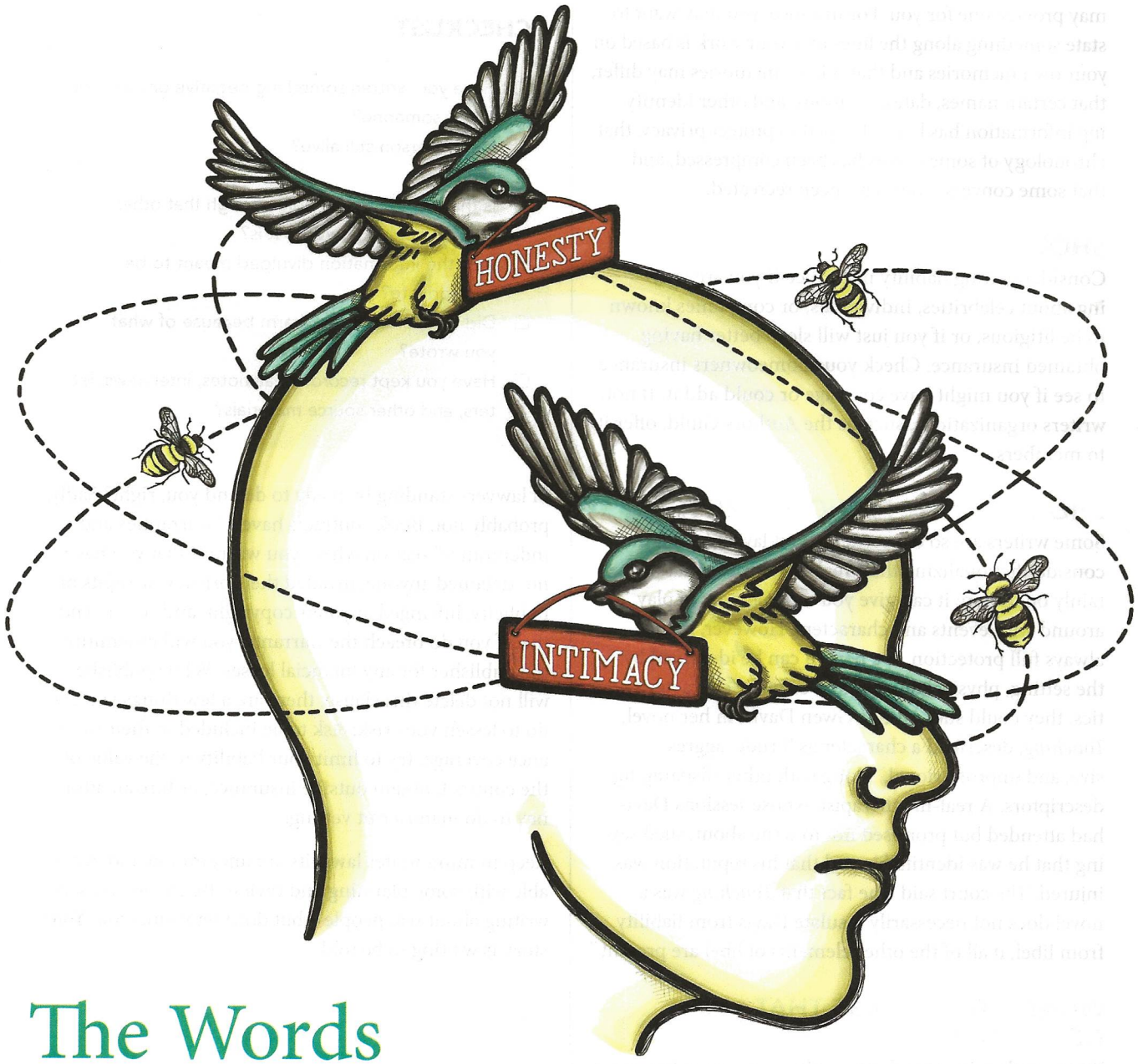

The Words and the Bees

No matter the genre, writers of romantic plots all dread one thing: Writing a terrible intimate scene.

BY GRIFFIN SUBER

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Editor's Note: *This article contains descriptions of sex and sexual acts, including uncensored quotes from published works. We believe in helping writers improve all aspects of their writing, including the parts that may be uncomfortable or challenging to others. Reader discretion is advised.*

There are many literary awards that authors would be honored to receive. The Bad Sex in Fiction Award is not one of them. Started in 1993 by Britain's *Literary Review* magazine, the Bad Sex in Fiction Awards honor "the year's most outstandingly awful scene of sexual description in an otherwise good novel." Avoiding purposely pornographic writing or expressly erotic literature, the Bad Sex Awards seek to draw attention to the poorly written, downright cringeworthy passages of sexual description in modern fiction.

While critics are always going to be critical, frustrated *Literary Review* editors, reviewing a novella a week, encountered too many bad sex scenes, and the award was created as a way for them to laugh instead of cry. The award struck a chord and soon readers and contributors flooded the *Review*'s inbox with leads on scenes that, whether clumsily introduced or charmlessly described, were particularly unappealing. The award became a way for the literary community to speak openly about a subject that is so often left to hushed tones and allusion. A well-executed sex scene can be crucial for characterization and, if it is indeed true that we learn more from our failures than our successes, let us use examples of what doesn't work to lead us toward what does.

"Some people misunderstand the awards," says Michael Delgado, editorial and marketing assistant at the *Literary Review*. "They think it's bad sex, when it's more bad writing about sex. It's more if the sex feels shoe-horned into the novel or if it includes overwritten flowery description. Sometimes, writers will completely change their style of writing when writing about sex, whereas authors who write really well about sex, people like Sally Rooney, they write the sex scenes in the same voice in which they've written the rest of the novel. That's usually the way to go."

Identifying what doesn't work when writing about sex is a bit like how a Supreme Court Justice once defined pornography—"I know it when I see it." *Literary Review*'s editorial staff starts with a long list of contenders, then narrows that down to a short list of finalists. From there, the office gets together and debates whether certain entries deserve to lose, which in this case means they're actually fine.

The winner is almost always an objectively questionable piece of publishing. Morrissey, the lead singer of The Smiths, took home the gold in 2015 with this wild ride of a passage from his debut novel, *List of the Lost*:

> Eliza and Ezra rolled together into 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 with Eliza's breasts barrel-rolled across Ezra's howling mouth and the pained frenzy of his bulbous salutation extenuating his excitement as it whacked and smacked its way into every muscle of Eliza's body except for the otherwise central zone.

With scenes of sexual description, nailing the right vocabulary is critical to accurately setting the mood. In 2017, Christopher Bollen won for a passage from his novel *The Destroyers*, which has the protagonist describe his lover's skin as akin to "water stains in a bathtub" and his own genitalia as a "billiard rack." While anatomically confusing, these descriptors don't exactly strike the sensual notes the scene is going for. Perhaps more than descriptors, a bumbling verb can bring a scene from sexy to confusing. Take as an example this winning passage from 2019, Didier Decoin's *The Office of Gardens and Ponds*:

> Katsuro moaned as a bulge formed beneath the material of his kimono, a bulge that Miyuki seized, kneaded, massaged, squashed, and crushed. With

> the fondling, Katsuro's penis and testicles became one single mound that rolled around beneath the grip of her hand. Miyuki felt as though she was manipulating a small monkey that was curling up its paws.

"Sometimes people overanalyze the Bad Sex Awards," says Delgado. "It's fundamentally a joke award. The spirit is satirical and sometimes people miss that. A lot of authors have taken it in really good spirits. We're not trying to shame authors or say you're a terrible writer, we're more trying to say, isn't writing about sex difficult? Look how hard it is to write about sex well. It points to our collective embarrassment around sex."

Past Bad Sex nominees include Pulitzer and Booker Prize winners, such as Paulo Coelho, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and John Updike. Even the greats get tripped up writing about intimacy. So, what makes writing about sex so difficult?

Sex scenes can be vulnerable for a story's characters but doubly so for the authors who write them. What if what you think is steamy comes off as cringey or completely inappropriate? Good writing, like good sex, is subjective. While both have room for interpretation and preference, there are time-tested tools to steer you in the right direction.

Elizabeth Benedict wrote *The Joy of Writing Sex* in 1996. She has since published a second edition which includes the new role of the internet in writing about sex, as well as a dissection of how the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal, which brought oral sex onto the nightly news, helped open up the country more generally.

"Sex is generally a private encounter," says Benedict. "We're literally naked and we're doing things we don't generally do with an audience. In some cultures, we're even taught to not talk about it or even not do it. Those are the practical reasons why it's such a hard thing to write about. Once we overcome all that baggage and those prohibitions, it's very complicated to figure out what to say. It can be very clinical, it can be pornographic, it can be distant, romanticized—it's difficult to know what words to use and what attitude to bring to it."

A common mistake when writing a sex scene is to use overly flowery language or to write about it in an overly grand way. A recurring theme in Bad Sex Award Winners are passages that are simultaneously pretentious and extremely graphic. "If you do talk about the body parts, you should call them what the characters would call them," says Benedict. "If you use crude terms, it only works if that's what the characters would say. If they're decorous, they wouldn't say those things and maybe they wouldn't talk about body parts at all."

Writing is always a balance between what you show and what you leave up to the reader's imagination. This is one of Elizabeth Benedict's rules of writing sex: A sex scene is not a sex manual; you don't need to tell readers everything. James Salter's *A Sport and A Pastime* is a masterclass of prose that contains many, many examples of how to write a sex scene actually about good sex. Far from gushy or inflated, Salter's descriptions drip with gratuitous honesty, mentioning everything from gleaming stomachs and cheap black panties to bad breath, awaking in the middle of the night with terrible cottonmouth, and the occasional blood.

> The next morning she is recovered. His prick is hard. She takes it in her hand. They always sleep naked. Their flesh is innocent and warm. In the end she is arranged across the pillows, a ritual she accepts without a word. It is half an hour before they fall apart, spent, and call for breakfast. She eats both her rolls and one of his.
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> He has wrapped her in an enormous towel, soft as a robe, and carried her to the bed. They lie across it diagonally, and he begins to draw the towel apart with care, to remove it as if it were a bandage. Her flesh appears, still smelling a little of soap. His hands float onto her. The sum of small acts begins to unite them, the pure calculus of love. He feels himself enter. Her last breath—it is almost a sigh—leaves her. Her white throat appears.
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> When it is over she falls asleep without a word. Dean lies beside her. The real France, he is thinking. The real France. He is lost in it, in the smell of the very sheets. The next morning they do it again. Grey light, it's very early. Her breath is bad.

Really, the approach shouldn't be too different from writing any other scene. "The research for this book was reading a lot of sex scenes in lots of literary fiction," says

Benedict, "and what I found was that the most important thing is the relationship the characters have to each other. The relationship is usually more interesting than the body parts." If the scene is of a married couple, maybe that sex is very mechanical and that's troubling to them, or just one of them. If it's a scene with illicit lovers, that scene would have more tension. An author may want to focus more on describing the character's guilt or their apathy or even the setting.

James Baldwin was an exceptionally lucid writer. In his novel *Giovanni's Room*, there's all sorts of sex—gay, straight, adulterous—all told from the narrator's perspective. The tone and descriptors of each are different because the relationships and situations are different. First, a scene where the narrator is stepping out on his boyfriend, as well as his traveling girlfriend:

> And I—I thought of many things, lying coupled with Sue in that dark place. I wondered if she'd done anything to prevent herself from becoming pregnant; and the thought of a child belonging to Sue and me, of my being trapped in that way—in the very act, so to speak, of trying to escape—almost precipitated a laughing jag. I wondered if her blue jeans had been thrown on top of the cigarette she had been smoking. I wondered if anyone else had a key to her apartment, if we could be heard through the inadequate walls, how much, in a few moments, we would hate each other.
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> I traveled through a network of Sue's cries, of Sue's tom-tom fists on my back, and judged by means of her thighs, of her legs, how soon I could be free. Then I thought, *The end is coming soon*, her sobs became even higher and harsher, I was terribly aware of the small of my back and the cold sweat there, I thought, *Well let her have it for Christ's sake, get it over with*; then it was ending and I hated her and me, then it was over, and the dark, tiny room rushed back. And I wanted only to get out of there.

In the above scene, the sex is basically background to what's happening inside the narrator's mind. This is another one of Elizabeth Benedict's rules for writing sex: Sex is nice, but character is destiny. Compare the above scene to the following from earlier in the book.

Writing is always a balance between what you show and what you leave up to the reader's imagination.

> He locked the door behind us, and then for a moment, in the gloom, we simply stared at each other—with dismay, with relief, and breathing hard. I was trembling. I thought, if I do not open the door and get out of here, I am lost. But I knew I could not open the door, I knew it was too late; soon it was too late to do anything except moan. He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed. With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes.*

The greatest advantage of writing is that an author can describe that which can't be seen. That power is as useful in a sex scene as it is in any other.

"The characters must want and want intensely," says Benedict. "That doesn't just mean they want sex—to make an interesting sex scene the characters must want something from the sex scene. In real life, sex is just sort of part of life. But in a book, you want it to have more purpose. The purpose could be very small. It doesn't need to be a big drama." Another one of Benedict's rules: A good sex scene is always about sex and something else. Good scenes advance either plot or character. Whether writing about two characters getting intimate or ordering at a restaurant, make sure what you show matters.

Sex overlaps with many sensitive cultural issues—sexuality, birth control, consent—so it's understandably challenging for writers to determine how to best address larger issues while staying within the realm of their story. Benedict's advice is to bring it all back to your characters.

"As far as talking about consent in fiction now, just think about how it comes up in real life. You have to listen to your characters and try to hear your characters. Would they talk about these things or address them nonverbally? Are you writing realistic fiction that's meant to be grounded in those sorts of things? Maybe it's a fantasy

world where those issues aren't as present. If you're writing historical fiction, even anything set in the 1950s, you're not going to be talking about consent."

In December 2017, a short story in *The New Yorker*, "Cat Person" by Kristen Roupenian,[1] went viral. The story of a single bad date, it's a clear-eyed screenshot of the foggy situations that easily arise with modern dating—the mythologies we build off careful analysis of a text message, the reckless abandon of sliding into intimate situations with a complete stranger, and, of course, the many miscommunications along the way. Told in close third person from the perspective of 20-year-old Margot, much of the story is spent describing her thought process as she realizes that she does not want to have sex with Robert, then ends up going through with it anyway.

> Margot sat on the bed while Robert took off his shirt and unbuckled his pants, pulling them down to his ankles before realizing that he was still wearing his shoes and bending over to untie them. Looking at him like that, so awkwardly bent, his belly thick and soft and covered with hair, Margot recoiled. But the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon. It wasn't that she was scared he would try to force her to do something against her will but that insisting that they stop now, after everything she'd done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious, as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back.
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> During sex, he moved her through a series of positions with brusque efficiency, flipping her over, pushing her around, and she felt like a doll again, as she had outside the 7-Eleven, though not a precious one now—a doll made of rubber, flexible and resilient, a prop for the movie that was playing in his head. When she was on top, he slapped her thigh and said, "Yeah, yeah, you like that," with an intonation that made it impossible to tell whether he meant it as a question, an observation, or an order, and when he turned her over he growled in her ear, "I always wanted to fuck a girl with nice tits," and she had to smother her face in the pillow to keep from laughing again.

"Cat Person" was published at the height of #MeToo and it created a digital uproar. In a follow-up article reflecting on the story's success, Roupenian said it spoke to a common experience among young people, the unwanted sex that occurs not because of physical force, but because of embarrassment, pride, self-consciousness, and cultural expectations. "What had started as a conversation *among* women was then taken up and folded into a much larger debate that played out, for the most part, *between* men and women, its flames fanned by the internet controversy machine. Was what happened between Robert and Margot an issue of consent, or no? Was Robert a villain for not picking up on Margot's discomfort, or was Margot at fault for not telling Robert what she was feeling?" While some readers tried to assign blame, others treated the story as an article or an essay because it reads so realistically—people forgot it was a work of a fiction.

A story like "Cat Person" going viral shows why writing about sex is so difficult and why it's so essential. We don't all think about sex in the same way. Whether it's lights on or lights off, premarital or polyamorous, it's an aspect of life that's deeply personal and can have significant effects on people. It should be the same for our characters. Listen to your characters, describe it honestly, and please, avoid words like "bulbous" and "billiard rack." **WD**

1. Before the success of "Cat Person" and the publication of her story collection *You Know You Want This*, Roupenian won Grand Prize in the 11th Annual Writer's Digest Popular Fiction Awards for her short story "Don't Be Scarred."

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