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Tour de Raunch

A brief history of sex in American fiction

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ABOUT A DOZEN YEARS AGO a friend of mine described to me the literary magazine he thought America really needed. It would feature the country's best fiction writers—specifically, its most refined stylists—and in this quarterly they would write only hard-core erotica. I don't think he ever came up with a name for the journal, and I don't remember the entire contributors' roster for the dream inaugural issue, but it included Marilynne Robinson, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Harry Mathews, Edward P. Jones, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ben Marcus, and Nicholson Baker. Funding wasn't available, and soon my friend dropped out of the quality-lit game, started a family, and moved to the West Coast. The prestige-smut-lit-mag gap has yet to be filled.

But a few years later, Baker—whose phone-sex novel *Vox* was one of the gifts Monica Lewinsky gave to Bill Clinton—published *House of Holes*, in which characters travel by various means, including through a straw and, in one man's case, through his own urethra, to a sex resort in a parallel dimension, where alternate laws of physics allow for perversions involving shape-shifting, decapitation, conveyor belts, and genital enlargement accomplished via arm amputation. There's a jet plane that sucks bad pornography out of the world's cities and deposits it in receptacles where it generates a “tumorousness of overstimulated desire.” There's an exhausting theater called the “Porndecahedron.” There's a penis called an “aged parliamentarian” and another called a “Malcolm

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Baker has always been something of an outlier, and his sex books—or “wankathons,” to use one reviewer’s term—are a deviation from his more wholesome pyrotechnics in fiction and his humanitarian forays into nonfiction. (His last book was about being a substitute teacher.) Critics greeted *House of Holes* warmly: In the *London Review of Books* Christopher Tayler said it was “a work of genuine pornography that’s also hilarious, broadly feminist in intent, entirely cheerful and strangely innocent.” They weren’t as kind to *The Fermata*. In that novel, the narrator, Arno, has the power to stop time, and he uses it to look at women without their clothes on and occasionally ejaculate on them. Geoff Dyer called it “a shameless waste of Baker’s distinctive talents.” Shame in recent years seems to have acquired the quality of a first-order literary value, and creepiness that of a cardinal sin, which may be why Baker had better luck writing a wankathon that could be judged innocent because absurd.

What if American literary characters stopped fucking entirely? This thought occurred to me over the winter with regard to a few recent blockbuster novels in which sex either doesn’t happen or doesn’t happen without embarrassment or shame. In Elif Batuman’s first novel, *The Idiot*, Selin, the narrator, is a freshman at Harvard in the mid-1990s afflicted by a metastasizing crush on a Hungarian mathematician named Ivan who has a girlfriend, a tantalizing way of not returning e-mails for weeks at a time, and just enough interest in Selin to suggest that she move to Hungary for the summer but not enough to relieve her of the virginity she badly wants to rid herself of. Sexual frustration is Batuman’s theme, baked into the novel’s title. Sexlessness operates like a literary restraint and is also a reflection of *The Idiot*’s fidelity to autobiographical reality. Sometimes sex just isn’t happening. But when no one is climaxing, will we keep reading? (In Batuman’s case, because sex is an absent presence we recognize as youthful desire, the answer is yes.)

Jacob and Julia, the married couple in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Here I Am*, aren’t exactly sexless—they have three children, after all—but the novel’s sexual content is designed to be not quite coital. Jacob has a diminished libido, perhaps something to do with his Propecia prescription, but he’s engaged in a filthy-text-message affair with a coworker (“*you don’t deserve to get fucked in the ass,*” etc.). His telephone mistress never appears onstage—

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ago romantic weekend in the country, where Julia makes a request: “I want to spread my legs, and I want you to move your head down and look at me until I come.” This innovation results in mutual simultaneous orgasms, and may be to do with the couple’s precious determination to do nothing the conventional way, or to do with Julia’s desire for an intimacy that involves neither the touch nor the sight of her husband. In any case, they don’t cuddle afterward, which is either extremely hot or a kind of curse in a marriage and a novel that primarily associate sex with embarrassment.

Arguably there’s more sex in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life* than in any other twenty-first-century American novel. Unfortunately for the protagonist, Jude, most of it takes the form of the horrific serial child rape that constitutes his childhood as he’s trafficked across the motels of the West by an evil monk named Brother Luke. The novel’s title comes from Brother Luke’s instruction to the boy Jude to show his clients “a little life.” The book’s conceptual conundrum is whether happiness is possible after a childhood of total horror and daily, escalating abuse. The answer is no. So despite his success as a lawyer, his bespoke luxury apartment, and his relationship with Willem—his best friend from college, who loves him deeply and is, to boot, a celebrity leading man and heartthrob of George Clooney-like proportions—Jude will always be faking it when he shows Willem “a little life,” and sex feels like this: “When it was over there was the same shame, the same nausea, the same desire to hurt himself, to scoop out his insides and hurl them against the wall with a bloody thwack.”

Sex that doesn’t happen, sex that’s embarrassing, sex that’s shameful and painful—is that all there is? No, sex is always with us. But in our literature it is subject to cycles of repression and liberation, ecstasy and shame, arousal and quieting. The history of the American novel is a history of sex, as Leslie Fiedler showed in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. It may be subtext—Huck and Jim on the raft; Ishmael and Queequeg in bed aboard the *Pequod*—or it may be an all-too-obvious source of shame, as in *The Scarlet Letter*. (You could always count on the Puritans to have sex on the brain.) Sex is the impossibility that makes *The Sun Also Rises* possible: If his equipment worked, Jake Barnes would have settled down with Lady Brett Ashley and soberly made babies. Where’s

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burden of slave times, when all whites knew but few said that slaves were not only unpaid laborers but unpaid sexual servants.” More even than money and poor driving, sex is the engine of *The Great Gatsby*’s plot. Jay Gatsby wants nothing more than to relive that first time with a rich girl; Tom Buchanan’s slumming with Myrtle Wilson—in addition to his racism and general boorishness—makes us cheer for Daisy to leave him; and Gatsby’s death is a cuckold’s misdirected revenge. And what about that scene after the party when Nick suddenly finds himself one moment in the elevator and the next downstairs in the McKees’ apartment: “I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands.”

Codes and ambiguous ellipses were necessary in an era of pervasive homophobia and obscenity laws. Two of the absolute triumphs of American modernism are lesbian masterpieces: Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood* and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (“Tend her buttons,” in the critic Kathryn Kent’s reading). Both combine beauty with near indecipherability. Barnes on unrequited longing: “In Nora’s heart lay the fossil of Robin, intaglio of her identity, and about it for its maintenance ran Nora’s blood.” For those keeping track, “intaglio” is a hot synonym for *engraving*. Here is Stein on “A New Cup and Saucer”: “Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud and saucer, enthusiastically so is the bite in the ribbon.” Is that a sentence about sex? You could write a dissertation on the question and still not know for sure.

Enthusiastically was the way novelists took to writing about sex once the obscenity laws that had obstructed *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *The Ginger Man*, and *Lolita* were smashed. As we know from the sad ending of Philip Roth’s *Goodbye, Columbus*, it was the era of diaphragms. Here is Norman Mailer on the device, in his 1965 novel *An American Dream*:

I said, “No, I don’t want to . . . I can’t so long as you have that thing in you,” which I never said before, and she shifted, I was out, the shock comparable to banging one’s head on a low beam, and then I searched for that corporate rubbery obstruction I detested so much, found it with a finger, pulled it forth, flipped it away from the bed. Like diving on a cold winter day back to a warm

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exchange of stares which goes on and on, wills which begin at last in the force of equality to water and to loose tears, to soften into some light which is shut away again by the will to force tears back, steel to steel, until steel shimmers in a mist of dew, is wiped, is wet again. I was passing through a grotto of curious lights, dark lights, like colored lanterns beneath the sea . . .

Mailer was famously an opponent of birth control, and we have his child-support obligations to thank for his prolific output. What I've quoted above isn't the most lovely example of what was now possible for American writers, but it exhibits the gusto with which many applied themselves to the task. The roll call of liberations includes those now referred to variously as the "Great Male Novelists," the "Great Male Narcissists," or the "Midcentury Misogynists" (Bellow, Mailer, Roth, Updike, and, depending on who's doing the counting, James Salter) as well as William S. Burroughs, with his interstellar hieroglyphic cowboy fantasias; James Baldwin, with the tender and tortured bisexual couplings in *Giovanni's Room*; and Mary McCarthy, who could move from sly references to bruises on a woman's buttocks in her 1941 story "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" (just what went on in that train cabin?) to more frank portrayals of women's sexual appetites in *The Group*. By 1971, a then unknown like Don DeLillo could publish a first novel, *Americana*, that wound up with a scene of a full-on scat orgy: "The woman had my cock in her hand and she was trying to put it inside her. I pulled her down to me and kissed her and she let go finally and just lay on top of me, moving from side to side and licking my face. Then she straddled me again and I realized she was pissing all over my belly and chest. She got up finally and sat on the running board and drank some beer. I pushed myself up to my knees and fastened my belt. Then I threw up." And so on.

But just because everything was permitted didn't mean it was compulsory. The *New Yorker* was still being edited by William Shawn, a famous prude who wouldn't abide dirty words fouling its pages. This presented a challenge for someone like John Updike, and that may be why his novels tend to be more explicit than his stories and why his bluer material, like Cheever's and Nabokov's, tended to end up in *Playboy*. It's also behind one of the theories explaining the long silence of J. D. Salinger: He'd gotten interested in sex and didn't want

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ends with a possible pregnancy and the latter is all about an absent lover. There's a certain charm to stalwarts like Elizabeth Hardwick who retained a commitment to lovemaking as an intellectual activity. A paragraph in her 1979 masterpiece of autofiction *Sleepless Nights* begins: "I was honored when he allowed me to go to bed with him and dishonored when I felt my imaginative, anxious, exhausting efforts were not what he wanted." And goes on: "Worst of all was my ambivalence over what I took to the inauthenticity of his Marxism." Indeed, what could be worse than that?

The 1980s were perhaps the golden age of sex writing in American fiction. Anything seemed possible, and there were still some heretofore transgressive things that hadn't yet been tried on the page. The workplace spanking and masturbation in Mary Gaitskill's "Secretary" transpire in a dizzy zone between desire and abuse, but it's in no way romantic. The text was betrayed by a 2002 film adaptation, with Maggie Gyllenhaal and James Spader, that turned it into a giddy rom-com with a dollop of cute S&M. No such soft-pedaling could be done with peers of Gaitskill's like Kathy Acker ("I stormed her openings as if she was a beleaguered fortress") or Dennis Cooper ("He has the hottest, sweetest little ass, especially if you like them a little used like I do"). The decade's literary erotics were nicely captured last year in *The Soho Press Book of 80s Short Fiction*, edited by Dale Peck. In his introduction, Peck writes that the decade saw a "shift in narrative focus from institutions (marriage, corporations, the military) to individuals, above all the insistence on constricting consciousness to its physical container: to the body. . . . This is a literature of the flesh: of its shifting loci of pleasure and pain, as Foucault, uncoupling sexuality from Freudian pathologies, labeled them; of its futile but inevitable gestures toward transcendence." One upshot of this was that sex could be written in a matter-of-fact tone, as in Gary Indiana's "Sodomy": "Sometimes Jack carried me across the room, his arms wrapped around my thighs, fucking the whole time like an air hammer. . . . As things go, it wasn't much."

On the other, more sensationalist hand, perhaps a certain limit of sadism was reached by Bret Easton Ellis with *American Psycho*, and the 1990s saw the rise of the "feminist erotic thriller," as women responded to "male writers who have had literary orgasms over the

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Susanna Moore among them—“almost never describe the physical sensations of a woman getting sexual pleasure from or giving sexual pleasure to a man. What they describe is the social significance of a sexual encounter between a woman and a man.” Once sex became a way of exploring power relations, exploitation, and victimization, you couldn’t expect it to be fun.

At the same time, the male writers who had first enjoyed the freedoms afforded by the lifting of obscenity laws were up for re-evaluation. Updike became “a penis with a thesaurus,” in the phrase of an anonymous young female friend David Foster Wallace quoted in a review of *Toward the End of Time*. Wallace argued that the heroic and daring libidinous assertions of the generation that arrived in the 1960s and ’70s were now hard to take for the children of divorce who “got to watch all this brave new individualism and self-expression and sexual freedom deteriorate into the joyless and anomic self-indulgence of the Me Generation.” It didn’t help matters that Updike, soon followed by Roth, had turned to themes they must have known would come for them one day: failing prostates and impotence. Mailer had already incurred a backlash for *Ancient Evenings*, the 1983 pharaohs-and-gods fuckfest that James Wolcott deemed “a muddle of incest and strange oaths . . . reducing everything to lewd, godly, bestial grunts.”

Katie Roiphe, writing in the *Times Book Review* in 2010, noticed a corollary development to the repudiation of the “aggressive virility” of the older generation: a “new purity” among younger writers like David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Michael Chabon, and Benjamin Kunkel, whose characters, she wrote, “can’t condone even their own sexual impulses; they are, in short, too cool for sex.” (Breaking ranks with his generational cohort, Jonathan Franzen has in recent years come to the defense of Philip Roth and cast himself as Roth’s heir. How Roth’s influence led him to imagine the scene of conception for the heroine of his 2015 novel *Purity*—anal sex followed by a quick and clandestine transfer of sperm to the place where a heroine can be conceived—is an open question.)

Looking at the same phenomenon, Elaine Blair, in her 2012 *New York Review of Books* essay “American Male Novelists: The New Deal,” argued that the predominance of “unloved and unlovable” male protagonists subject to serial sexual humiliations in recent

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about being unloved *as writers*—specifically by the female reader.” Blair continues, channeling the mentality of the new American male novelist:

When you see the loser-figure in a novel, what you are seeing is a complicated bargain that goes something like this: yes, it is kind of immature and boorish to be thinking about sex all the time and ogling and objectifying women, but this is what we men sometimes do and we have to write about it. We fervently promise, however, to avoid the mistake of the late Updike novels: we will always, always, call our characters out when they’re being self-absorbed jerks and louts. We will make them comically pathetic, and punish them for their infractions a priori by making them undesirable to women, thus anticipating what we imagine will be your judgments, female reader.

The predicament Blair describes should be familiar to readers of current US literary fiction—it’s part of a continuum with the treatment of sex in the novels of Batuman, Foer, and Yanagihara—and it is so far unresolved, though several strategies seem to have emerged. One is a satiric model of humiliation that’s total yet only virtual, as in Joshua Cohen’s 2011 story “Emission,” in which a drug dealer who tells a story of ejaculating on a sleeping girl at a party is shamed on the internet and, cut off from the possibility of respectable employment, exiles himself to Berlin. Another is to mix pleasure with punishment: In David Vann’s 2012 novel, *Dirt*, the twenty-two-year-old hero, Galen, is repeatedly called a “freakazoid” among other insults by his seventeen-year-old cousin Jennifer, who subjects him to various tortures as she seduces him, saying, “If you move or make a sound, you’ll never see my pussy again,” and leaving him with bruised genitals and a fear of erections.

One path to sex with dignity for the straight male novelist has been blazed by Ben Lerner. It involves the elision of passion and the acceptance of responsibility. Ben, the narrator of Lerner’s 2014 novel *10:04*, sleeps with two women in the course of the book. One is an artist named Alena, who isn’t quite his girlfriend. Though we never glimpse them in the act, only after they’ve had sex on the floor of her apartment, we learn indirectly that the sex is pretty hot and involves “breath-play.” But Ben has to stop sleeping with her to pursue “sex as part of a reproductive strategy” with his friend Alex. (The only sexual humiliation

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masturbate and is provided with Asian pornography that spurs guilty political thoughts about postcolonial exploitation.) Ben and Alex have a hard time doing it because they're such old and close friends and the act usually leads to laughter and flaccidity. When they finally get it right, it sounds like this:

I was somehow too shy to reach for her breasts or genitalia as my instincts bade me, even though we were conjoined. Finally I asked her where she'd like me to place them with a polite formality so incongruous with our situation that it again caused us to laugh. But we were determined not to let hilarity derail us a second time. She turned around and faced me frankly, scissoring her legs through mine. I pulled her hair back so that her neck was exposed, pressed my face into it, and, after many months of trying, came.

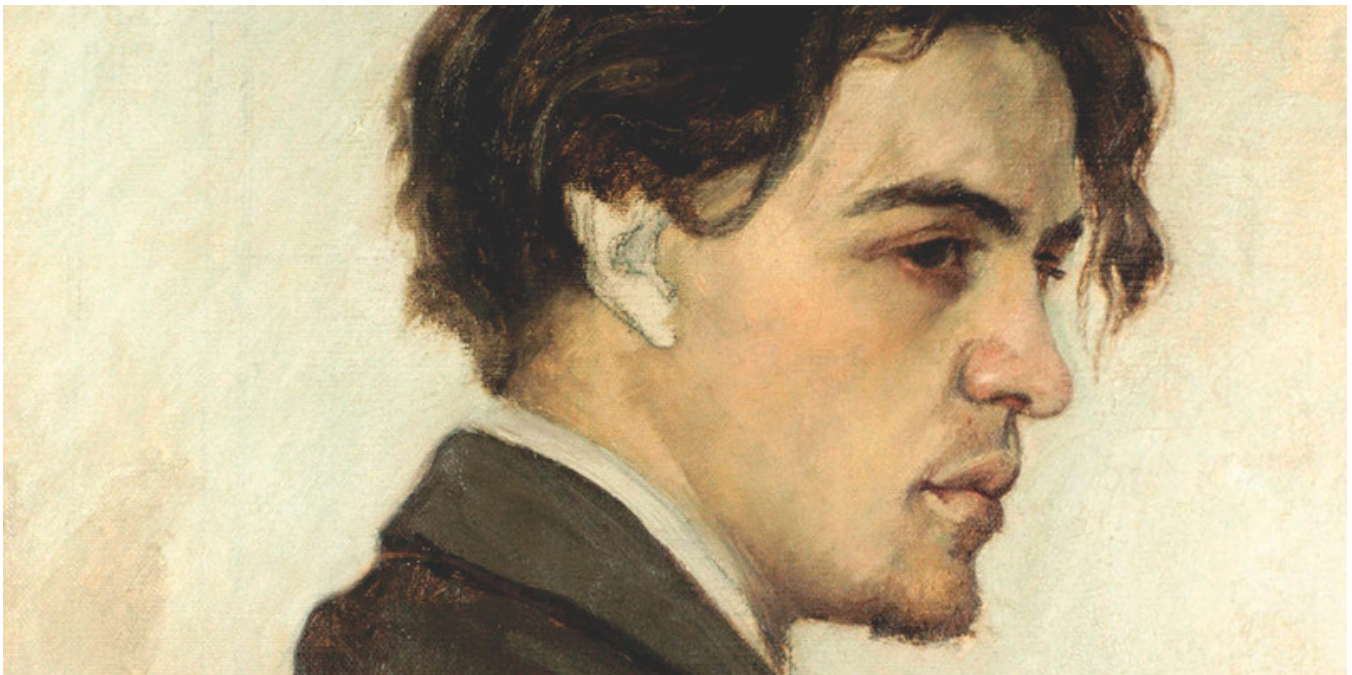
Humiliation, punishment, elision, or polite formality—straight male novelists and their alter egos will no doubt find other ways out of the post–Great Male Narcissist dilemma. Meanwhile other quiet revolts are happening. Against the intellectualization of sex, the narrator of Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* says, “Why are you all reading? I don't understand this reading business when there is so much fucking to be done.” But the real innovation of that novel is to render sex in a way that's both very intense and at the same time a sideshow to the novel's larger themes of friendship and creating art. Against the thrillingly blunt legacy of 1980s sex writing, there are the sinuous sentences of Garth Greenwell's 2016 novel, *What Belongs to You*, which show that encounters that begin in public toilets are as worthy of aesthetic refinement as any others. And against the idea that social significance and physical pleasure are mutually exclusive modes of writing about sex, there are the examples of Helen DeWitt, whose 2011 satire *Lightning Rods* traces the rise of a firm that provides interoffice incognito prostitutes as a sexual-harassment-prevention system, and Nell Zink, who found she could gain a wide readership for novels about environmental conservation and anarchism when she delivered them in the form of a sex farce. The “new purity” Roiphe observed could only last so long. Puritans after all have the dirtiest minds.

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