

Introduction
By Susie Bright
From *Herotica 3*

I collect sexy stories: erotic fiction, dirty books, porno, sensuous reading, you name it. I started acquiring these stories when I didn't have any name for them, except *Don't Let Anyone Find Out About This*. I collected them underneath my bed, in the back of my underwear drawer, in the knothole of a tree on my way to school.

I accumulated my stories in secret—finding them in other people's underwear drawers, or at garage sales where I could lift them without anyone noticing, or in the back of baby-sitters' cars, where I sat while they went out for cigarettes. After puberty I started writing my own stories to arouse myself. I'd enter elaborate fantasies in my diaries in code, or rip out the pages the next day.

My collection matured over time. These days I buy erotic fiction without hesitation in any bookstore in town. Moreover, I publish many of the sexiest stories I can find. I have been editing erotica for ten years now. I get interviewed by journalists, grad students, and fellow travelers regarding my sex fiction collection and expertise. Inevitably, the conversation turns to politics. The reporter leans into me and states the question as if drawing a line in the sand: "Are you a feminist?"

Each time I'm asked, I pause for a moment, because if it's a one word answer they're looking for, it should be as plain as the nose on my face. Isn't it obvious?

Tragically, feminism is perceived as "down on sex" and against pornography "Feminist pornography" is considered a contradiction in terms; "feminist erotica" only marginally less so. Women's liberation is always being counterpoised to erotic freedom, despite the fact that sexual liberation has always been a cornerstone of modern feminism. One of the oldest feminist challenges is to eliminate the double standard, to move from barefoot and pregnant to orgasmic and decisive.

So why isn't the sex field treated by feminists as just another Old Boys Club that needs to be shaken up and infused with a woman's point of view? Feminists have zapped other male-only institutions from construction sites to the halls of Congress.

Sex is different. It's different because our culture is so puritanical that we can't even discuss sex publicly without our worst fears and fantasies rendering us mute, embarrassed, inarticulate. It's not about Equal Pay for Equal Work, it's about Different Strokes for Different Folks. Those differences are unpalatable to some, unspeakable to others. We haven't been honest about sexuality—we've denied it. Our prudery turns us into liars, yet despite all these factors, sex is compelling. Women's desire does not change through fear of condemnation.

The women claiming the erotic frontier are woman-centric, no-compromises, read-my-lips Amazons. They're the women writing sexual fiction, the women publishing it, the scholars

teaching it, the entrepreneurs selling it, the politicians on a soapbox debating it.

If they have one thing in common, it's that one day they picked up a sexual story and said out loud to themselves, "I like this." Then they said the same thing to their lovers, their families, over dinner, to audiences. They are risk takers, women who say yes to sex as forcefully as they've been raised to say no. Any woman who confesses enthusiasm for erotic writing or visual materials is on the erotic frontier. Why is the existence of these women so hard to believe? Because we're a minority? It's true there aren't a lot of politically active feminists who go public with their erotic adventures, but we've been vocal and inspiring enough to make an impressive dent,

Sexual liberation for women is certainly not all jolly and climaxing with happy faces. In many years of teaching and talking sex, I have never had a man come up and say, "I don't know where my penis is and I've never had an orgasm." It never will happen either. It's feminists who have put the clitoris on the map; now we're concentrating above the neck.

Why do the anti-porn feminists still dominate the public perception of feminist views on sexuality?

I've often participated in debates where some woman "against pornography" tells me that a woman is being raped every ten seconds, and that my work is at the core of this devastation. An entire women's studies class picketed my lecture on lesbian erotica in history passing out a leaflet that said, "First slavery in the Roman Empire ... then the Holocaust ... Now, Susie Bright comes to the University of Minnesota campus."

This last example may have pushed the argument to its surreal limits, but the U of M protesters' sentiment reflects the more comprehensive statements by anti-porn leaders like Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, or Robin Morgan. Their position articulates the anti-erotic lock on feminist ideology. On the one side they incite the visceral female reaction to male violence; on the other, they play to traditional middle class Anglo-Saxon prejudices within the women's movement. And all this controversy exists within a national climate of sexual ignorance defined by religion and superstition, so that even with the best intentions, we know so very little. Eros is a universe, and we haven't even gotten off the launch pad.

The feminist "sex wars" have been going on since the early 1980s, from the first bloom of the women's erotic renaissance. It has always been exasperating for me to articulate my anger with the feminist status quo. It now seems that a lot of my pro-porn arguments of the past have been as superficial as the prejudices of the anti-porn feminists and even more defensive. It may sound reassuring to say, "Fantasies shall set you free, nothing you imagine in your mind can hurt you," but these are only feel-good sentiments, Dale Carnegie with a vibrator in his hand. There's often a long and unpredictable road between our fantasy and consciousness.

Feminists worry about the effects of written and visual expressions of sexuality in the same way that parents worry about violent TV programming, or that consumers worry about sensational advertising. How much effect does it have on us? How easily can we be swayed? Why is it that I

can stay up all night with insomnia, watch a four-hour infomercial about molecular hair curlers, and race on down to the mall to buy a set the next day even though I have never set my hair in my entire life, yet when asked if men get the idea that all women become whores by reading Playboy. I reply, "Don't be ridiculous."

It's not a ridiculous notion that we get ideas and inspiration from the media or the arts. It's not news that you can be suckered by anything. But we also find ourselves skeptical of these same images or inventing our own interpretations that may be quite the opposite of the producers' intentions. Certainly I learned to look for lesbian associations and sympathies in Hollywood movies when I knew in reality that they never meant to speak to me. Most women's entire experience with pornography is taking material that was made for men's tastes and manipulating it to our own purposes.

There is one thing for certain about the effect of pictures and words on our minds: Sexuality has been preposterously singled out as the most vile influence around. I am hardly the first person to point out how we are inundated with violent images from our earliest fairy tales and cartoons. Nearly everyone sees Hollywood movies and network news shows and the violence they contain. Relatively few people see hardcore pornography, yet this is where all of our law enforcement, legislation, and political condemnation is focused for attack. How can we think we are assessing sexual expression fairly when clearly we have a knee-jerk reaction to it? Our attitude toward sexually explicit materials is riddled with hypocrisy and second guessing and feminist attitudes towards it are no exception.

The first time I heard Andrea Dworkin, the most charismatic anti-porn orator of all, speak about what men do to women, it turned my stomach. I was one of many young women in the audience, most of us either crying, pale with anger, or shocked. Her descriptions jarred memories of events I'd love to forget. My thoughts turned to my teenage years and the soldier who came back from basic training and raped me. My nails raked bloody scratches down his back, but they didn't stop his cock from moving in and out of me like a piston. I have fractured recollections of a drunk who followed my mother home and broke into our house. I hid in the closet with my roller skates clutched in my hand to bean him with if she couldn't succeed in talking him out of the room. I remembered, not so long ago, the young kid who held a knife to my breast and stuck his dirty hand in my pants before he fled with my purse.

Every woman around me at the lecture must have recalled her own catalog of male cruelty sadism, and indifference, inside each one of us who loves a husband, father, or son is a wound of resentment that can be opened every time she is reminded of the bullies, the pigs.

Feminists are accused of man-hating, the implication, of course, being that they are infantile, as stubborn and indiscriminating as two-year-olds who hate their bedtime. But hating one's oppressor; hating the bullies, is entirely natural. What's unnatural is for women to deny that we feel so strongly. Any minority that has successfully stood up for itself has had to address hating whoever has hurt its members. You can't just 'hate' sexism and racism without contemplating the individuals who enforce that ideology

But my memories were not the only thing upsetting me the night I saw Dworkin speak. She took the anger of her audience, an audience charged up with humiliation, guilt, and titillation at her explicit descriptions, and she turned them all against a culprit that most of those young women had very little first-hand experience with—pornography.

I could not find my release down that path. I know my friend who joined the Air Force was not acting out what he saw in a magazine when he raped me. He was a virgin when I met him, tender and open; after nine months in the service, he became hardened and mean. I don't think that drunk who harassed my mother had been looking at anything but the bottom of a bottle for a long time. And the babyface with the switchblade in his dirty hand—I don't know who his role models were, but I think they were closer to him in flesh than celluloid.

Dworkin's explanation of pornography as a rapist's tool is unbelievable to me. The idea that dirty pictures mixed with testosterone equal a time bomb doesn't add up. It's as though she pulled only one worm out of the whole squirming can.

My dread of male violence is only a single thread in my need to know why human cruelty exists in the first place, why some people lose control, and how unexpected and vicious those manifestations are. My questions are given little reassurance by the limitlessness of erotic imagination—but I'm not looking for a pat on the head.

It's not that sexual fantasy is so incompatible with feminism; it's that politics—any political philosophy—does not adequately address sexual psychology.

Close your eyes for a moment, and remember the last time you had an orgasm. At the moment of climax, how many of you were thinking about a lovely walk on the beach, or a bouquet of balloons? Be honest. Beach walking is a really nice romantic fantasy, and so are sunsets, dinners for two, and a bearskin rug in front of a blazing fireplace. But as erotic fantasies that get us off they don't often come up. The highest levels of arousal are often reached with thoughts that frighten us, anger us, overwhelm us. What is awful, what is forbidden, what is taboo, what is dreaded, is exactly what is erotic—up to a point. In fantasy, nothing can actually harm you. And the point at which a particular thought or image goes past that point and becomes anti-erotic is as individual as your fingerprint.

Look at one example of a common fantasy—the anticipation of getting caught having sex. The titillation might be the small chance of being seen or heard. The bedsprings squeak too loudly. You can't stop, you're with the lover of your dreams. The phone rings. Someone bursts in. Your mother. No, your ex. With a gun. With an accomplice. And an alibi. Does the bed still groan under your sweating bodies? At what point in this scenario does the heat turn to fear, the hard-on go limp, the wet pussy turn to dry mouth? This is what different strokes are all about.

Scientists, sex researchers, psychotherapists—none of them knows why we have the fantasies we do. That's right, they don't know, and most of them admit that in public.

Of course, sexual fantasies can be interpreted, but not easily or reductively. A sexual fantasy of a

homosexual experience does not mean one is queer. A lesbian who fantasizes a tryst with a man is not living a lie. A rape in fantasy is certainly the antithesis of a rape in reality where nothing is under the subject's guidance, limits, or control.

From the time we are small, we develop a very strong sense of what is make-believe and what is reality. I learn from watching how my own toddler has grown; sometimes she defers to others' boundaries and at other times she gets to act as if she were omnipotent.

My kid's idea of ecstasy is being tickled—very popular at her age. I call it the original SM activity. She loves to run around saying, "Catch me, catch me" and playing hide and seek. When I find her and get my fingers under her arms she laughs and shrieks, "Stop! Stop!" as in the original *Perils of Pauline*. But the moment I stop tickling her, she is absolutely certain to take a big breath and cry out, "Again!"

On the other hand, when I really lose my temper at my daughter, there's no mistaking the pain. She cries, I swear and steam, and there's nothing consensual about it. My daughter, like every other child, is learning about boundaries and trust, long before the media gets to her.

When we are face to face with a grown-up who doesn't see limits, for whom there is no line between pretend and real, we are not dealing with someone who just has naughty sex fantasies or who reads too many *Hustlers*, or who takes Madonna's latest pop tune the wrong way. We are dealing with a pathological lack of compassion and empathy that overrides fundamental adult Dos and Don'ts.

Historically; men as a group have been chauvinistic, egocentric, accustomed to gaining entrance. But if every man who had an aggressive rape fantasy acted it out, we would be living in a state of absolute barbarism. The sexual sociopath our society dreads is not just a villain of feminism or women's rights; his beliefs and preferences are superseded by a lack of conscience, a drop from reality, a failure to feel guilt or accountability that goes beyond conceit.

The Unstoppable Testosterone Rampage is a very popular mythical stereotype, and it's ironic that there's also an opposite stereotype with a ring of truth to it. It is that men specialize in keeping their feelings under tight control. The successful man is always putting his sexuality aside in consideration of other ambitions, saying "No, I can't do this now, I don't have time for my family, I don't have time for my sex life, I don't have time for my body, I don't have time for desire." Men struggle to express themselves sexually with any kind of sensuality, or gladness.

If men are capable of exercising tremendous control in every part of their lives, and routinely stifle their sexual desires, then why should we believe the sulking Casanova who insists, "She looked at me like she wanted it, and I couldn't stop myself"? Is this the one moment when a man becomes a wild animal, not able to use his masculine discipline to respect another's limits? This is in itself a sexist prejudice. Men's sex is supposedly out of bounds without a leash, while women are deemed incapable of impulsiveness, passion, or just plain hominess.

We hear the same clichés over and over again: men are turned on by porn, women are not; men

look at a sex act, then run out and start imitating exactly what they saw. Women, on the other hand, supposedly find satisfaction with soap operas and a big box of chocolates.

Men and women will be separated by artificial notions of sex and romance as long, as we cling to traditional gender roles. Fears of violence and chaos will haunt us as long as we struggle with the notion of civilization. Beyond both of these debates is one constant that defines the most important differences in erotic appreciation. It is the element that absolutely dominates the feminist anti-porn position. It is something that Americans in particular are loathe to talk about—our class values and how they define our rules of sexual propriety. The feminist sex wars have not been routinely defined as class wars—and it's time that they were.

What are middle-class values regarding sex? They are based solely on this question: Am I doing the right thing? The right thing is very important because of the middle-class investment in a secure future, which depends on deferred gratification. If we deny immediate gratification, and suppress spontaneous feeling, the future may seem more promising, i.e., secure.

These values are not only perpetuated by the upper class but are also the values everyone else is encouraged to adopt. That's why a lot of people who don't have any money or social standing whatsoever think this way.

Of course sex is often a matter of immediate passion, impulsive actions, if it feels right, then it is right; this is the motto of the body. Sexual fantasies are led by our unconscious, not by our superego. Our erotic impulses don't follow a schedule, they don't care what anybody thinks.

Since everyone has sexual feelings, the degree to which one controls those feelings will often be reflected in one's economic or cultural background. The expression "going native," or slumming, is the juicy evidence of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde dual life that many middle- and upper-class people assume in order to handle their sexual (and other) desires, which they believe are inappropriate to their milieu. Occasionally these people are exposed, and it is truly grotesque to see the contrast between what they practice and what they preach. J. Edgar Hoover and Jimmy Swaggart are some of our most recent outrageous examples. No one has yet unearthed the pervert masquerading in a feminist anti-porn crusader's clothing, but it's only a matter of time.

Women of every class are brought up to circumscribe their sexuality on a different threshold than men. Some manage to suppress their sexual yearning to such a degree that they don't allow themselves to fantasize, masturbate, or make love with another person. Our society is so puritanical and materialistic that this self-control is actually lauded. Women will brag about being celibate as a "choice," but not about being fertile or lusty.

In such a sexually repressive society, state power stays centralized at the top. It should not come as a surprise to anyone that the most powerful religious and right-wing demagogues use "feminist" anti-porn rhetoric to defend their anti-erotic, sex-negative campaigns. The feminist status quo has defined itself by these same upper class values since its origins. There are endless historical examples of the women's movement excluding and alienating others who deviated from upper class, white, and heterosexual (or discreetly closeted) values.

Sojourner Truth electrified a nineteenth-century women's rights convention when she criticized the white suffragettes:

I think dat 'twixt de Niggers of the South and de women of de North all a talkin' 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all dis here talkin' about? Dat man over there say that women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helped me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best places ... and ar'nt I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plow and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—ar'nt I a woman? I could work as much as a man (when I could get it) and bear the lash as well—and ar'nt I a woman? I have borne 5 children and I seen 'em most all sold off into slavers and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'nt I a woman? (Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970).

The more privileged, wealthy, and discreet elements of the women's movement have prevailed in public policy. The same is true of gay liberation: Angry Puerto Rican drag queens may have been the street fighters of the Stonewall rebellion, but they are not the ones advising the President on gay rights.

Erotic language is the language of the streets, the one-on-one revolution that happens every time one lover speaks plainly to another. Sexual fiction, especially, is often an autobiographic statement—it tells a private story~ a story of the body, surrounded by the most important aspects of the lover's life. The stories that evoke the most controversy over political correctness are those that raise fears of violence (sodomasochistic material like *The Story of O*, for example) or stories that evoke an atmosphere that is "sleazy" "tawdry" "coarse," or "animalistic." Henry Miller's work was a perfect example of class-conscious censorship in his time, and Erica Jong's in hers. The *Herotica* series has received the same type of criticism. All those belittling adjectives are euphemisms for saying that such stories are not in the upper- middle-class comfort zone. While they may titillate many who live there, those same people will do their best to keep these revelations from public view.

In recent years, the comfort zone has been seriously shaken up into an "Every Woman for Herself" zone. Feminists who pursue erotic inquiry are not only lifting a veil, they are among the instigators of a new wave which can only be described as the democratization of kinkiness.

I won't turn my back on sexual exploration even when I sense darkness there. That's exactly what keeps me pushing. I am making a different kind of "investment" in the future, one with such intimate riches that it cannot be deferred ultimately; one that we cannot hold back, disguise, or deny.

Susie Bright

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