

## *An Introduction:* *Some Like It Hot: Erotic*



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What is erotic literature? Several years ago this publication explored the subject, focusing on works both literary and political. The present Focus attends mostly to the literary and includes discussion of poetry, anthologies, and memoirs. The purpose here is to examine “hotness” and interest in sexual matters. This is not to deny entirely the political consequences of erotica. Certainly Eros continues to be defined in contrast with its cousin, pornography. When does degradation end and arousal begin? Carol Queen’s *Leather Daddy and the Femme* includes observations on this subject; Lisa Palac discusses degrees of efficacy and class when weighing definitions of these two forms of sexual text. Such distinctions, however, almost always come down to matters of taste.

And what tastes are served in the works discussed herein... The collections reviewed draw on heterosexuality, homosexuality, “vanilla,” and sadomasochistic interests. These texts are a road map of sexual desires. It is a tribute to our time that the *Herotica* series can flourish, and that Susie Bright can find material even in mainstream sources to fill her *Best American Erotica* series. That selections from best selling authors can appear alongside those who write primarily to express sexual interests demonstrates our fascination with the act of going beyond (while aggressively rubbing against) tradition.

Heat is a centerpiece of erotica. Lisa Palac’s e-mail correspondent in *The Edge of the Bed* writes of the “frisson of transgression.” This wonderful phrase sheds light on reactions to the standards set forth by the mainstream. Perhaps the act of brushing against norms is the source of the heat that emanates from good erotica. I think there are three elements to erotica that exemplify this

heat. One is the sense of rebellion. In *Writing the Orgy*, Lucienne Frappier-Mazur discusses the “exceptionally wide gap between (Sade’s) desire and the constraints that bound him.” The society that imprisoned him also drove him to create a universe both sexually violent and as “ritualized” as itself. Victorian erotica also provides us with fine examples of sexual libertinism in an oppressive time. “The Lustful Memoirs of a Young and Passionate Girl,” most recently collected in Prometheus Books’ *Erotic Tales of the Victorian Age*, depicts a young woman, using and being used by various servants and neighbors, all of whom judge and are judged by others. The narrator is deflowered by local ruffian Mr. Brown (and propriety does dictate that even in intimacy he be called “Mr. Brown”), yet marries another gentleman, per expectations. The images of young women flinging themselves upon men’s members are presented as matter of fact, even if it was unlikely that such behavior could be much discussed outside of these stories.

Longing is another element of the “heat” of an erotic text. One decidedly non-erotic work, A. A. Milne’s *The House at Pooh Corner*, reflects pre-conquest yearning. Here Pooh is asked what he likes doing best. He considers this question and decides that, “although Eating Honey was a very good thing to do, there was a moment just before you began to eat it which was better than when you were.” This is the moment of longing to which I refer—the moment when you know your urges are to be fulfilled, but when there remains that slightest doubt that you will go hungry. The ice cube just out of reach, the final shoe fall—these are moments of longing. In *Story of O*, whose author Dominique Aury died earlier this year, the title character carries with her a near-religious need for her suffering. Both Rene

and St. Stephen arouse in O a passion defined by her growing willingness to wait for their call, to be available to serve their needs when they announce them. She longs.

The sad counterpart to the successful culmination of longing is the sense of loss. Eros often conveys this. In her *Eros: The Bittersweet*, Anne Carson quotes a fragment from Sappho, wherein Eros is termed “sweetbitter.” Why this word? Does the inevitable end of the relationship make the pleasure of the moment less real? Carson writes, “All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles.” Like life itself, erotica includes many stages. Death, an ending, will not be ignored.

The works reviewed herein mark all stages, all elements of erotica. I hope you enjoy these pieces. I wish to thank Barry Wallenstein for his assistance in the compilation of this Focus. Much of what I know about erotica, I owe to him.