

Indian Adventures in Erotica

Some years ago, when the editor of my first novel moved from *Penguin* to lead the Indian edition of *Cosmopolitan*, (the world's best-selling women's magazine by far and 'the lifestyle for millions of fun fearless females who want to be the best they can in every area of their lives' as its website proudly declares) she very kindly invited me to become one of its few male contributors. I started off writing travel articles then progressed to their '*Mantalk*' column. I developed a bit of a reputation for being ever ready and up for it when the call came: Hmmm. Funny how as soon as you mention erotica everything sounds like a double entendre, isn't it? Anyway, a typical demand for input would be 'What's it like to go bald? How does it make a man feel? 750 words by midday please.'

I loved it. My day job in the UK Civil Service wasn't terribly demanding so bashing out a few lines at short notice was no problem. Plus it was at a time when I might just have been taking myself a tad too seriously as a writer. Had anyone asked me (no one did, sadly but never mind) I would have said writing was craft not art. A skill to be honed. And a competent craftsman should be able to turn his journeyman's hand to any task within his ambit.

So when my editor moved on again, this time to one of the first online magazines in India, and asked if I fancied dashing off 4500 words of erotica for her, my immediate reaction was an enthusiastic yes.

Now I don't want to appear pathetic, and having now authored some myself I'm certainly not being prudish about it but I'd never actually read any erotica. In fact, I wasn't really sure I knew what it was. OK, I understood it was writing about sex, but beyond that...Is it just soft porn with long words? And having been commissioned to produce some, it was by then too late to put right this lacuna in my education, because if I did I was pretty sure all I'd do was imitate the style of whatever I read.

I realised I needed some help. So I asked a colleague if he fancied collaborating on this. A man of similar background, age and, it rapidly became clear, sexually repressed upbringing. Not perhaps the ideal choice for a first literary foray into the purple boudoir but at least he was willing to give it a go. In official communications he had a nice turn of phrase and a mischievous wit and I enjoyed working with him. Plus he was a veritable thesaurus of euphemisms for genitalia which was bound to come in handy. How would I know something like that about him? Well we'd attended a 'Sensitivity to Sexism' Workshop together and one of the required exercises was to come up with as many words for a penis as possible. Quite what the point was I wasn't sure even at the time and certainly have no idea now, but his lexicon of vulgarity was breath-taking. He was still going strong ages after the rest of us had exhausted our smut-stock. Personally I think he was making up a lot of the words on the spot because nobody else had ever heard of them. Plus he had actually read some erotica so had a pretty good idea of what we ought to be aiming for.

Or so he said.

We decided to go for a gritty, Chandler-esque detective story. Told in the first person. Our hero would be a hard boiled private investigator who's hired by a rich gangster in Delhi to watch his woman, whom he suspects is cheating on him, and with whom the detective ends up having a torrid, self-destructive affair. So we agreed I'd do the plotting and my chum would handle the, err, well, you know.

Next decision was whether to go literary, literal or guttural, if you see what I mean. Should we use terms like 'She felt his heat, his need...'? No. Too Mills and Boon-ey. Did we want to use proper names and accurate descriptions? No. Too clinical. So we decided on, let's call them street terms.

All good so far. Problems started to surface when we reached the first intimate scene. We discussed draft one over the phone. The conversation went something like this:

“So what have you got?”

“Well, *he* walks in to the room...”

“Yes...”

“...and *she’s* standing there.”

“Good so far. Go on.”

“Well, he looks at her.”

“OK.”

“And she looks at him.”

‘Hmmm?’

“And he says ‘Yeah?’”

“And?”

“Well this is the good bit. She says ‘Yeah.’”

“And then...?”

“And then they do it!”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all I’ve got so far.”

“OK. I can see two possible problems...”

“You’re going to say it’s not very long.”

“I was indeed. Or very erotic.”

“It is in my head.”

“I think that may be the other problem.”

Those words obviously stung, because his next offering was so painstakingly described and so excruciatingly explicit that it read more like a surgical procedure reported in a particularly earnest medical journal than anything even vaguely titillating.

All eventually fell into place when we decided on the plot twist: We flagged it up in the title ‘The Looker’. We thought this pretty clever. The woman, beautiful, was a Looker, but so too was the detective, constantly looking at her. Then the whammo: The gangster who had hired the detective, and who we thought the woman and the detective were betraying, was a voyeur, who had actually engineered the whole thing, so he could watch. The Looker. Good, eh? Dark. There’s probably a film noir in it.

Sadly, we never knew how well were our efforts received. The people behind the website pulled the financial plug shortly after our story was published, defaulting on the salaries of its employees and the bills of its creditors. Including two enthusiastic entrants to the field of Indian Erotica.

There's probably a moral there.