

## *Best American Erotica 2006*

### **Introduction:**

### **After Andrea**

by Susie Bright

The week I put this edition of *The Best American Erotica 2006* to bed, Andrea Dworkin died.

There was a time— when I started collecting and encouraging erotic writers— that Andrea Dworkin's name would have inevitably been brought up in the first ten minutes of any conversation. Nowadays, I realize that I might have to explain who she was, due to the speed of American historical amnesia.

Andrea Dworkin was a influential political activist and writer, who was so charismatic that she molded a generation of attitudes toward sexual expression. She particularly dissected the image of women in literature, media, and pornography, where she saw it as evidence that our culture thrived on violence and humiliation towards women, as a gender. She didn't think sexism was naughty-cute— she found it deadly, and culpable.

As far as she was concerned, “erotica” could go fuck itself, it was just a prettied-up word for pernicious and patriarchal pornography. Yes, she was that blunt. One of the great whammy’s of Dworkin’s anti-porn rhetoric was that she used the most visceral pornographic language to describe and condemn her nemeses. Like Pandora, she invited every woman she encountered to open the lid of sexual magazines, books, and movies, and take a hard look at what came out.

The problem was, we did— and many of us came to different, or at least more nuanced conclusions than Andrea. The day after she died, I wrote in my blog:

“Dworkin used her considerable intellectual powers to analyze pornography, which was something that no one had done before. No one. The men who made porn didn’t. Porn was like a low culture joke before the feminist revolution kicked its ass. It was beneath discussion.

“Here’s the irony... every single woman who pioneered the sexual revolution, every erotic-feminist-bad-girl-and-proud-of-it-stiletto-shitkicker, was once a fan of Andrea Dworkin. Until 1984, we all were. She was the one who got us looking at porn with a critical eye, she made you feel like you could just stomp into the adult bookstore and seize everything for inspection and a bonfire.

“The funny thing that happened on the way to the X-Rated Sex Palace was that some of us came to different conclusions than Ms. Dworkin. We saw the sexism of the porn business... but we also saw some intriguing possibilities and amazing maverick spirit. We said, ‘What if we made something that reflected our politics and values, but was just as sexually bold?’”

I remember walking into a old-fashioned “ADULTS ONLY” store in 1977 when I was nineteen years old. I was there, (with an older female friend holding my trembling hand), on assignment from my college Women’s Studies class, where we had been told to take a firsthand look at some “pornography,” and write an analysis.

I thought I was going to throw up. First of all, the store smelled like stale smoke and chlorine. There was a surreal display of fishing and hunting magazines up front, which I later learned were part of a local zoning requirement to keep the business open as a “legitimate” retailer. Next to the glossy covers of giant salmon, there was a title called “Lactating Lesbians.”

I was horrified. I was fascinated. I HAD to open that magazine, the way a kid has to stick a bean up their nose.

It was so easy to feel guilty, like an outsider, like a pervert of the first water. I realized right away that I had deeper reactions than what Dworkin had prescribed. I was ashamed to be seen as interested in sex. I was shocked to realize I'd never seen a woman express milk, even in wholesome circumstances. I felt concern for the models of the magazine, who I imagined must be desperate to pose for such pathetic photos. I was paranoid, wondering how many men came into this enclave, and whether this was what every man was thinking about, morning, noon, and night. Then I came back to the shame bit about how much I privately thought about sex myself. I couldn't get out of that store fast enough, and I'm sure my resultant essay was something along the lines of: "This is sick, sick, sick."

Driving home, I thought about the "classier" erotic literature I had seen in my parents' bookshelves. They had elegant photo albums of the Kama Sutra temples, formerly banned copies of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and volumes by Henry Miller. I remember his passages in *The Tropic of Capricorn* about "The Land of Cunt." Miller was so prejudiced in every aspect you had to wonder if he was a misanthrope. But he was also transcendent and lyrical on this subject of cunt, and his absolute submission to it. His words were poetic and a turn-on, and I wondered, "Is this erotica?" If I was a "lactating lesbian," could I write something about my breasts and my sexual feelings that would be authentic, that would inspire as much integrity as arousal?

I wasn't the only one wondering. So many women, and men at the time, were determined to make sexual liberation their own, rather than a marketing device or a punchline at someone else's expense. That was the mainstream media's portrayal, certainly, but they were clearly out of the loop. It was already quite in vogue to laugh at women for going braless or taking birth control pills, as if the joke was on them— that they could only be exploited for their trappy ways, never in charge of their sexual destiny.

I resented that depiction; it played right into the hands of Dworkin's steadfast acolytes, who wanted every pornographer in a pine box or behind bars. In their prism, the sexually outspoken woman was a dupe, a tragic victim, or a Judas. They thrived on these black and white distinctions, much like the religious fundamentalists. If erotic creativity was doomed in a sexist world, if equality in the bedroom was impossible until "after the revolution," it didn't give you much room to breathe. They treated sexuality like a decadent, soul-sucking luxury that could be solved with abstention.

But what if we start with the premise that sexuality is an integral part of human nature? Let's compare sex with another appetite, eating. There's no doubt that our food and water supply is compromised, and causes us no end of health problems, as well as screwed-up notions of what's good or bad for us.

Do we begin fasting; do we reject the planting season? Of course not. Many of us eat, shop, and cook as judiciously as we can. Many of us influence public life to promote

sound practices that in producing, consuming, and enjoying our food. The organics movement, for one, wouldn't exist without this change in consciousness.

Erotic artists and innovators have refused to treat sexual relations as expendable, or desire as a hopeless ruin. In our efforts, we have turned a lot of stereotypical conventions of pornography upside-down.

The first revolution was self-definition. When I began writing and editing erotica, it was shocking for women to write about their sexual lives. We were delighted to kick the door down. The Lactating Lesbian pushed her phony proxy into a ditch, and wrote her own damn manifesto.

Men also were anxious to break through the har-de-har-har routine of standard male conquest. They wanted to talk about sexual desires that had more substance than braggadocio.

Another sea change was the notion of "Who can be sexy?" Dworkin and her peers claimed that if you were old, fat, hairy, disabled, or non-symmetrical in any way, you were eliminated from the porno casting call. Ironically, this had never really been the case with hardcore porn, where producers were not that picky— but it is certainly true in Hollywood and high fashion.

The 80s erotic renaissance changed that picture for good. Just looking at the material in this collection of BAE, I'm aware that there are characters of every age and appearance, every circumstance, who are the heroes of their erotic story line. They are desirable and they desire; even when they aren't fulfilled, they are not pathetic. Erotic writing has been the cutting edge of positive body self-image; I've grown accustomed to it. The conformist appearances promoted by celebrity media are the ones that seem strange, and out of touch.

Looking back on it, re-creating sexy bodies was the easy part. The more complicated flavor of the sexual revolution is how we advanced the discussion of power, dominance, and submission in our erotic imagination .

Once again, the public conversation evolved because of our personal observations. We started to confess our questions to ourselves, and then to our intimates. It seemed odd that one could be a paragon of social justice and equality during the day, but at night, dream of pirates and wenches, tops and bottoms, hellcats and quivering flowers. We didn't want to be hypocrites, we didn't want to be closet cases. We wanted to let the erotic fur fly, but we didn't want to damage anyone: Was it possible? We craved some psychological depth, not just wonky literal translation: "You want to be spanked because you are brainwashed by the patriarchy to think you are evil and must deserve abuse— Beep."

To accept the Dworkin orthodoxy, all fantasy, all dreaming, all whimsy, all wishing was wicked. But she forgot that she had let Hope out of the box too, and no one else has been willing to let go of that.

When S/M activists began to use the term “safe/sane/consensual,” it didn't make a lot of sense to Dworkin's followers, who saw the whole scene as straight out of the Inferno. However, it was just the ticket for people who said, “Look, I'm not crazy or dangerous, but I am a lover who thrives on risk, sensation, and taboo.”

Naturally, the themes of erotic power and conflict make for great drama and theater—that's why you see more S/M in fiction than you do in real life. It is all of our comedy and tragedy writ large. Even people who will never give up their vanilla tastes can still be aroused by explosive erotic stories, where our most anxious taboos are steadily squeezed into erotic juice.

That's the nature of sexual creativity: It just won't sit at the beach and watch a sunset without a reverie, without complicated feelings coloring the sky. To quote *The Dude*, “There's a lot of in's, a lot of out's, a lot of what-have-you's.”

Dworkin's rebels, my compatriots, reminded me of the Ban-The-Bomb movement. The men who coined that name were themselves the very scientists, who helped build

the the nuclear bomb. Yet when they saw how it got used, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then spent the rest of their lives in pursuit of nonviolence.

The erotic rebels were similar— we thought we had an effective way to abolish sexism forever, that if you eliminated the Triple XXX, you eliminated a root cause. But once we deployed our theories, we were dismayed, to say the least. It wasn't liberating, it was disastrous. Who was going to be demolished next? There had to be a more positive way to address the sexual battlefield. Our army of lovers came into play.

We thought sex itself had great possibilities, and that the creative erotic mind was a terrible thing to waste. There was no reason why we couldn't invent sexual speech on our own terms, turn the gender game upside down, give the status quo a run for their money. We only needed the nerve, and the means to distribute our courage.

Nowadays, there are still anti-erotic critics who sneer, "And what did your "leatherette revolution" come to? Bimbos in bikinis selling cars with a sexual come-on, appended with the declaration that they're "empowered"? Give me a break!"

That kind of advertising is the unfortunate marketing result of every counter- culture movement. My stomach turns when I hear my favorite rock'n'roll riff used to sell that same car, but I'm not going to say that the 60s musical revolution was for naught.

Madison Avenue is parasitical, and they will gravitate toward anything that might appeal to the zeitgeist. They are NOT the originators, and they are not the last word.

I wonder how many of the authors in this collection would say they were directly influenced by Andrea Dworkin; if they were inspired to roll their own after sampling her wares. I look at their names and see at least half of them, who would say, “Oh yes, I remember the days.” Some of us remember rather vividly being on the wrong end of the firing squad when we first defied her.

One young woman wrote to my blog, after I posted my eulogy, who thought I was exaggerating the bad old days for glorious effect: “That bit about staunch radical feminists later finding their Happy Hooker side strikes me as PR fluff.”

Public relations? For who? To defy the Dworkin/MacKinnon feminist theology in the late 70s and 80s was to become a pariah— and to wonder if you had given up your entire community to make a point about sex that you weren't even quite sure of...

We only knew that to say nothing, was to become a hypocrite and abuser like the very ones we were determined to overcome. To forswear the positive power of sexuality, to put erotic creation up on shelf, was unhealthy. It self-destructs. That's why the very phrase, “sex-positive” came into the vocabulary— such a strange hyphenated word, and easy to make fun of. But sex-positive artists speak to the consciousness that with-

out lifting a finger, sexuality will inevitably be portrayed in a shameful, prudish, and vindictive fashion, a place where lust and desire will always point to harm, will always do you in. Dworkin's agenda took her from the poetry and incandescence of erotic possibility and became entrenched in a view as fundamentally sex-negative as any of her patriarchal enemies.

I'm sorry Andrea Dworkin started a sexual revolution that she ended up repudiating. She never came to understand people like me, and the rest of her protégées who took her inspiration, to question authority, and flew to a new dimension. I read the stories in this volume, who reveal sexual intention in every aspect, who voice what is felt but so often hidden, and I know my appetite is only going to grow wiser.

Susie Bright

Valentines Day, 2006