

Foreword
The *Vice* Magazine Interview

Censorship: Is Gay Literature Porno or Erotica?

Bruno Bayley Interviews Jack Fritscher

British journalist Bruno Bayley sat down with Jack Fritscher for a Q&A about the nasty culture war over “gay literature and censorship” for the international magazine *Vice*, published January 2010. Originally titled “Erotic Fiction, Puritan Censorship, and Gynaecological Detail,” the feature, first published by *Vice*, is reprinted with permission.

Bruno Bayley: The old joke about the difference between *erotica* and *pornography* merely being a matter of the lighting, what do you think of that? Exactly where does the boundary lie?

Jack Fritscher: Boundaries are frontiers. Trapped in Bloomsbury, Lytton Strachey dared say “Semen?” and changed London. Cole Porter sang: “Good authors who once knew better words now only use four-letter words writing prose—anything goes.” What was porn yesterday is literature today. *Fanny Hill*, *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Naked Lunch*, and the leather lyrics of gay British poet Thom Gunn have all become pop-culture child’s play. I waffle my linguistics between *porn* and *erotica* depending if I’m talking to a sex seminar or to church ladies. I’m not concerned about labels. The endless debate about *erotica* and *porn* is an Ockham’s razor important mostly to politically correct academics and to religious fundamentalists. Whether one and the same or not, *erotica* and *porn* should both be judged by multicultural literary standards.

Vice readers, living in the slipstream of fundamentalism sweeping the world, might take action that censorship does not bring back the “old school” closet of having to “read between the lines.” Satirizing that difficult search for nasty bits, songwriter Tom Lehrer wrote: “All books can be indecent books/though recent books are bolder,/for filth (I’m glad to say)/ is in the mind of the beholder./When correctly viewed,/everything is lewd.”

In the American fundamentalist theater of the absurd, seven of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs were put on trial in Ohio during 1990 to determine if they were erotica or porn. I have a certain insight in that I was Mapplethorpe's bicoastal lover, and, as editor of *Drummer* magazine, I assigned him his first cover before he was world famous. While I thought Robert's content and style beautiful, I doubt to this day if for all his vaunted "porno" anyone has every masturbated to a Mapplethorpe photograph. (All seven were acquitted.) Regarding the seesaw between *erotica* and *porn*, my longtime pal, the London art critic Edward Lucie-Smith, pointed out, "A Mapplethorpe photo of a calla lily hanging in the dining room gains *frisson* from the Mapplethorpe fisting photo hanging in the bedroom."

About the impossibility of defining pornography, Justice Potter Stewart, in the most famous phrase ever uttered by the U.S. Supreme Court, said he couldn't define it, but "I know it when I see it." Porn is personal. I'm an author without borders. I write gripping tales for prehensile readers. I don't write porn. I write literary erotica that begins in the head and works its way down. In the alchemy of eros, if readers cum, it is they defining what is erotica and what is porn.

Bruno Bayley: You earned a doctorate for your dissertation *Love and Death in Tennessee Williams*. Was that the start of your interest in erotic writing, or merely the culmination of an amateur interest that then became a profession? Could you name some "classic novels" that many people might read totally oblivious to their erotic undercurrents, or importance to erotic writing?

Jack Fritscher: As the conformist 1950s became the liberated 1960s, I read Tennessee Williams to learn about sex because I was an innocent student stranded in a Catholic seminary, and I was having a nervous breakthrough. After reading five Williams plays, I ended my eleven years of study, exited the seminary, came out into the world, and met Tennessee Williams. He was an archetypal artist making sexuality intelligent and literary in *Baby Doll*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. In the ironic alert inherent in censorship, when I was eight years old, a shrieking priest in a pulpit had inadvertently made me aware of *Forever Amber*, the best selling novel of the 1940s that was condemned by the Catholic Church's delirious *Index of Forbidden Books*. Growing up like most Catholic intellectuals, I made the *Index* my reading list for classic literature.

Born a writer, I was hellbent on learning how to connect with readers. Is there any writing more interactive than eroticism that seduces a

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reader to orgasm? Censorship, conveniently citing page references, guided me to the forbidden passages in Flaubert, Balzac, and George Sand. The *Index* condemning all works by De Sade, Zola, Sartre, Moravia, and Gide, was threatening Tennessee Williams when its Inquisitional reign of terror (1515-1966) was stopped by Pope John XXIII. Absurdly, it continues defining porn in the right-wing group “Opus Dei” outed by *The Da Vinci Code*.

Pumped up on the *Index*, the Catholic Legion of Decency listed films whose viewing would send me to hell, or at least to the library to borrow the filthy books adapted by Hollywood. When the priest who was my highschool English teacher lectured on Walt Whitman, he said *Leaves of Grass* was literature, but too dirty for boys. I immediately wrapped the book in a plain brown wrapper. Expecting a sex panic, I fell into esthetic rapture that exposed the sex hysteria in my bourgeois education. Excited in my Speedo, I was Whitman’s “Twenty-Ninth Bather” swooning with lust. That shock of recognition is the heart of erotica when sex and desire validate identity with the great *Yes* of a cumshot: “OMG, I really am gay!”

I was a very aggro lad attuned to whispers about sex, and I moved on to scanning between the lines of brilliant filth by James Joyce, Genet, Nabokov, Radclyffe Hall, William Burroughs, James Leo Herlihy, Anais Nin, and my late friend, James Purdy. These writers, and Henry Miller and Camus and Ginsberg at Olympia Press and *The Evergreen Review*, taught me the rhetorical tricks of the trade. With dick in hand, I learned how to spell *hard-on*. At age fourteen, my kickstart in erotic writing was yob masturbation. I wrote to make explicit what I found missing in the erotic undertow of novels. I wanted the pen to be as mighty as the penis. I had grown up frustrated in movie palaces during World War II when, during a love scene, the camera cut away from the kiss to waves crashing on shore, or to a train roaring into a tunnel. I didn’t want to write that way. I wanted the full monty.

Bruno Bayley: In erotic literature, do you favour subtlety or directness? My dad says, “For me, some of the most erotic writing of all is in Alberto Moravia’s novels and short stories. These are very subtle and tend to describe gloomy afternoons behind net curtains in apartments in Rome.” What are your views on the relative merits of subtlety vs. gynecological anatomical detail in erotic writing?

Jack Fritscher: I love the extraordinary films *Two Women* and *The Conformist* adapted from Alberto Moravia’s engaging novels. Enlivened on the screen, his sexual realism on the page had heat back in the day of

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Mussolini's Fascist censorship before sexual liberation, but now that the net curtains have parted? Born freer thirty years after Moravia and Tennessee Williams, I was the next generation. I respect that the hustler-sex of Tennessee Williams' *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* had to occur behind the hotel portieres. Erotic pioneers, like Joyce in *Ulysses*, Moravia and Williams slowly stripped the dance of the seven veils using six, then five, then four veils.

Since 1964 in the U.S. when the written word became protected by the Constitution, my generation hasn't had to drape the windows of sex. So: what if an author writes an erotic story and no reader cums? Teasing in sex writing can be a turnon until it becomes all talk and no action. I don't want to write the menu of sex. I want to cook the food. I want it hot. I want to deliver it. I want to fuck the takeaway customer. I'm a very direct male. I channel sex. I write declarative sentences. I don't write twee description. I write dialogue. As an erotic stylist, I find poetry in Anglo-Saxon words. Like Moravia and Whitman, I use common words. I write with explicit nouns and verbs. Unlike academics who misspell *come*, I spell *cum*. I like to knuckle up the reader with priapic rhythms as in my Irish story "Chasing Danny Boy."

However, I can zip up my fly and write romantically, and have done in my novel *Some Dance to Remember*, and in a recent short story about two lads caught in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake published in *Best Gay Romance 2009*. I was pleasantly surprised at the critics' acceptance of that tenderness because gay readers tend to demand that I write about hard-driving homomasculine sex. To test my own agility to see if I could write as "camp" as Paul Rudnick or David Sedaris, I penned a drag style in my comic short story "Stonewall: June 28, 1969, 11 PM" which is nominated this year for a Lambda Literary Award. In my romantic short novel *Titanic*, the narrative tends toward humor and then the terrible loss of disaster. However, in my *Titanic*, before the ship goes down, all the characters go down...on each other. Priapic detail? Gynecological detail? I can do that. I have written explicit lesbian and straight erotica for major publishers like Larry Flynt.

Bruno Bayley: I take it, from what I have read, that in your opinion erotic fiction is of a totally different level of importance to the gay community than it is to the heterosexual community? What purposes does it serve in the respective communities?

Jack Fritscher: Even though I was conceived and raised by heterosexuals, my sense is that straight erotica veers quickly away from male-female

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intercourse to that other dimension of kinky sex whose escalating degree of difficulty is akin to Olympic skaters trying to cut a “Figure 8” backwards on an ice cube. Commercial straight erotica is not about missionary sex. It is more often about power and being fisted in bondage by the archetypal Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS. There is a hardly a taboo left standing.

Perhaps an essential difference between the erotic fiction of straights and of gays is that GLBT folks regard erotica as an identity art form. By its essentialist nature, queer erotica puts its finger on what makes the gay community different from the straight: identity sexuality. Growing up, straight kids are, simply, straight. Without such surety, gay kids must search out definitions of themselves. Pop culture magazines and media indicate that straight men use porn to satisfy their alternative sex urges and fetish tastes between bouts of breedership, and not for sorting their sexual identity in the bathroom where gay identity emerges singing pop tunes into a hairbrush.

Erotic writing is as necessary to gay culture as rap is to black culture. Without sex, and, radically, without sex that makes the reader cum at the roots, gay writing has no gay soul. It is just alternative safe mainstream corporate writing. The anti-sex self-censorship in the politically correct GLBT community is a self-hating scandal, and many famous gay fiction authors who are professional homosexuals at work in the fields of academe do not even have the skill sets to write erotica.

While editing and writing the monthly *Drummer* magazine for a quarter of a century with feedback from the readers, I have noticed that the lesbian readership is nearly 100% sexual bottoms. Therefore, all the gay erotica I write and photograph is created to dominate the reader and viewer. I’ve shot nearly two hundred rather successful erotic videos all from the point of view of the voyeur-bottom lying stoned on the couch at home. Straight erotica sells the same dominance. It seems everyone straight and gay on the planet is looking for a top who will fucking control them. (That’s how religion was invented. And nipple clamps.)

Without erotic literature, straight culture could arguably march on. Without erotic literature, however, gay culture would not have its essentialist training manuals. Specifically, straight culture does not need *The Catcher in the Rye* to survive, but perversatile gay culture absolutely requires thousands of detailed coming-out and coming-of-age stories.

Bruno Bayley: In terms of erotica, how do you view the differing treatments between heterosexual and homosexual erotic literature by the mainstream?

Jack Fritscher: Booksellers enforce their own “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.” Mainstream publishers are corporations run by conservative Puritan businessmen who marginalize gay erotic literature because they fear fundamentalist religionists might threaten a boycott as they did with the benign *Brokeback Mountain*. The children’s powerhouse publisher Scholastic recently banned from elementary-school book fairs a kiddie-lit book featuring lesbian moms. My own books published by dedicated gay presses, especially the hard-core *Leather Blues*, are often confiscated when sent through Canadian Customs.

There is a double standard. The quintessential difference between perceptions of hetero and homo literature is that the mainstream thinks that specifically erotic straight books are individuated from other straight books, but in a triumph of global homophobia, the mainstream thinks that ALL gay writing, whether about sex or not, is somehow erotic...and dangerous.

As an analogy, if a straight photographer and a gay photographer identically photograph a nude male at the same time and place, the verdict is that the straight photo is art and the other is gay porn. When Gay Men’s Press of London published a coffee-table book of my photographs titled *American Men* (1995), the book was considered “erotic art” and was permitted because it was a “gay” book; but when author Edward Lucie-Smith tried to include some of those photos of men with erections in his historical survey *Ars Erotica*, the photos were censored by his publishers on both sides of the Atlantic because *Ars Erotica* was a “straight” book. If Mapplethorpe had been straight, he would never have been censored, and he might have become famous for little more than fathering the children of Patti Smith.

Big-box bookstores display straight sex magazines on their racks, but their begrudged gay book section is closeted away on four or five book shelves, and features lesbian writing more than gay male writing because, insofar as lesbians are women, they are of safe fetish interest to straights. Just as the straight mainstream is twisted over gay literature, the GLBT mainstream is twisted over gender. When my publisher sent a copy of my award-winning comic novel *The Geography of Women* to *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, the editor wrote back that he did not know how to review a book about women written by a man. I sent him a note and asked him how he would review *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The few surviving GLBT bookstores focus mostly on feminist, ethnic, and politically correct titles, heavy on the academic, the self-help, the biographies, all of which are subsidized through the sale of gay greeting

cards, male pin-up calendars, and porn magazines. The best mainstream ally that GLBT erotic literature has ever had is the new breed of online book sellers who mail all titles off in discreet packages to the smallest towns. A click-and-order straight bookstore is more culture changing than a bricks-and-mortar gay bookstore. Even so, anti-gay censorship can happen quickly at a corporation. During 2009, book giant Amazon suffered an attack of “gay panic” and dropped all gay titles from its site. When GLBT customers protested, Amazon blamed a computer error, and, after nearly a week of excuses and apologies, returned to selling gay books.

Bruno Bayley: In 1968, you wrote your first erotic novel *Leather Blues*. Since then you have written countless stories, articles, memoirs, and histories. Do you feel the fiction is still as important in representing the gay community as academic writing or biography? Has the Internet undermined erotic publishing?

Jack Fritscher: Fiction is all-important. Fiction reflects soul. But fiction is sinking slowly in the west. Ninety percent of titles nowadays are non-fiction. Fiction, like scripted television, has fallen victim to reality shows and blog postings. As a humanist, I’m disappointed because the current fad of politically correct academic writing is, among some other toilet-ries, reverse sexism, reverse racism, and twaddle psycho-babbled by newly minted academics, who are themselves often sadly educated, and desperate to publish or perish. Most academics should be given a drink-driving test before being allowed to write anything about homosexuality.

Storytelling is important to the human psyche. It is quintessentially important to GLBT culture in its final uncloseting. In the 1970s, gay magazines worked to develop gay authors. My *Drummer* magazine helped create the very leather culture we reported on each issue. Now killed by the Internet, that fertile magazine culture that churned out new material every thirty days has been replaced by dozens of annual gay fiction anthologies of the splendid kind invented by the Canadian critic Richard Labonté and edited by, for instance, the legendary Susie Bright in her straight-and-gay mixer *Best American Erotica*.

I am an academic who immigrated from the university ivory tower to the corporate world and to the gay *dolce vita* of GLBT publishing. Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach. In my hybrid career, I’ve written academic books and papers, biography, history, and fiction, and directed films. These days many gay fiction authors, such as Edmund White and Larry Kramer and I, are trending toward publishing autobiography, biography, and nonfiction history. In 1968, I was impelled to write *Leather*

Blues as an erotic-fiction novel and send it to a publisher. In 2009, one is more likely to shoot a video documentary about S&M leather and post it on Youtube. I am dedicated to both gay fiction and gay nonfiction equally because each singularly channels GLBT voices in a way that the great gay poet Walt Whitman would approve.

As example, I have written a mix of three fiction and nonfiction books about the first decade of gay liberation, the 1970s. Each book's subtitle reveals how much the DNA of fiction and nonfiction is related. In 1984, I completed the historical epic *Some Dance to Remember* whose mixed-genre subtitle is *A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*. As if to underscore the nonfiction contents of that fictitious novel, the new 2010 edition is published with an index—a research tool no novel has had built-in before. In 2008, I completed twenty-five years of work on the nonfiction *Gay San Francisco* which is virtually the same story as *Some Dance* but with real people, and an index, which can also be read—as I surrender to the Internet—free online at my site. Its subtitle is a precise thumbnail: *A Memoir of the Sex, Art, Salon, Pop Culture War, and Gay History of Drummer Magazine from the Titanic 1970s to 1999*. My personal erotic memoir *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera* (1994) was subtitled *A Pop-Culture Memoir, An Outlaw Reminiscence*. As an eyewitness pioneer of the gay literary scene since the mid-1960s, I think fiction and nonfiction remain equally valid, but it is fiction that is the endangered species.