

# COSMOPOLITAN

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## FABULOUS FICTION ISSUE

Mitzi Gaynor of "South Pacific." Read about star-makers Rodgers and Hammerstein.

**STORIES** Such Men Are Dangerous—Double-length Suspense

Novel by Donald MacKenzie • The Brahms Kick, a Tantalizing Novelette by Garson Kanin, plus Other Exciting Stories for Perfect Summer Reading • Sex in Fiction

**AUTHORS** Françoise Sagan—The Literary Imp

How Writers Work in New York—Rome—Paris—London—Dublin—Hollywood Millionaire Class of Young Writers • Bergen Evans Picks the Best Novels of Our Time



# Sex in Modern Fiction

*Author, editor, critic, and professor, Edmund Fuller challenges modern novelists who have capitalized on smut. "A corrupted and debased image of man has become current," he says. He has been widely criticized for his stand on sex and censorship, the distorted image of women, the strange "beat generation," and the "new total depravity" which pervades contemporary novels*

## BY EDMUND FULLER

Nowadays young girls are writing books which, a generation ago, they wouldn't have been allowed to read." So said some sprightly wit in the publishing world—I don't know who—in the season when those precocious young ladies, France's Françoise Sagan, America's Pamela Moore (*Chocolates for Breakfast*), and other teenage novelists were attracting attention by their worldly books.

When my wife attended a good preparatory school in the late twenties, the girls all had to bring a note from home giving them permission to read *The Scarlet Letter*. The age of literary consent has changed drastically in a short time, as have the standards, attitudes, and restrictions regarding the treatment of sex in fiction.

For a long time, even after the close of the Victorian era, that imaginary old personage called Mrs. Grundy, who served a good many generations as a symbol of censorious moral disapproval, sat on the lid of a Pandora's box full of facts and language touching people's sexual behavior. Something less than forty years ago she was pushed rudely off the lid and the contents of that box began to find their way into fiction at an accelerating rate that seems to have reached a climactic rush in the last few years. Some of this has been for the good and some has

not. Many writers have not yet grown up to their new freedom.

In the case of the original Pandora's box, all the scourges and plagues of man escaped. The lid was slammed down just in time to hold one thing—Hope. A good many scourges came out of Mrs. Grundy's box, too. The hope left for us is that writers will employ their valuable and hard-won freedom as mature, responsible artists, instead of using it as a cloak for their limited invention and insight, for dramatic short cuts, and sensation mongering. Of course, there are novelists who do use this freedom intelligently, but there are far too many who don't, who are muddying the waters for all. One can go to court with good will to defend the freedom of serious literary artists, but it is disheartening to see the whole structure of artistic freedom risked by trashy work at the Spillane level, or by immature and mediocre talents who think that the detailed description of sex acts or the use of four-letter words constitutes profound study of the relations between men and women.

Incredible as it seems today, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* once was a *cause célèbre*, withheld from publication for some years at the beginning of this century, as an immoral book. It contained no offensive words, no lurid scenes, but it portrayed a woman involved in unconventional sex

relationships who was not struck down by retribution. Shakespeare, and most of the great authors through the ages, could not have written their works under such narrow, puritanical censorship.

The good aspect—the most important one—of the new freedom lies in the fact that the writer is an interpreter of human life and behavior. As such he must be free to write about anything that happens in man's life from the degraded to the sublime, from the degenerate to the saintly. He has the right, too, to use the authentic speech of all sorts and conditions of men, and should not be required to restrict himself to terms suitable for the Sunday School or the refined drawing room.

Yet these rights and freedoms, like all others in society, from as great a one as free speech to as routine a one as a driver's license, are less than absolute. Some limits exist upon all rights, and these limits may be summed up under a single word: responsibility. For the writer this means not only responsibility morally and socially, but also artistically. If we don't want censorship to threaten us, the good sense, artistic judgment, and consciences of professional writers, critics, editors, and publishers must provide unwritten standards for us—a function in which they have lately fallen short.

It's hard to know whether to laugh or

ery at some of the idiocies promulgated by writers during recent years, in dealing with sex. Clichés of the most ludicrous order have sprung up—set routines and repetitious patterns that the widely read person can see coming a mile away. The law of diminishing returns has dealt so ruthlessly with most of these that they are self-defeating. To a reader equipped with anything but the most wide-eyed naïveté they are not shocking, or dramatically arresting, but simply boring, to be greeted with the sigh, "Here we go again," or "This is where I came in."

I've had occasion, as a critic, to sum up some of the shopworn devices of these sexual soap operas. Take the matter of undressing. Wise writers always have realized that in a sexual encounter the reader would be aware that, somewhere along the line, some clothing came off—how much, in what order, and by whom removed doesn't seem important. Tolstoy didn't find it necessary to bother us with any problems Count Vronksy may have had with Anna Karenina's underwear. Yet today's undressing specialists itemize every several button, strap, and bow, layer by layer. James Jones, in *From Here to Eternity*, contributed a technique known as shorts-shucking, which follows halter-dropping in sequence. But a host of our modern fictional lovers are too impetuous to wait upon buttons, or even zippers; they must rip and tear their way to the target. James M. Cain was the pioneer among these clothes-ripping technicians, who by now have shredded enough lingerie to clothe the poor of the world.

We see descriptive specialists in the texture and surface temperature of the body, ranging in the first case from marble to velvet; in the second, from hot to cool. There are body-geography and sexual-topology students—erotic spelunkers of a sort. Also, we have experts in the functional mechanics or general physics of sex relations. Many writers seem compelled to diagram precisely what is involved in sexual intercourse, either to instruct the reader or to reassure themselves that they know.

We find a fantastically ingenious variety of orgasm symbols, now that it is deemed necessary, in fiction, to pursue sex to the living end. These range from concentric ripples, waves, and other aspects of water, through high wind, fire, rockets, and levitation. Ernest Hemingway introduced earth-moving in the famous sleeping-bag sequences of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which was said to have induced a major boom in camping equipment. Fireworks are popular symbols of the climax, considered refined enough even for Grace Kelly films.

In the celebrated *Peyton Place*, one of the most extreme scenes in Mrs. Metalious' torrid theatricals, and one of the least necessary in terms of the story struc-

ture, carries her away from the fiction category toward the "Do It Yourself" or "How to . . ." type of book. This is the sequence, in the closing pages, in which Allison MacKenzie, budding writer and budding woman, is given an explicit short course in erotic technique at the hands of a singularly versatile literary agent. It would be interesting to know what effect the advertisement of this extension service has had on that otherwise sedate profession. Allison, at least, was properly grateful for this tutelage, and when dropped off at home, demurely said, "Thank you for a lovely time."

In a new novel called *Strangers When We Meet*, Evan Hunter, best-known for *The Blackboard Jungle*, prowls through what he conceives to be the suburban jungle of marital infidelity. Amid scenes of Peeping-Tom explicitness, Hunter introduces a variation on the popular sequence that often begins, "Tell me about the others . . ." Piling cliché upon cliché, he segues, as the musicians would put it, from "It was a rape, Larry, don't you understand that?" to "All right!" she screamed, "I wanted to be raped," within a few familiar lines.

### The Writer's Responsibility

This kind of wearisome routine reduces to vulgarity and worthlessness a novel that contained a potentially important theme. Mr. Hunter failed to probe the essence of a marriage, failed to follow the opportunities he had opened up for himself. He was satisfied to confine himself to the crude mechanics of adultery instead of examining its causes, its social and moral implications, and resolving the relationships at the center of his story. The most startling response to the book was that of a reviewer in the *New York Times Book Review*, who felt Mr. Hunter's problem to be that he could not laugh about adultery, like the French, but instead was too moral and too much "bothered by the Seventh Commandment."

Do not suppose that I am minimizing the major importance of sex as one of the aspects of life to be studied in fiction, or that I think it should not be dealt with. I ask that the writer treat it maturely and responsibly in a meaningful context in which men and women, apart from merely the perverted or the psychopathic among them, might hope to recognize themselves. James Gould Cozzens, in his much-hailed *By Love Possessed*, has been about as explicit as possible in certain sexual scenes. I believe that he need not have spelled things out so minutely, but I do not quarrel with him for doing so. The total context of this large book is a wide-ranging survey of life and behavior to which vulgarity and sensationalism for their own sakes cannot be imputed. Cozzens is an artist who justifies, in his total work, his right to

use whatever resources he feels he must.

The first novel, some seasons ago, of one of the most interesting of the newer American writers is worth comment in this connection. In *The Devil Rides Outside*, John Howard Griffin wrote a book intensely religious in spirit and tone. It is much preoccupied with sex in many blunt, unsparing scenes, but its entire purpose was to search out, in a man's soul, the meaning and purpose of his sexuality. Much the same thing could be said of Jan de Hartog's most interesting and ambitious novel, *The Spiral Road*.

The writers whom I decry know nothing of sex in the context of actual love, but know only the sterile grapplings of loveless passion, a very different thing from passionate love. Thornton Wilder says of such loveless passion, in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: "Many who have spent a lifetime in it can tell us less of love than the child that lost a dog yesterday."

One of the current vogues of American literature is that which romanticizes and glorifies the so-called "beat generation." To Jack Kerouac and the others who speak for this clique, love is understood as nothing more than the quest for "kicks." Sex is portrayed by them as a stupefying pleasure mechanism for which heterosexual or homosexual relationships can serve equally well.

In all these various kinds of novels offering us loveless lust, women are depicted primarily as depersonalized sex objects for the convenience of the inflamed male—as zombies with a single function, having no identity as individuals. Occasionally, as a corollary, the male is imagined as a mere instrument for female gratification. The bonds of love and devotion, of tenderness and consideration, and above all of parenthood are unknown to such writers.

If you want to see different facets of sex and love, try two fine and markedly individual novels: *The Cry and the Covenant*, by Morton Thompson, and *A Death in the Family*, by James Agee, each of which, in its own way, sets the question of sex in a human context beyond the grasp of the piddling panderers or immature children who write so large a portion of our current fiction.

Censorship is no answer to the problem of sex in literature. Censors have unerring gifts for attacking the thoughtful and the creative while letting the cheaply smutty and suggestive slip through their fingers. They mistake the respectable for the moral. Apart from the ultimate good sense of the majority in and around the professions of writing, publishing, and criticism, the good sense and taste of the reading public is the only resort. Disdain, on the part of the public, for the sick and the silly in sexual portrayal is the best remedy for the present excess. THE END