

Braving That First Sex Scene **By Dorothy McFalls**

If you are like me, especially if you've had the privilege of being raised in the conservative south, the thought of discussing the hows and whys of putting sex in our romances is something that will quickly make us blush and itch to change the subject. But I'm afraid, this is a topic that every romance writer should face. Whether she will ever decide to write that spicy sex scene or not, consciously thinking about the level of sensuality the book's characters will experience and how to show that attraction on the page is an important part of writing a compelling love story. For without attraction, which is biologically sexual in nature, a romance would sit flat on the paper and go nowhere.

Recently, author E. Joan Sims, who writes the Paisley Sterling Mysteries, spoke to our local chapter about her personal beliefs about writing sexually explicit scenes. She said when she sat down to write what was going on with her characters behind closed bedroom doors she felt like a voyeur. She was embarrassed that someone might actually read her titillating words. Years earlier, she had conquered her fears and written a steamy romance only to discover that her school-aged daughter would sneak up at night to read it. Joan's hesitation to write that steamy scene has led her to an important realization though. A character's age and background will determine her outlook on sexual behavior.

A writer can use these cultural differences. Where one character might talk casually about her desires and experiences another might feel a strong need to keep it all inside. What wonderful interactions these two characters might have together, especially when one is the heroine and the other the hero!

Joan also reminds us that a romance does not need to go into the bedroom to become heated. "True romance comes from the writer seducing the reader," she says. Whether this seduction includes an explicit description of "the act" is up to the writer, the requirements of the plot, and the targeted publisher's expectations. There is only one given in this art of crafting a story, the writer must use words to invoke a response.

To put it another way, it is the carefully worded sentences that compel the reader to live the emotions and the tortured yearnings of the characters. Every writer strives to build sentences that grab the reader's heart and keep her riveted to the scenes as the plot builds toward a climax. (Hmmm...If it sounds like I am talking about something far more intimate than plot development, then you are catching on.)

A romance should continually build the tension and keep the reader guessing until it reaches the satisfying conclusion where the hero and heroine can finally find their happily-ever-after. When I read an especially powerful romance, I find myself in awe over the page after page of groundwork that has been laid, willing me to want these two fictional characters to finally find happiness. That happiness would be meaningless if it appeared on the first page.

Writing an emotionally charged sex scene should be no different. The groundwork has to be in place for the reader to care because creating sexual tension is not about writing a hot sex

scene, but about building a strong attraction between two compelling characters and then creating realistic obstacles that will keep those characters from pursuing that attraction. It may take an entire book to reach a point where the protagonists might jump into bed together.

Or it might take a page.

So before writing that sex scene, ask yourself a few simple questions:

1. **Does the level of sensuality fit the publishing line I'm targeting?** *Whether you are writing for category or not, this is an important point to consider. For example, the publishers I'm targeting all seem to publish books with no less than two steamy sex scenes. I have made a conscience decision not to send an editor at that house a manuscript that did anything less. The best way to learn to write sensually is to read it.*
2. **How does the sex scene advance the plot?** *Just like any scene in a manuscript, a sex scene should move the plot forward. A heroine giving herself over to a man sexually can serve to signal that she's opening herself up to the hero. She's risking a lot, whether it is her heart or something else. If this scene doesn't increase the stakes or create a new barrier between the two, then consider cutting.*
3. **Does the level of sensuality fit the characters?** *If you have a virgin pull out a leather cat suit and a whip, the reader will probably cry foul. Let the character's personality drive just how wild to make a scene.*
4. **Have you followed the twelve steps to intimacy to get your hero and heroine into the bed?** *These twelve steps outlined by Desmond Morris <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intimacy> help prepare the reader and the characters for that, gulp, bedroom scene. If you're not ready to write that scene, perhaps you've missed a step somewhere along the way. I first saw these in an article by Linda Howard, which is no longer available on the Internet. I also now have them listed on a clock hanging in my office, thanks to an enterprising chapter of the Romance Writers of America. The 12 Steps are:*
 1. Eye to Body
 2. Eye to Eye
 3. Voice to Voice
 4. Hand to Hand
 5. Hand to Shoulder
 6. Hand to Waist
 7. Face to Face
 8. Hand to Body
 9. Mouth to Breast
 10. Hand to Genitals
 11. Intercourse

Lay your groundwork, get your characters to a place and a situation where a steamy sex scene is the best way to advance your plot, take a deep breath, and write as if you weren't going to show it to anyone. You might be surprised with what you get.

Still having trouble braving that bold sex scene? Try reading these great how-to books. *Joy of Writing Sex*, by Elizabeth Benedict

Writing Erotica, by Edo Von Belkom

Dorothy McFalls still blushes as she writes her next steamy Regency-era sex scene while striving to create a story packed with emotion and mouth-watering sensuality.