

The Line Between Erotica and Pornography

Contributed by
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In the rules for our current writing contest, we state that we will not accept pornographic works. This statement has caused some consternation amongst a few of our entrants who have written pieces with explicitly sexual scenes. What is the line between Erotica and Pornography? We pose an answer here and ask for your opinion in return.

The Fine Line Between Erotica and Pornography

In the rules for our current writing contest, we state that we will not accept pornographic works. This statement has caused some consternation amongst a few of our entrants who have written pieces with explicitly sexual scenes. "What is the line between Erotica and Pornography?" they ask. They wonder at what point does a book that deals with human sexuality in an explicit and descriptive manner cross that line into pornography.

This has been a more challenging question to answer than we had anticipated when we started the contest. Not only are there more people writing books with explicit sexuality than we'd anticipated, the lack of any real guidelines on the subject makes the question difficult to answer.

The answer, it seems, really does depend on whom you ask.

[What's your opinion? Post it Here]

What Webster says

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines erotica as, "literary or artistic works having an erotic theme or quality." Pornography, on the other hand is defined as, "the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement."

These definitions simplify the matter, but again, these definitions can just as easily be tossed out the window by whomever wants to make a point. Gloria Leonard is famously quoted as saying "The difference between pornography and erotica is lighting."

Put some guys in a dark room, the Victoria's Secret catalogue becomes the essence of high art.

What is a literary or artistic work?

The key differentiator between erotica and porn appears to be this loosely defined thing we call "literary or artistic" work. But who defines what's literary or artistic, and what isn't?

Take, for example, the following quote (quoted in Utne Magazine, in a sidebar to the "Porn Culture: What It's Doing to Us" article) of Tristan Taormino:

"Feminist porn is porn that empowers women and men: It gives them information and ideas about sex. It teaches. It inspires fantasy and adventure. It validates viewers when they see themselves or a part of their sexuality represented. It presents sex as joyful, fun, safe, and satisfying. It counteracts the other messages we get from society: Sex is shameful, naughty, dirty, scary, dangerous, or it's the domain of men, where theirs are the only desires and fantasies that get fulfilled."

But where's the story line, plot, or character development in this work? Are they no more than training manuals?

When I was a very young and raw 17-year-old, I had the privilege of seeing my first porn in the living room of my high school psychology teacher. No, it wasn't a school assignment. And, yes, he quit teaching the next year.

The only film I remember was something called "The Cake Bake." The plot was rather thin. Guy runs out of sugar. Goes to girl next door who answers the door stark naked. She gets cup of sugar, which she absent-mindedly spills on her conveniently shaved [deleted]. He, of course, proceeds to clean said damsel in distress with his tongue. You get the picture.

High art? A literary masterpiece? No - pure porn.

I disagree with the idea that pornography can empower women and men. These films are meant to arouse, not teach. It is the intention, I believe, that sets it apart from erotica in the world of filmmaking, art, and in writing.

As a writer, you write for both yourself and your audience. Certainly you can write a passage with the intention of causing arousal in your reader. That's simply good writing. You can cuss, swear, talk about cunts, cocks, tits and fucking if these words fit within the personality of your character and framework of your book. While writing a 17th century historical novel, for example, you wouldn't have one character say, "Hey, baby. Come over here and let daddy lick your [fill in the blank]." That's just plain dumb.
The bottom line... in my opinion

While this discussion is anything from over, here's what I wrote to one entrant in our contest:

"It's something of a fine line between erotica and porn. For me, porn is exploitive in nature, demeaning to some people, and is more interested in arousing the reader sexually than intellectually. Erotica is a literary piece that engages the mind of the reader, but can use sexuality as a literary device as opposed to an end in itself." Armed with this information, he backed out of the contest. I kind of wish I'd had the chance to read his book, if for no other reason than to fuel this discussion.

I'm not sure that we've answered any questions by opening this dialogue. But there you have it. This is one writer's views on the debate about erotica versus pornography.

What's your opinion?

Send us your opinion. We'll gather all opinions and post them (anonymously) for next month's magazine issue. This should be interesting to say the least. We'll let folks vote on their favorite assessment/opinion, and the winner (we'll know who you are) will get some nifty prize to be announced later.

To Post your opinion, go here:

<http://www.askdatabase.com/campaigns/?gt=1&a=1&b=6898>