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**The Good Parts**

Finding My Place In The World By Writing Erotica



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By **Petula Caesar**

**I GREW UP AFTER MUCH OF THE LEGAL DUST** from the civil rights movement had settled. I also came along after the women's rights movement--ladies burning their bras, legalizing abortion, and storming into the workplace--so I could choose to do none of those things. And let's not forget the sexual revolution, which I also missed. I hear it was fun, and while it didn't necessarily provide many answers, at least now you were allowed to ask the questions--and once the information age kicked in you had resources for finding those answers right at your fingertips. Plus, I live in America, where citizens put time and effort into pondering the quality of their lives. To quote the great philosopher Chris Rock--hey, your comedian is my philosopher--Americans go hunting on a full stomach. I've come along at a great time in the history of the Western world, as an African-American woman and as a writer. The sky is the limit. I can choose to write anything--even erotic fiction.

After all, it can be very lucrative--just ask Zane, queen of African-American erotica. Her originally self-published erotic works found a home at Simon and Schuster and ended up riding high on the *New York Times* best-seller list. She now runs her own imprint under her publisher. I have a short story appearing in her latest anthology, *Caramel Flava*. But that doesn't mean that writing about sex as literary art as an African-American woman doesn't have its challenges.

I was always encouraged to develop my mind by reading when I was growing up. In spite of his lack of formal education, my dad was an avid reader and considered himself part of the black intellectual class--plus, he was very light-skinned in an era when being like-white automatically meant you were smarter. He groomed me, in

the tradition of W.E.B. Du Bois, to be part of the "talented 10th"--the intellectually gifted group of blacks who, because of their smarts, would be educated and take leadership roles in the African-American community to affect social change. As a writer, my contribution to this effort was going to be bringing enlightenment with my words and ideas. In junior high school I earned my popularity in a classroom of geeky gifted and talented students by writing adventure and mystery stories featuring my classmates as characters. My best friend/fellow writer Robin Christopher and I were as popular as J.R.R. Tolkien in Class 8-462 at Herring Run Junior High. At the time sex didn't appear in my writing, but it was in my reading.

I would awake some mornings to find my sex education on my nightstand--some book from my parents, with a note attached instructing me to "come to us with any questions." Books written to educate and inform, mind you--they weren't leaving me copies of *Playgirl*. The first book was the classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; next up, John Schimmel's *Your Child In Adolescence*.

From that book I picked up the phrase "nocturnal emission." It sounded like sex to me, and I filed it away in my brain. I read pretty fast, so books arrived in rapid, blurring succession. *Teenage Sexuality* stands out--a collection of surveys and essays chronicling the sex lives of those aged 13-19. It was a very scientific, scholarly work, and knowing the proper names for the body parts and sex acts that others crudely referred to made me feel like I was wearing sexy underwear beneath a plain dress. I added words like "fellatio," "cunnilingus," and "orgasm" to my other mental entries.

I read everything I could get my hands on, no matter how I got my hands on it. I sneaked peeks at my mom's Judith Krantz novels and consumed Judy Blume books--my copy of *Forever* still opens to the good parts. As I got older I read *Story of O*, *Fanny Hill*, *The Happy Hooker*, and the like.

But erotica wasn't something I was supposed to get from African-American writers. This was especially true of the women authors. They often wrote about high-spirited women whose sense of self was crushed by mean-spirited people, society in general, cruelty, loss, and tragedy. The result? Sometimes betrayal and confusion, like the titular character sleeping with her best friend's husband in Toni Morrison's *Sula*; other times poignant sadness, like in Maya Angelou's first consensual sexual experience, as described in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which she orchestrated so she could prove to herself that, in her words, "nothing was wrong with her."

Those books were profoundly moving to me, but I loved to read about the joy of sensuality between black people, too. I loved reading about Celie revealing herself to Shug Avery for the first time in *The Color Purple*, and about Mattie Michael and Butch Fuller in the sugarcane field in *The Women of Brewster Place*. But enjoying the erotic elements of these works bothered me. It felt wrong--this wasn't *Tropic of Cancer* or *Tropic of Capricorn*, these were the great works of my African-American literary role models. These books were supposed to stimulate my mind--and nothing else. The fact that the sex resonated with me as it did meant I was just getting off on the good parts, and these books were more than that, were better than that. I clearly was a sick puppy.

In spite of my sickness, I excelled academically and graduated high school with honors, ready to do my part as one of the talented 10th. I continued my education, and when I started writing as an adult, I tried to be important, and meaningful. I wanted to be the next great African-American literary voice. I did my verbal best to be a revolutionary, blazing a trail for my people with my pen. I ended up writing about sex.

I wrote about sex in relation to how people deal with their frail flawed humanity. I wrote about it because it pleased me to write it--it was fun and entertaining. And yeah, I wrote about sex to get people off, too. But no matter the reason, I wrote it. I wrote about sex in every possible aspect--the humorous, the fanciful, the ridiculous, the beautiful, the sad, and the joyous. I explored it all; it poured out of me. I was documenting my struggle to be a whole person, including a sexual being, in spite of my race, my gender, my heritage, my history, my upbringing. It was my own little battle against sexual stereotypes that are especially poisonous in this day and age because of how effectively and endlessly the media delivers them.

By telling my little stories that seemed so inconsequential because they focused on sex, I found that at times I was commenting on bigger issues. And as I got better, I found I was telling everyone's story to some degree--it wasn't just for me anymore, or for people who I felt were like me. And people were entertained by what I wrote. They were excited by it. They sometimes even recognized their silly, freaky, nasty, imperfect selves in my work. I guess I wasn't supposed to be so thoughtful when writing about something that, at the very least, is considered highly private and personal--and, at the most, sinful and shameful. The responses to my work ranged from amusing to ridiculous, and its impact on my relationships with friends, family, and my race was unexpected.

When my first erotic short was published online in 2004--for which I was paid \$50--the man I was dating asked when I was going to start writing "real stories." "I don't know," I replied. I was going to see how far the "fake" ones took me. After my first book was e-published last year, at book signings people commented on how "normal" I looked--10 fingers, 10 toes, and all that. Many readers praised my book's "high literary quality," asking why I wrote this genre when I could "actually write." *Why do you read this if you can actually read?*

A reporter asked me if I found more men approaching me since becoming an erotica author, or if men were intimidated by me, feeling they couldn't measure up. How would I know why men do what they do? Half the time they don't know themselves. Readers and writers would ask such questions, as if I had really considered all that when I started writing.

On the other hand, acceptance of my genre choice came from my mom. She brags about me. To her, I've cured cancer while walking on water, spinning straw into gold, and bringing peace to the Middle East along the way. I've explained to her that while I'm not ashamed of what I write, it's not for some people. But she calls family members indiscriminately to say, "My baby wrote a book. It's erotica. E-R-O-T-I-C-A. Stories about sex. Different positions and stuff. I'll send you a copy. And say hello to your husband the reverend for me."

One or two of my close writer friends are as boastfully proud of me as my mom. They are my personal cheerleaders. They will happily run down a list of my accomplishments to anyone at any time. Other friends are distantly supportive--they don't much care what I write as long I'm good at it, get rich doing it, and remember them once I'm wealthy.

Then there's my beautiful daughter. When I began writing erotica she was a small child. Keeping it from her was easy, partly because it didn't interest her. Now she's a curious teenager living in a society where talk of the R. Kelly scandal among her classmates made her ask what a blow job was at 12--and some of the kids already knew from personal experience. Do I let her read my work--aside from the snooping she's probably already done--with my consent and guidance? I try to recall what I really wanted and needed to know as a teen. I try to consider certain modern-day realities. And I try to keep it real, honest, informative, and within

boundaries. I manage to be a marginally "cool mom" without falling into the trap of losing my authority by always trying to be her friend.

And if all that weren't enough, I hear that I'm not uplifting my people either. Every bit of "art" that an African-American creates has to be about "the struggle," you see. People forget the fact that *because* you are African-American, whatever you do is always about that to some degree because it's a part of who you are.

But I'm finding my balance in all this, and making peace with the pieces. I'm reaching my original goal as a writer, which was to make people think. And I'm doing that in spite of the unique road I'm traveling, or maybe because of it. Best of all, I understand how I got here. A quote often attributed to Ferenc Molnár, one of Hungary's greatest 20th-century playwrights, goes like this: When asked how he became a writer Molnár allegedly replied, "In the same way that a woman becomes a prostitute. First I did it to please myself, then I did it to please my friends, and finally I did it for money."

He definitely got that right.

Petula Caesar's fiction and poetry have been nominated this year for the Rauxa Prize. Her latest short story, "The Tradeoff," can be found on [Clean Sheets](#). Her erotic shorts collection, *Lipstick and Other Stories*, is downloadable from her publisher [Phase](#) and [Fictionwise](#) and will be available in print in December. She is also Associate Editor for [Mic Life Magazine](#).