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Burning Desires and The New Erotic Romance Novel

**A Discussion with Authors Robin Schone
and Karen Mercury
hosted by William S. Dean**

"Do romance readers want a clueless virgin who regularly bathes but has no idea that she has a clitoris until the hero finds the magic button?" This was the question author Robin Schone posed some six years ago in an essay posted on the All About Romance website. Today, the battle lines are still tightly drawn between what publishers call "sweet romance" and the scorching, hot, frank language and situations of "erotic romance." While some still cling to airy fantasy scenarios with perfect heroes on white steeds and virginal heroines longing to live happily ever after with Prince Charming, another set of readers and writers are exploring how passion, desire, and direct lust can propel characters through a seemingly endless variety of human couplings and relationships.

Our guest authors this month are Robin Schone, (author of *Awaken, My Love, Gabriel's Woman, The Lady's Tutor, The Lover*, and anthologies including *Fascinated* and *Captivated*) and Karen Mercury (author of *The*

Hinterlands and the soon-to-be-published *The Four Quarters of the World*.)

William Dean (WD): *Apart from obvious passion, what are some of the key elements in explicit erotic scene writing that publishers (and readers) are expecting?*

Karen Mercury (KM): This is an interesting question, because I've always been clueless as to what readers/publishers wanted in "love scenes." I always thought that what I liked to read was something so off the beaten track that nobody else could possibly share the same interests. Then all of a sudden I had a "paradigm shift," and started trusting in my instincts. I started trusting in, and writing about, what I wanted to read.

This turned out to be a scene in *The Hinterlands* which the heroine stumbles upon the hero bathing in a river. She hides behind a tree, and watches as he soaps himself, and this leads to him masturbating. She's practically boneless with lust, sliding down the tree watching this gorgeous spectacle.

As it turned out, this was the scene that convinced my publisher to buy my book. Those gals were just as stupefied as I was by this scene. So now, I'm not second-guessing anyone, and I'm trusting more in my own instincts, instincts that probably seem to most people as not being "commercial." I'm probably not as unusual as I used to think. I'll bet a lot of people want to read the same things.

Robin Schone (RS): Characterization. Emotion. I can't stress those two qualities enough. Publishers—and readers—want two people making love, not two acrobats testing the limits of human endurance. They want to know those two people, to experience their sexuality with them and through them.

WD: *Is there a basic framework or "box" that erotic romance writers*

shouldn't write outside of? Are there things still forbidden as content?

RS: I think I can safely say that anything having to do with feces, pedophilia or bestiality (real animals, not were-animals) are definite no-nos. Other than that, the market seems to be expanding by leaps and bounds. Ds. M&S. Berkley recently published a triad novel. I myself have written about male prostitution, dildos, anal sex, masturbation, voyeurism, and even fist-fucking. Readers—and publishers—are very accepting about sexuality as long as the protagonists are sympathetic and the sex is consistent with the characterization. In the end, however, it really does depend upon the publisher. Publishers, like authors, have their own distinct personalities.

KM: There are definitely still forbidden things. There is the "other partner" forbidden zone that I believe Liz Carlyle just completely broke through with her *The Devil to Pay* which is in my TBR [To Be Read] stack. There's also the fine line between rape and what's come to be known as "forced seduction." I'm dealing with the latter in my current WIP [Works in Progress]. In the heydays of the bodice rippers, rape was an acceptable theme. Most of the women so treated wound up so-called "loving" their rapists, a'la Luke and Laura on "General Hospital."

That became very unpalatable in the 1970s. Women refused to accept that, and with good reason, as many of them were victims of that sort of torture themselves. There was the death knell of the "bodice rippers," and the beginnings of more equitable authors like Susan Johnson, Thea Devine, and Bertrice Small, stories where women fought back, and were strong, and heroes became less alpha, more feeling and beta.

My current WIP is a "captive story," and here we come into the more modern and acceptable world of the "forced seduction." This is where the man so-called "forces" the woman to feel pleasure, albeit in the beginning against her will. It's a fine line to walk. As I knew I certainly couldn't have the evil emperor rape the heroine, I decided to have him merely feel her

breasts. As it turned out, this simple action wound up being way more erotic than any sort of other mauling I could have possibly imagined, and it opened up worlds of possibilities in both of the two characters. They both started actually liking each other, after that.

WD: *It seems that a good proportion of erotic romances are set in Regency or Victorian England. Do you think there will soon be breakout novels set in other times and places? Can there be contemporary erotic romances?*

RS: Actually, there are quite a lot of erotic romances set outside the Regency and Victorian era, with more being published daily. Think medieval England and Arabia on one end, and contemporary on the other. In between are futuristic, paranormal—and of course, the latest fad, vampire—erotic romances. There are even a couple that are set in the wild wild west.

Personally, I write in the Victorian era because I love that age. It perfectly parallels with our own time. Late nineteenth century was bursting with new age technology that was changing the entire industrial, political and moral infrastructures. They had cholera, we have AIDS. Rape and incest were rampant. Homosexuality and masturbation were sexual monsters that our Victorian ancestors daily struggled to conquer. Wow. How things don't change. I feel right at home when I write a novel set in the Victorian era.

KM: My debut historical, *The Hinterlands*, is set in the 1897 Niger Delta region. I never saw anything in particular standing in the way of having an unusual setting/time until I started marketing it. The most common response? "Sorry, tough setting." I was just livid with apoplexy! If I saw just one more "The Most Notorious Rake in All of London" I was fixed to scream. Ironically, during this period, I marched right into a Borders, and on the back of the first book I picked up, there it was. "The most notorious rake in all of London..." How could there possibly have been so many of the most notorious rakes during the Regency period, which after all only lasted 20

years? Were all these rakes duking it out to see who was really the most notorious?

I wondered what was wrong with writing about "the most notorious trader/leopard hunter in all of the Niger Delta waterways." Medallion Press requests not to be sent anything set in the British Isles. They want fresh locations and time periods. In fact, next winter they're presenting Marjorie Jones's romance, *The Light Horsemen*, set in 1918 Australia. It's fresh, original, and exciting. I think that in a year from now a lot of other houses will be suddenly be actively seeking unusual settings.

My one requirement is that all of my heroes and heroines will always be Americans, plunked down into exotic settings and exciting time periods in history. I can relate to other Americans. I like to read about Americans. I could never figure out why most American authors choose British heroes and heroines. Maybe there's some vast cult in England where their writers are penning westerns. J

WD: *Is there, in your opinion, a typical erotic romance reader and what separates them from a non-erotic romance reader?*

KM: I have to think it might be geographical. The people I've seen who have been most interested in explicit sex have been born and raised on the two coasts.

RS: I can only say that I have received fan letters from a broad range of people. My readers are aged 12 to 84 and everything in between. Mostly they are female but I also have male readers. Politically they are Republicans and Democrats, conservative Christians and liberal Freethinkers. Their education levels range from high school drop out to PH.D. They are stay-at-home moms, attorneys, laborers, clergy, doctors, truck drivers, prison inmates, correction officers, teachers, nurses, librarians, social workers, military personnel, retirees . . . I could go on, but I think you get my drift.

We all need. We all want. Hope resides within all of us that—regardless of age, beauty or lack thereof, and physical capabilities—we will find love and sexual satisfaction. One of the most heartrending letters I've ever received came from a woman with Muscular Dystrophy. She had read my novella *A Man and A Woman* and asked me to please do for people with MD what I had done for my eunuch hero. She wanted me to give MD sufferers hope that they, too, could find acceptance and loving gratification.

WD: *Do you feel that erotic romance authors are more influenced by explicit-language using literary writers, such as Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence, or by more modern erotica writers, such as Zane or those included in Best Women's Erotica anthologies?*

RS: I think if an erotic romance author is writing historicals, then they had better stick with the language of D. H. Lawrence; if they're writing contemporary, then, of course their language needs to be contemporary. One of the biggest complaints about erotic historical romances are authors who consistently use modern language. It would be a rare debutante indeed who whispers sweet four letter words into our hero's ear. On the other hand, one of the biggest complaints about erotic contemporary romances are authors who use distinct historical terms for genitalia. Who in this day and age refers to a man or a woman's sex organs as their "manhood" or "womanhood"? The challenge for me is mixing the historical and contemporary languages, so that my readers get a historical taste without being bogged down with historical syntax, i.e., paragraph long sentences.

KM: Henry Miller was the most influential writer of my pre-teen years—yes, I snarfed copies of *The Rosy Crucifixion* from my mother's bookshelf, and of course started reading "the good parts." Pretty soon I found myself reading a bit before, and a bit after the "good parts," and shortly I said to myself, "Hell with it, this is pretty good, let's just read the whole damn book." In that way, I developed my inchoate (one of Lawrence's favorite words)

dichotomic theory that one can write a book that's literary and has extremely hot sex.

D.H. Lawrence was another huge influence in my teens, though I don't consider him explicit in the slightest. I know he was scandalous at the time. The one scene that always made the hugest impact on me was when Lady Chatterley is reaching out for the baby chick, and the tear falls on her wrist, and Mellors leads her into his house. That was it. Not explicit at all. Yet it's stayed with me to such an extent that I use variations on this scene, as writers will use scenes that moved them profoundly. Because sometimes when you want to affect people the most, a silent scene with no dialogue is best.

Because I write historicals, I'm more influenced by the erotic Victorian writers. Most people think the Victorian age was characterized by stymied, buttoned-up conservatism. While that may have been true for mainstream Victorians, that suppression automatically spawned its own rich subterranean world of erotica. In my current WIP, I've based the hero on Sir Richard F. Burton (the explorer, not the actor), who was incontrovertibly the biggest proponent of Victorian "smut" on the face of the planet. It was said that he "knew twenty-nine languages, not the least of which was the language of pornography." His prudish straight-laced wife burned all of his translations and diaries after his death. It was such a dire loss to almost every branch of science and art, she's rightfully becomes known as "the most hated woman in all of literature."

WD: *How do you personally know when you've written what you consider your best and hottest sex scene in a book?*

KM: We better not go there...! Let's just say, when I wrote the aforementioned scene of the hero masturbating in the creek, I knew it was right. And yes, I do personally research every sex scene.

RS: I know a sex scene is hot if I squirm when I write it. I know a sex scene is good when after hours, days or weeks of rewriting it, I still squirm.

WD: *When you start a new novel, is it often a kind of assembly process from bits and pieces, or do you follow a detailed outline and adhere to the plotline?*

RS: I remember doing an outline in high school geography. What a bore. When I write, I start out with an idea—ex., in *The Lover* I started off with the idea of a male prostitute who is scarred from a fire and who must now pay women to service him—and work the story out through a series of questions. Why is Michael a prostitute? He ran away to Paris as a boy and was taken in by a madam. How did Michael get burned? He tried to save the woman he loved from killing herself in a fire. Why did the woman want to kill herself? She had been horribly tortured by a man from Michael's past. Why did this man torture the woman Michael loved? Because the man has destroyed everything Michael has ever loved. How can Michael destroy this man? Through a woman. Bingo. Through that series of questions, I had a plot—revenge; I had an erotic love story—a lonely woman procuress and a scarred male ex-prostitute; and I had an ending—Michael must confront the man from his past. I sat down and started writing. Writing without an outline is like riding a roller coaster —I love the surprise twists and turns!

KM: I'm definitely not a pantzer, and I like to follow a general outline. But because I believe that my characters actually live and breathe on another plane, I have to allow elbow room for what they decide to do on their own.

WD: *If a publisher were to say "I give you a free hand" to write whatever and however you want for your next erotic romance, how would it be different from what you've written before?*

KM: Medallion Press, although they definitely state that they do NOT publish erotica, has been extremely generous in giving me a free hand in

writing what I want. We get away from the "erotica" label because I write stories that are very heavy on historical detail. Some erotica can just be a bunch of sex scenes with a very flimsy plot that serves as a framework to hang a bunch of sex scenes on. That gets very repetitious after, about, an hour.

There are always those "wallpaper historicals" where you can't even tell something takes place in the Victorian era until someone mentions there was a gas lamp or a corset. If not for those factors, they may as well be set in the 21st century.

I love explicit sex, and at the same time, I love history. I never saw anything standing in the way with having a story that was very heavy on the history, and heavy on sex the same time. I believe that sex was a central part of history. The more I want to know about historical characters, the more I want to know about their sex lives. To me, the two go hand in hand. Medallion has given me the freedom to do both things at the same time.

RS: I've been very, very fortunate in the fact that I have always been allowed to write what I want. I've catapulted a 20th century woman through time and space via masturbation. My multi-cultural hero first tutors the Chancellor of the Exchequer's wife with *The Perfumed Garden* (16th century Arabic manual on lovemaking translated by Sir Richard Burton), and then with his big ten inches. I've written about a male prostitute who was trained to please women, and I've written about a male prostitute who was trained to please men. My war-weary colonel lives out his fantasy by taking my heroine via anal sex while guiding her fingers up into her vagina. My windowed heroine messages my castrated hero's prostate to gift him with the orgasm that "regular" sex can't bring him.

I think, at some point in the future, I might like to write a triad love story. But I doubt that will raise a publisher's eyebrows.

WD: *What projects are you working on now and what will we be seeing from you in the future?*

RS: Unfortunately, I am in a legal dispute with my publisher, and can't publish anything until that is resolved. And no, the dispute did not occur because the publisher wanted me to tone down my sex scenes! *smile*

KM: I'm writing *The Four Quarters of the World*, a story set in 1868 Abyssinia. It's being released in February 2006. It's the story of an American adventurer, a former engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, who decided he was bored with mapping the West, and went to Abyssinia to become the right-hand man to Emperor Tewodros, a crazed and enigmatic far-seeing figure in African history. My background is in African history, and I stumbled upon this most dynamic man. The story is incredible.

What's amazing to me is, this stuff actually happened. That's why I love writing history. I couldn't make this stuff up. There's already so much amazing history that you don't need to tinker with at all.

Visit the authors' websites for more information:

[Robin Schone](#)

[Karen Mercury](#)

Books mentioned in this Roundtable Discussion are available at:

[Amazon.com](#) / [Amazon UK](#) / [Amazon CA](#)



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