

Love Those Sex Scenes!

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At the 2010 RT Booklovers' Convention, I participated in a panel on writing Sin-Sational Scenes. This article is based on the handout I provided.

Why Take Readers Into the Bedroom?

- In a nutshell, because a writer should show, rather than tell. The way two characters relate together during their most intimate interactions reveals a great deal about each of their personalities and about their developing relationship. It's a source of emotional change and of tension and conflict. If the author shuts the bedroom door, they've shut the reader out of something that's critical to character arc and the development of the relationship.

Do Your Research

- Know what's appropriate for the line you're targeting: heat level, sex scenes versus love scenes, number of sex/love scenes, length of each scene, explicitness, language, types of sex.

Sex Scenes versus Love Scenes

- In a romance, there may be only love scenes – i.e., scenes that have emotional intimacy. Or there may also be sex scenes – scenes that involve physical intimacy but lack emotional depth (e.g., the sex may be about having fun, winning a bet, gaining power over someone) – but typically, these will only be at the beginning of the book (or between secondary characters).
- Often in an erotic romance, a couple starts out with sex scenes (e.g., thinking, for whatever reason, their relationship will just be sexy fun, totally casual), then they find themselves caring for each other, becoming intimate on an emotional level as well as a physical one, and then the scenes are love scenes. There's usually a lot of internal conflict involved because they had good reasons for wanting a casual relationship, and now they're being challenged. This makes for great tension.
- A couple can be doing the same things in a sex scene and a love scene; it's the emotions involved and the way the characters relate to each other that make the difference – and it's the author's challenge to make those differences clear to the reader.

Keys To a Great Sex/Love Scene in Romance Fiction

- The scene must be intrinsic to the story, not gratuitous. It must serve at least one purpose, and typically the most important ones are to reveal character and develop the lovers' relationship. It's also good if external plot elements can be folded in.
- It must come out of character and reveal character. Consider each lover's goal and motivation for having sex with this particular person, in this place, at this time. Consider how personality and emotion are reflected in the way each makes love to the other. Consider how each reacts to the other, because sex is, of course, all about interaction. How does the scene progress and are the initial goals met, do they change during the scene, or are they frustrated? For example, let's say the heroine's goal was to have fun casual sex with her hot new neighbor, as a way of celebrating her independence after breaking up with a long-time

boyfriend. If she finds herself starting to care for the neighbor, her life becomes much more complicated.

- Stay in character. A woman's perception of an erotic touch will be different than a man's, and each woman's will be slightly different.
- Go deep into the viewpoint character's point of view. And consider, in a long scene, switching point of view once in the middle (or write the next sex/love scene from the other's POV), so the reader knows what both lovers are thinking and feeling.
- As always, show don't tell. Use all the senses. Don't write purple prose, but be sensual. Avoid clichés. Give enough physical detail so the reader can picture the scene, but don't get so detailed it becomes more like an anatomy lesson than a sensual, emotional experience.
- Don't be afraid to use tenderness, fierceness, humor. Don't make everything too perfect, but don't add details that (realistic though they may be) throw the reader out of the mood.
- Action and dialogue are both important. Find the right balance at each stage of the scene.
- Vary the types of sex, locations for making love, etc. Let your couple experiment and discover sexual acts and locations they've never explored with anyone else. Find inspiration in women's common sexual fantasies.
- If these lovers are meant for each other, there needs to be something different about this sex – in terms of intimacy and emotional connection – than they've ever felt before. For example, it may bring up feelings of vulnerability they haven't experienced, or help them discover their true sexuality. This enhances tension and often conflict, and provides opportunities for character growth. In other cases, emotions may have developed outside the bedroom, and the love scene is a concrete way of illustrating that development.
- Show the reader how the relationship is developing – in ways the lovers may not even be aware of themselves. Each sex/love scene should be a stepping stone toward their happily ever after, though at the time some may seem like steps backward (e.g., if they quarrel). Keep increasing the stakes and the tension. What should be happening is a deepening of emotions, a triggering of vulnerabilities, and usually an internal struggle over whether it's wise to be falling for this person (not that, of course, they can stop themselves!).
- Use language that's appropriate to the characters and time period.
- Have fun! Loosen up, get rid of the internal censor, make sure you'll have no interruptions, pour yourself a glass of wine, and let go. Remember, you can always edit later.

Before and After

- Before the sex/love scene, have an appropriate lead-in or build-up. It may be a long, romantic evening of dining and dancing and a slow build of sexual tension, or it may be immediate passionate heat on seeing each other after being apart or after surviving some scary situation.
- After the sex/love scene, how are the lovers different? As individuals, what issues do they now need to deal with? As a couple, how do they behave with each other? Is the external plot affected by either of these things?

Follow these tips, and you'll love writing those sexy scenes!

©Susan Lyons. International bestselling author Susan Lyons, who also writes as Susan Fox and Savanna Fox, writes “emotionally compelling, sexy contemporary romance” (*Publishers Weekly*). Visit her website at www.susanlyons.ca.