

MWF Panel 23 August 2015

I spent twenty years writing *Submission*. I thought I was writing a novel. That is, I wanted to write literary fiction. I wanted to create interesting characters and see what they did.

When I finally showed the book to agents and publishers, I learned that I had made fundamental mistakes. The plot centered on finding an assassin, and I'd set the story in an exotic locale – clear signals that I had written a thriller. But I hadn't. *Submission* is a spy story that turns into a love story. There is no such genre.

I've said elsewhere that I put in the sex because a spy novel without any would be like a dinner party without wine. But thanks to the commercial success of *Fifty Shades of Gray*, people are looking for more voltage than *Submission* offers. I wasn't trying to go down that path – either in *Submission* or in *Partners*. I've described my formula as “sex and laughter.” There is no such genre.

The central male character in *Submission* is a former special operations soldier. He teaches the Crown Prince of Alidar how to employ his army. This allowed me to include recollections of army life – some humorous, some elegiac. I'm proud of that aspect of the book, which is dedicated to a friend who was killed in Vietnam. But with conscription a distant memory, and war something that

happens on television it doesn't affect most of us, the military memoir is becoming a minor genre.

Several generous, intelligent, discriminating, elegant, in-all-ways-superior female readers have said nice things about my writing style. My age and profession made me a novelty. One guess how journalists portray me.

Talking about sex makes many people nervous. There must be some evolutionary reason for this. Writing about sex means walking in a mine-field of self-disclosure. You're interested in that sort of thing, are you? Achieving the right tone is important. It's a serious subject that calls for a light touch.

There is, actually, a genre that might be called literary erotica. Krissy points out that you could fill a shelf with such works. She's added to that shelf. It doubt I could.

Erotic fiction that doesn't want to be dismissed as smut needs to disclose character. The characters in *Six Degrees* are touchingly real. Holly White is bizarre but real. I think the way Philip, Allison and Cassandra engage in sex tells you a lot about them.

Allison's acceptance of domination is the mainspring of the plot, but it also makes her interesting. She has a secret identity, and does her work in disguise, but longs to expose herself. Several

women readers have indicated that they identified strongly with Allison.

Cassandra is a gorgeous British prostitute taking a sabbatical. The way she *talks* about sex defines her. She is honest about her “work” as she calls it, but the actual sex she has is not explicit.

Philip is a mixture of vulnerability and courage. Here’s Cassandra’s first impression of him: “Quick movements, giving a hint of the muscles beneath his shirt. Left-handed, blond hair cut short, intelligent eyes. When he smiles, you remember he is American, but otherwise there is something of the stray dog about him. An alpha male, to be sure, but homeless. One could have sex with him for days, I would think.”

Sex is like gravity. It is always there. But so is God. So are ambition and war.

You only need to talk about sex some of the time. Hints will do. And you don’t want ice cream with everything. I think purely erotic fiction is a self-limiting genre. But the erotic element in fiction is artistry, and should be enjoyed as such.