

Elizabeth Benedict

What I learned about sex on the Internet

A decade ago, I had the peculiar distinction of being dubbed “The Sex Priestess of the Ivy League” by the sassy *New York Observer*. I was teaching in Princeton’s creative writing program and promoting a new book, *The Joy of Writing Sex: A Guide for Fiction Writers*, a serious approach to writing sex scenes in literary fiction. Not long after that, there would be more to my moniker than *The Observer* – or my students – knew. For the next two years, while instructing my young charges in the elements of serious fiction, I wrote a monthly column called “Girl Talk,” under a pseudonym, for the Japanese edition of *Playboy*. Each piece was a mini-play starring four saucy New York women in their twenties – though I hadn’t seen my own for some time – who met at trendy bars and ski lodges to discuss their latest sexual exploits. It was lively banter and a smidgen of soft-core porn.

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I hadn’t sought out either publication. Until a publisher asked me to write *The Joy of Writing Sex*, I kept busy teaching and writing literary novels (each with a few sex scenes), book reviews, and the occasional travel piece or personal essay. But the publisher’s idea appealed to me. Before I knew it, I was conceptualizing theories and strategies involved in writing about sex, collecting examples from contemporary work, and interviewing writers including Russell Banks, John Updike, Dorothy Allison, and Alan Hollinghurst. In New York, I happened to meet a Japanese editor and book scout and sent her the finished manuscript, hoping she might interest a Japanese publisher. Instead, she phoned me some time later with a far more exotic invitation.

Japanese *Playboy* needed a monthly woman columnist after their New York-based writer suddenly quit. Was I interested? At first I was flummoxed. Writing about sex in fiction came easily to me, but what could I possibly dream up, month after month, that would hold in thrall tens of thousands of randy Japanese men? I balked until she mentioned the mini-play format, which suits my taste for writing dialogue, and the hyper-generous fee – every month for a year. Surely, I could think of something. Once

I did some novelist's research into the sex lives of Gen Xers and New York's latest hot spots, I was turning out my spicy columns the morning they were due. Readers were happy. I was prosperous. The contract continued for a second year, until the editor in Tokyo moved to Venice.

Her departure coincided with the end of my four-year appointment at Princeton in 1998. Perhaps as a result of this series of losses – the job, *Playboy*, and the cherished Sex Priestess title – my body soon lurched into another phase, the phase of losing all the estrogen I'd been born with, and then the phase of taking little blue pills every day that gave me back the estrogen in another form. All of these events spanned the period in which we witnessed the collapse of the NASDAQ, where I'd put my *Playboy* winnings; the election of George Bush; September 11; and the warning, issued by the NIH on July 2, 2002, that the little blue pills, also known as hormone-replacement therapy, caused small but distinct increases in a virulent strain of breast cancer, and we all had to stop taking them.

It was one thing for a part-time sex-writing expert to lose a cushy magazine gig and a teaching job with a pension, but quite another to lose the essential hormone that regulates libido and keeps the equipment working. A woman minus her estrogen is like a car with no oil – and no shock absorbers. With my estrogen flowing, in real or synthetic form, it had been easy to imagine the hyperbolic escapades that filled my monthly column. But without it coursing through my blood, I could barely remember what desire felt like. Or do I mean I didn't want to remember, didn't want to be reminded of what was no longer there? Gone was the World Trade Center, gone was my libido.

In this maelstrom of loss, I conflated the personal, the political, and the grim news of the day, more and more of which I began to consume online. Soon after the invasion of Iraq began, I became aware of a slew of alternate news sites, ballast against the media's lust for Shock and Awe and Annihilation and for the neocon con job: sites like www.mediawhoresonline.com, since retired, and www.buzzflash.com, still going strong. Instead of going to sleep with J., my partner of many years, I found myself staying up late many nights, reading the latest flood of news about what had become the great drama of our time, Bush-Cheney-Rove vs. the United States of America – and the Rest of Humanity. In my nightly haze of anxiety and disbelief, I occasionally remembered a friend's funny story. "My wife and I had a huge fight," he said. "I left the house and went to the movies. The theater was mobbed. I said to myself, 'All these people had fights with their wives?'" Adopting his twisted logic, I became convinced that the political landscape had cast a pall on *everyone's* sex life, on those, anyway, who were paying attention. Wasn't everyone awake till all hours reading the same alarming news I was reading – and if not, why not? I sent frantic emails to reporters, I fretted, I worked on political campaigns when the time came. Sex? It had a familiar ring, like the word 'gramophone,' but as a living concept – well, in my addled, scared, estrogen-starved, 3 a.m. brain, it had begun to sound passé. It had begun to sound very September 10.

Reader, I am trying to explain how the former Sex Priestess of the Ivy League came to the abject place I found myself on a recent night: googling the word 'sex.' After midnight. Alone in the living room. Ashamed of typing in those three little letters, as though I had no better

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offers at that hour. As though I were desperate. When in fact I was only . . . curious . . . to see what everyone else was up to while my own libido languished.

There is more going on than I had imagined. On my first try, Google coughs up 733,000,000 entries. (I've since learned the number varies enormously, some days down to a mere 44,000,000.) The top entry is "Sex Etc." at www.sxetc.org, "a website by teens for teens" that's straightforward and informational. The quote of the day: "I give masturbation two thumbs up." – Ian, 13, Hancock, NY." Reassuring, that the gods of Google have somehow made it easy for the most vulnerable sex consumers to have access to so many facts put forward by people they can trust.

The next entry is "Salon.com Sex Index," leading to all of *Salon's* entries on the topic, notably www.shoperotictv.com, where I watch an advertising video that appears on TV (not sure what channel), in which two straight-faced women cheerfully sell a Turbo Stroker (\$89.99, marked down from \$99.99), a mechanical vagina in a canister. It's topped with pink rubbery lips, into which a man can put 'himself' and experience a mechanical squeeze similar to a real woman and/or Portnoy's cored apple. (What a hoot! I'm tempted to wake J. from his sleep – but what if he wants to order one? I suppose I wouldn't blame him.)

Next I find Wikipedia's exhaustive and exhausting entry on 'sexual intercourse,' and then the home page for *Playboy*, where I find, alas, no links to my alma mater in Tokyo. The *Playboy* entry makes me feel nostalgic for the bright, shining days when I made as much money per hour as Bill Clinton's lawyers. But then it's on to the next entry, a tilt toward the sinister: "Sex Ad-

dicts Anonymous." The dark sides of sex soon assert themselves on every page of Google, in the prolific Sex Offender Public Registry sites. The first such site belongs to the U.S. Department of Justice. DOJ insignia appear beside the name of our beloved attorney general, Alberto R. Gonzales. But in order to find out where the rapists live in my neighborhood, I must click an 'I Agree' box, and there's no telling what I'm signing up for when I do this. Next: the home pages for *Sex in the City*; the Museum of Sex; the Sex Pistols; the EEOC Sex Discrimination office, which I am surprised still exists; and SWOP USA, the Sex Workers Outreach Program, announcing its upcoming State of Women's Health Conference, in Toledo, Ohio.

The next eight or nine pages are pretty dreary (Frequently Asked Questions about Sex, and lists of sex offenders in Maine, Tennessee, New York, Oklahoma, etc.) until I spot "Anal Sex According to the Word of God." The URL – www.sexinchrist.com – leads me to what must be some of the more bizarre FAQs ever written:

Anal Sex in Accordance with God's Will

Are you saving yourself for your wedding night? The Devil wants you to fail, that's why he puts stumbling blocks in your way. But God wants you to succeed, and that's why he has given us an alternative to intercourse before marriage: anal sex. Through anal sex, you can satisfy your body's needs, while you avoid the risk of unwanted pregnancy and still keep yourself pure for marriage.

You may be shocked at first by this idea. Isn't anal sex (sodomy) forbidden by the Bible? Isn't anal sex dirty? What's the difference between having anal sex before marriage and having regular intercourse?

I thought the Bible said anal sex was a sin.

This is a common misconception. Anal sex is confusing to many Christians because of the attention paid to the Bible's condemnation of homosexual acts. However, it's important to realize that these often-quoted scriptures refer only to sexual acts between two men. Nowhere does the Bible forbid anal sex between a male and female.

In fact, many biblical passages allude to the act of anal sex between men and women. Lamentations 2:10 describes how "the virgins of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground," indicating how virginal maidens should position themselves to receive anal sex. Another suggestive scripture tells of a woman's pride in her "valley" (referring to her buttocks and the cleft between them) and entices her lover to ejaculate against her backside: "How boastful you are about the valleys! O backsliding daughter who trusts in her treasures, [saying,] 'Who will come against me?' (Jeremiah 49:4) And in the Song of Songs, the lover urges his mate to allow him to enter her from behind: "Draw me after you, let us make haste." (Song of Solomon 1:4)

The site tackles, and mostly endorses, adultery, masturbation, pornography, even 'fisting'; and each page is presented with a straight face and plenty of Biblical quotes. But the most bizarre Q&As come from readers, who have a page of their own. A colloquy on Christianity and swallowing semen leads to this:

This is complete blasphemy. You must take this down. To suggest that the Lord Jesus Christ propositioned a woman for a blow job is preposterous. You are sinning against God by twisting the words of His son. You need to take this down, for your own good.

We did not mean to suggest that Jesus was propositioning the woman at the well or asked her to give him a blow job. Of course not! Jesus would never do that. In fact, he refuses to give her the "living water" himself. When she asks him to give her the living water (semen), Christ tells the woman to get her husband. This is so he (Christ) could instruct her on how to give a blow job to her husband and receive the living water from her husband. Thank you for your concern, and we hope this clarifies matters.

Shame on me, I find myself engaged and amused. In a world of unimaginable sexual abundance and license – consider those 733,000,000 Google entries – this bizarre site somehow manages to be truly over the top. To whom does it belong? There are no 'Contact Us' or 'Who We Are' tabs, no links beyond the site. That it's an elaborate joke makes the most sense, a prankster trying to infuriate the Bible thumpers. Another possibility: an obsessive guy trying hard to convince his Christian wife that anal sex – and porn and adultery and fist fucking – are kosher. Maybe it's the work of a solitary, tormented man dreaming of a perfect world, where he can be a good Christian and a guilt-free perv, if only the right woman comes along.

Or maybe – contrary to the usual publicity – sexinchrist.com represents one tributary of the Christian mainstream. In this spirit of inquiry, I google 'sex + Christ,' and in 0.19 seconds, I'm blessed with 23,300,000 entries. Curiouser and curiouser: sexinchrist.com is the top listing.

An advertisement on the right side of the page tempts me at once: "Christian Porn." The site is a pitch for his-and-her e-books called *Sexual Satisfaction for the Christian Husband* and *Sexual Satisfaction*

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for the *Christian Wife* by Robert Irwin and Susan Irwin. Seems they were married for thirteen years, happily except for the awkwardness in the boudoir, before his intensive study – “bookshelves . . . lined with books, manuals and medical journals” – led to a sexual awakening for both of them. The ‘his’ page tells readers that by reading his book, they can learn to experience “pleasure so overwhelming that your wife will want sex as often as you do! . . . hours-long lovemaking sessions . . . multiple (and simultaneous) orgasms in a single evening,” and that they will be “capable of maintaining a single erection, literally, indefinitely.” The wife’s corresponding page (“Christian Wives Click Here”) promises that “you too can experience sex that is an intense, frequent and spiritual event . . . including orgasms (for both of you) that are so overwhelming that you will be amazed that such pleasure exists in this world. And, best of all . . . you will not have to embarrass yourself (as we did many times) by having to look for this information in a bookstore. You won’t have to hide any books from anyone, trying to avoid explaining your interest in such matters.” In the book, readers can also learn “how to help your husband to become your dream lover . . . how to become a ‘sexual explorer,’ while always pleasing God.”

At the end of Robert’s and Susan’s letters is a spiritual note: “P.S. You did not find this site by chance. With God, there are no ‘coincidences.’ You were meant to find this site because God cares about you, your marriage . . . and your sexual satisfaction!” Both books together, \$49.00.

God also seems to care about my Christian sex education, and only a moment later I’m inspired to google the phrase ‘Christian pornography.’ Ten thousand six hundred listings pop up

in 0.28 seconds. What gets top billing? Sexinchrist.com. At the bottom of the page is evidence of the true Christian way: www.uncontrolledthoughts.com, which promises to help us get rid of the desire for pornography and the nasty habit of masturbation. Unlike sexinchrist.com, this site includes an address (in Midway, Utah), a phone number, and a God-fearing rallying point: “Never masturbate again!!! Believe it or not, you can do without it.”

But on the World Wide Web, it’s nearly impossible to do without pornography for long. It was porn, after all, which gave the World Wide Web its most profitable product early on; it was porn that was, almost a decade ago, a \$10 to \$14 billion-a-year business, according to a 1998 study.¹ At the top of page two on my Christian porn search, I find “Pornography Blogs: Many Great Pornography Blogs to Read,” which includes “173 blog articles about Christian pornography.” The home page leads to a flashing billboard:

The world of pornography blogged ‘til it’s
raw
CLICK HERE TO SEE MY 22
FAVORITE NUDE CELEBRITIES!
famous celebrities you may have never
seen naked!

When I open this page, among the celebrities I may have never seen naked is:

JENNA BUSH
The President’s Daughter
missing bikini bottoms!
click here to join us inside to watch all of
the celebrity videos
See her and Thousands
More For Just a Buck!

1 Frank Rich, “Naked Capitalists,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2001.

On the one hand, I'm relieved that all of my searching has finally – finally! – led me to something more risqué than the Turbo Stroker: some actual porn, at least I assume that's what I'd see if I were willing to enter my credit card number into the system. But who knows what list of perverts or criminals I might end up on? Still, at 2 a.m., having nearly encountered the First Child in a compromising position, I'm emboldened to throw caution to the wind: then and there I decide to google the real thing, 'pornography.' I get 17,000,000 hits. And then 'porn' – 117,500,000. Both first pages turn up what we might expect – except for “#1 Christian Porn Site” at www.xxxchurch.com. These repentant sinners have turned thoughts.com into a spiffy cottage industry with a sharp-looking website. The most heavily flogged item is a tee shirt (\$15.00), whose message, “Christians Don't Masturbate,” is broadcast in bright red letters on black cloth and, best of all, set on a gray imprint of a large hand. The problems with masturbation are that “it is a selfish act that pleases no one but yourself” (clearly the writers have put it to limited use) and that 76 percent of masturbators are aided in sin by pornography. It's unclear whether porn is bad because it leads to masturbation, or masturbation is bad because it leads to porn.

Yet the graphically engaging site includes more than just tee shirts and bad advice. There is a section, “Just For Pastors,” with a slew of statistics about how susceptible pastors are to porn, and a slick video called “Pastors and Porn,” starring lifechurch.tv pastor Craig Groeschel. He's a surprisingly handsome, hunky guy – considering the depths of his sexual hang-ups – who tells us that images of pornography he viewed as a child and young man have

remained “burned on the hard drive” of his mind. He admits that every site on his computer is monitored by “someone else,” lest it lead him to the naughty places (117,000,000 sites – a lot of temptation by any reckoning). He won't travel anywhere alone. “I've had to put in necessary safeguards to remain pure,” he confides. Is it just masturbation he fears in that lonely hotel room – or is it some of the other big naughties that get so many squeaky-clean preachers into so much trouble? (Ask observant friend S. to view video and psych out Craig's interests.)

In a nearly 3 a.m. epiphany, it dawns on me that sexinchrist.com might well be one man's cheeky answer to Craig's purity campaign. Who knows? It might even be the work of Craig Groeschel. *This* is why he needs a chaperone. This blasphemous website is why he can't be trusted alone in a Comfort Inn. No telling what other passages he might find in a Gideon Bible, what other sins could be washed away with the right chapters and verses. Wonder who travels with him so he doesn't have to travel alone?

When I return to the Google 'porn' listings, the right-hand column of advertisements includes a surprise. The top ad – “Help the Children” – is an organization promoting children's rights in India. The other ads are more predictable, but they have a plucky variety I hadn't expected: “Get Laid,” “Sexy Russian Brides,” “See Photos of Hot Women,” “Mobile Sex.”

Before I'm tempted to revert to my true Internet addiction, left-wing political websites of the www.antiwar.com variety, I do one final Google search for plain old ordinary 'sex,' and find a listing so quaint it makes me smile: “Treehugger: TreeHuggerTV. In the same week that THTV released this How To

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Buy A Green Sex Toy video, Greenpeace issued a warning about the toxicity of sex toys”

Yet another sweet one turns up, like a daffodil blooming in April: “CNN.com – Mouthy parrot ‘reveals sex secret.’ A computer programmer found out his girlfriend was having an affair when his pet parrot kept repeating her lover’s name, British media reported Tuesday.”

Touching. An antitechnology story: no pastor-to-pastor Quick Time videos, no photos of Jenna uncloaked, no battery-operated vaginas, no porn videos you can watch on your new Treo. A parrot who chirps the Other Man’s name. Hooray for unbridled, unchaperoned Mother Nature, even when she gets you into trouble.

Who knows how the mind works in a state of Google stimulation? The condition may soon require its own word. Perhaps: Googlelation? Such disorders could become a new entry in the DSM compendium. Christian pastors are afraid of their own penises and everyone else’s, and perhaps I ought to be afraid of what I’m doing: studying the fearful, the obsessive, and the flat-out pornographers. A friend jokes: “If there are 800,000,000 websites for ‘sex,’ there are a total of 900,000,000 websites.” Actually, ‘money’ and ‘war’ both beat ‘sex’ by a mile. Tonight ‘war’ kicks out 1.02 billion websites; ‘money’ 1.3 billion. ‘Sex’ is chump change. Perhaps ‘sex’ will be no more than a comma in the history books, as President Bush recently said of the war in Iraq. Even if the porn industry has doubled or tripled since the 1998 study, it’s nothing compared to the hundreds of billions – or is it trillions? – that ‘war’ generates.

Some seven years ago, as the Internet took off and my mother’s brain started to shut down, she said something quite

endearing: “Before the evening gets away from us, could you tell me what ‘dot-com’ means?” It’s part of an address on the Internet, I explained, knowing it wouldn’t make much sense to her. I showed her what it was all about once or twice on my laptop, but the information went no farther than her short-term memory bank. Reading this piece, she would have to ask: What does ‘Google’ mean? What does ‘www’ mean? What does it mean ‘to kick out 1.2 billion websites’?

But of course she would know what ‘sex’ means. Everyone knows what sex is. Or we used to, when it was a less complicated proposition. Well, it was never uncomplicated, except for the mechanics. Now the mechanical dimension offers a few more choices than were previously available, including this one: me sitting in my living room staring at a screen in my lap, with X million shots of genitals and/or sex videos available to me with no more than a few typing strokes on the keyboard, all of this possible while the man I share a bed with sleeps in the other room. I’m not sure my mother would know what this means. She would assume that there is something amiss. But is there?

George Bataille didn’t have this technology or this scenario in mind when he wrote, in 1957: “The human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him. The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm; she does not know that his unacknowledgable passions and her own are really one.” Alone in the living room, I realize I fall somewhere on the continuum between the hyperactive Internet pornographers and the terrified Reverend Craig Groeschel, whose erotic urges frighten him into a state of endless torment. I’d be delighted to have a few more erotic

urges, but far fewer than 17,000,000. The libidos of millions of women have changed since the hormone-replacement news in 2002. And in roughly the same time period, sex and sexuality have undergone alteration, too. Frank Rich, the Sex Priest of *The New York Times*, or at least the man who's followed changes in the adult-entertainment business over the years with a vengeance, describes the phenomenon:

The cliché has it that when the formerly contraband becomes accepted, it loses its cachet. With sex, that's not really an option. What does seem to be happening is a digitalization of sex – and not only in the sense that porn is distributed digitally, whether by Internet or DVD or television or spam. In a more profound sense, the erotic is being figuratively and literally dismembered as it is broken down into its various discrete bytes, like albums that are atomized into their individual songs to be downloaded from the Web.²

“Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” exists independently of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. An image of a shiny erect penis thrusts in the center of my computer screen, unconnected not only to a body and a human being but even from the pretense of narrative that used to accompany porn. This miniature iteration of porn is a far cry from more narrative-driven examples of pornography that were current circa 1967, when Susan Sontag published “The Pornographic Imagination.” She defended the literary value of *Story of O* and did not defend the literary value of the ribald novel *Candy*, but from this distance, they both have the heft of *Middlemarch* when lined up against the 6,790,000 offerings that appear when you google

‘hot porn.’ Is the reason I'm not aroused – the reason I'm so turned off – because this form of stimulation is so ‘digitalized,’ so far from storytelling, or because I'm short on estrogen? Someone – millions of someones – are having a good time. Or so the unfathomable abundance leads you to believe. The truth might well be that only a few million hardcore porn lovers – or fewer than that – are dipping regularly into the well. In fact, there are probably more people trying to sell porn on the Internet than there are buyers of it.

Oh, for the good old days. Back when I was the Sex Priestess of the Ivy League, sex was still, as far as I can remember, an activity people wanted to do with other people, not with their computers. Google was the embryonic ambition of two Stanford graduate students. And the word ‘war’ was employed more often on our shores as a metaphor than as a series of real-life conflagrations that will embroil the U.S. military for the foreseeable future. Tonight there are 324,000 entries on Google that contain the phrase ‘war without end,’ and that, too, is an expression I'm sure my mother would have difficulty grasping. The clock on my computer tells me it's 3:00 a.m. on the nose, and I am suddenly a little bit lonely and more than a little sad. But before I turn out the lights and slip into the other room, into my side of the bed, I'm inspired to do one last search for the night. Astonishingly, in a matter of 0.34 seconds, some of my melancholy lifts. ‘Women + low libido + remedies’ turns up 92,400 possibilities. Who knew? There must be something in all those gigabytes that will do the trick. (Leave note for J. to see when he wakes up in the morning: *Guess what? The drought is over.*)

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2 Frank Rich, “Finally, Porn Does Time,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2003.