

Advice for Women Writers



by Armando Simón

I had been thinking of writing this for the longest of time,

but I always stopped because a lot of women would take umbrage though I have for decades—actually, since a child—enjoyed the company of women while abhorring that of men. Some persons would react to my criticism in the usual knee-jerk fashion of accusatory dismissal of “sexist.” Anyway, the reason for finally putting my thoughts down on “paper” is a very recent article on Jean [Rhys](#) where the author states that her difficulty in getting published was, of course, due to sexism (what else could it be, right?). Apparently, all male authors are instantly published.

But I have come to a point in life that I don't feel like holding back in reacting to offenses, which attitude irritate my children who feel that politeness should trump lashing out at idiocies, incompetence, and insults.

So here it is: most novels by women are bo-ring.

Chick flicks are bo-ring.

Jesus Almighty, they are BO-RING!

Have you ever seen the expression of those poor, cobwebbed, men sitting down near fitting rooms waiting for their wives inside to try on dresses, then go back out to find other dresses to try one? OK.

I am a bibliophile. I am writing this in a room whose four walls are covered with books from floor to ceiling, and overflowing books are inside bins in my garage. I don't give a damn about the writers' nationality, race, religion, sex, personality, hobbies, or criminal history, so my preference is not guided by those, so forget about my being sexist. I only care if the writing is good.

Now, don't misunderstand me. Many male authors are bad. In fact, mediocre. Then, there are well established male writers who can write well but whose writing is boring; I am thinking of works like *A Separate Peace*, *Remembrance of Things Past* and

The Catcher in the Rye, books that only pretentious intellectuals pretend to like in order to appear profound. And then there are those male writers who can write, but really shouldn't; I place Stephen King squarely in this category.

But leaving those men aside, let's focus on fiction and, although my point applies doubly so to the theater, I will focus on novels.

In viewing my authors from Spain, there is Gironella, Unamuno, Cervantes, Pio Baroja, Azorín, Ibañez, Pérez Galdós, Cela, Valera, Pérez-Reverte, and many others. And one woman, Matute.

In the German section, I see Goethe, Mann, Hoffmann, Kafka, Brandt, Grimmshausen, Hölderlin, Hesse, von Westphalen, Remarque, Schmidt, Böll, Jünger, etc. and no women.

In my collection of French authors, there is Camus, Malraux, Hugo, de Maupassant, Rabelais, Voltaire, Zola, Aragon, Dumas, Dumas, Balzac, Boule, Breton, Verne, France, de Sade, Houellebecq, de Laclos, Simon and others. There is one Pauline Réage.

Russian authors are Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Bulgakov, Solshenitzin, Gouzenko, Pasternak, Lermontov, Nabokov, Turgenev, Rybakov, Voinovich, Glukhovsky, Atbashan, Chekov, Pushkin, Goncharov, etc. And no women. Unless you count Ayn Rand, who wrote in America.

Going over to the Czech section, we have Čapek, Hašek, Weil, Kundera, Škvorecký, Poláček, Kohout, Klíma, Gruša, and an authoress, Iva Pekárková.

Japanese section consists of Tanizaki, Akutagawa, Kawabata, Oe, Mishima, Natsume, Saikaku, Abe, Ibuse, Takeyama, Shusako Endo, Miyamori Casataro. And Lady Murasaki.

My collection of Polish, Indian, Italian and Arabic fiction is too limited (only a dozen in each) to make generalities.

For some reason, when I look at the Anglo-American literature, there appears to be a greater proportion of good women authors. I think I can detect a common denominator in them. Even so, their number are dwarfed by male authors.

I look at my collection of British fiction. I see Dickens, Doyle, Kipling, Dahl, Orwell, Huxley, Maugham, Golding, Wells, Greene, Wodehouse, Waugh, Thackeray, Le Carré, Stevenson, Conrad, Tolkien, Forester, Wilde, Defoe, Fielding, Sterne, Hardy, Trollope, Maugham, Fowles, Forsyth, Foster, Adams. The authoress I have in mind are du Maurier, Austen, Shelley, Brontë, and Christie.

I look at my collection of American fiction. I see Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, Hemingway, Poe, Cooper, Dos Passos, Thorne Smith, Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, Tom Wolfe. Steinbeck, Heller, Spillane, Hawthorne, Irving, Edmonds, Anderson, Warren, Clark, Capote, Cheever, Roth, Wilder, Saroyan, Crane, etc. The good female authors are Harper Lee, Margaret Mitchell, Joyce Carol Oates, Cather, Hurston, Jackson, Wharton, Caldwell, Sepetys, Flynn.

It is common knowledge that in all cultures all over the world, a lot of women's talk can exasperate men. Even women acknowledge it (in fact, this is a source of present-day comedians' routine). Given free rein, a woman's speech can start on a topic and meander for the longest time before coming to a conclusion, *if* it comes to a conclusion. It is best taken in small doses. In fact, one of the highest, rare, compliments given about a woman, not directly to her, is that she thinks like a man. My wife is such a rare creature. With her insatiable thirst for knowledge, she will talk about—mind you, initiate conversation—on science, history, politics, literature, etc.

But what is relevant to the matter at hand is that the favorite topic of conversation for women is relationships, particularly those that are convoluted. And we see this in

most books written by women.

In the plots of so many unimportant books written by women *nothing happens*.

Just like romantic [songs](#).

In books by excellent female authors—just as with men—there is action. Yes, there are important character development and relationships in their works, as is the case in men's, but they accompany action, they are not an end in themselves. Think of *Frankenstein*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Gone Girl*, *Jamaica Inn*, *Salt to the Sea*, *Zombie*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Gone with the Wind*. The works of these women have remained popular for many decades and will remain popular for many more decades, if not centuries. Compare that fact to the fact that the popularity of most novels by all authors last a year or two before they are deservedly forgotten.

To be sure, there are exceptions to this rule. Some male authors, like Cheever, and some female authors, like Wharton and Brontë, have focused on relationships and their works are good, partly because of their use of language (Jane Austen's felicitous language is a pleasure to read) and partly is because of their unique perspective.

At this point I will state the obvious, to wit, all criticism (taste) is subjective. One can read a book and think it wonderful while another person will think it's bad. One can look at a painting or a film and dislike it while someone else will think it a masterpiece. When I was a teenager, my class went to see a film starring Christopher Plummer and Orson Welles, *Oedipus Rex*, which is now impossible to find. I thought it terrible. When we returned to school, I overheard another student gushing how good it was and how much he had enjoyed it. That made me reevaluate my standards (which at that time were very low though typical for a teenager).

Frankly, I would like to see more good writers who are good.

Male or female. I just enjoy reading a good book.

And if you think that's sexist, up yours!

Armando Simón is a trilingual native of Cuba, a retired psychologist, and author of *The [Book](#) of Many Books*, *Orlando [Stories](#)*, *The Only [Red](#) Star I Liked Was a Starfish*, and *Sex, [Science](#) and Beethoven: What Else Could Anyone Need?*