



The gender benders

Last week, the poet Hugo Williams won an award for a collection that included a description of a female orgasm. Lucretia Stewart asks if a man can really write how a woman feels and vice versa

Monday January 24, 2000

Guardian

Why can't a woman be more like a man?" was, if my memory serves me well, Professor Higgins' bewildered complaint in *My Fair Lady*, as Eliza Doolittle led him a merry dance. How times have changed. Now men want to be more like women, sometimes even to be women. Failing that, the question today seems to be: "Can a man think, feel and therefore write like (or possibly as) a woman?"

Last week, the poet Hugo Williams won the 1999 T.S. Eliot Award for his new collection, *Billy's Rain*. The book contains a poem called *Rhetorical Questions* in which the narrator, the "I" who dominates most of the poems, asks his lover (rhetorically) how she thinks he feels when she sets off "alone/down the hall of collapsing columns", a metaphor for orgasm. One (male) critic said Williams had written "as fine a description of female orgasm as a man can". Which begs the question: can a man really know how a woman feels and vice versa? And is it possible for a male writer to understand, really understand, what it's like to be a woman and vice versa?

The subject of last week's *In Our Times*, the Radio 4 discussion programme presented by Melvyn Bragg, was masculinity in literature. In it, Martin Amis and Cora Kaplan, an American feminist critic who is also Professor of English at Southampton University, discussed the way men had been portrayed in fiction in the 20th century and how that portrayal had changed as a result of feminism.

Amis' novel *Night Train*, published in 1997, was written in the voice of an American policewoman, Detective Mike Hoolihan. Note the masculinity of the name and note also the opening sentence of the book: "I am a police." It continues: "That may sound like an unusual statement - or an unusual construction. But it's a parlance we have. Among ourselves, we would never say I am a policeman or I am a policewoman or I am a police officer. We would just say I am a police." This, in turn, leads one to wonder to what degree political correctness has influenced matters - and to what extent Amis, who claimed a new, softer attitude towards women, was sending up political correctness.

Often the reason writers want to experiment with not just another voice (from another social or economic group or nationality, as Kazuo Ishiguro did in *The Remains Of The Day*) but with another gender is to see whether they can bring it off. It is also to see whether it liberates them, frees them up to express feelings, thoughts and opinions that might sit oddly in their "normal" voice.

Sometimes writers like to tease the reader by refusing to reveal the sex of the narrator, as in Rose Tremain's *The Towers Of Trebizond*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* or Jeanette Winterson's *Written On The Body*. Winterson said of the mystery she had created: "It is not important, it doesn't matter to me which it is - my own feeling is that it is both throughout the book and that it changes, that it is sometimes female, sometimes male, and that is perfectly all right."

If the narrator is not apparently driven by issues of masculinity or femininity (ie sex), is he, she or it not free to concentrate on higher things? This is all very well in theory. In practice, when you have a gender-free narrator, the reader keeps looking for clues and that can be distracting.

I am not suggesting that such political correctness should prevail in creative writing where only gay men are permitted to write gay novels, only lesbians lesbian novels, etc. This limits the imagination. If this perspective ruled, there would have been no science fiction, no crime stories, no *Book of Revelations*. If writers had been permitted to write just from their own experience, the canon of literature would consist only of a kind of dreary

social realism.

There is a difference, however, between, say, Tolstoy creating a wonderful fictional female character like Anna Karenina and a male writer trying to write as a woman. Like the outcome of a sex-change operation, it is rarely totally convincing.

When the French sado-masochistic novel *The Story Of O* was first published, it was attributed to Pauline Réage. For a long time, however, it was believed to have been written by a man (because, I imagine, it was thought to have been too sexy for a woman). Years after its publication, and after her death, it was revealed to have been the work of Dominique Aury. She had written the book in an attempt (successful, it turned out) to re-ignite the interest of her lover, Jean Paulhan.

Victorian pornographic novels were often written as if by a young girl, presumably in order to reassure the (male) reader that the girls were ready and willing. The girls always gave their repeated spankings and gamuchings (a Victorian term for cunnilingus) a terrific write-up.

A good writer almost always has the potential to be interesting, whatever voice he or she chooses to adopt. (Incidentally, Martin Amis described a discussion with Will Self on the use of pronouns: instead of always using the pronoun "he", Amis said he opted for "they"; Self said he made a point of often using "she", a gesture of what he described as "war reparations". Adam Phillips apparently does the same.) Some experiences are universal: death, loss, exile, bereavement, fatigue, itching, hunger, headaches. Headaches may (famously) have feminine causes, but a headache does not differentiate between men and women.

The reader should not be fooled, however, into believing that a man can know what the pain of childbirth (or indeed menstrual cramps) feels like just because he has read or heard or thought about it. By the same token, a man can't know, or describe, what a female orgasm feels like. Nor can a woman know what a male orgasm feels like, or how mind-numbingly boring it is to shave every day. Orgasms are a bit like that remark about the piece of string (as in "how long is"). Each is different.

Tiresias, a Theban seer who lived for seven generations, had the unusual experience of living first as a man, then as a woman, then again as a man. When Zeus and Hera were arguing about whether a man or a woman enjoyed sex more, Tiresias was called in to arbitrate. His opinion, having seen it from both sides, was that sex was nine times as pleasurable for a woman.

Now, his would have been a view worth having.

• Lucretia Stewart's novel *Making Love: A Romance* is published by Chatto & Windus.

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