

Sex so badly done you'll squirm and squeal with laughter

Thomas W Hodgkinson examines what it takes to win the literary prize, to be announced this week, that no one wants

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Anaïs Nin's diaries were largely devoted to cataloguing her famous literary lovers (Everett Collection/REX)

In two days' time the glitterati, witterati and possibly even a few members of the illiterati (although I've nothing against people who write for the diary pages) will assemble in the hushed, velveteen surroundings of the In & Out Club in St James's Square, central London, for an evening of gentle ribaldry.

It is now 23 years since Auberon Waugh instituted the Literary Review bad sex in fiction award and 14 years since the great man died. Time, in other words, to remind ourselves of the point and purpose of this jamboree.

The award — a plaster foot on a plinth — is presented to the author of the most ridiculous or redundant description of sex in a novel published over the past year, who is invited to place it in his or her mouth. But its aim, despite what was recently claimed in one mirthless broadsheet, is not mean-spirited mockery of struggling authors. Quite the opposite, in fact.



TTO Backlot account

I've spent the past 18 months writing a sceptical guide to some of the greatest writers in history and I can confidently reveal that the greater the writer, the higher is the likelihood that their sex scenes will be a load of complete rubbish.

DH Lawrence started the rot. Not content with being a brilliant social commentator and lyric poet, the ginger-bearded northerner set himself up as a kind of guru in sexual matters. He then wrote passages in the otherwise excellent novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that are so portentous and self-important that they are impossible to read with a straight face. I worked for the *Literary Review* for a couple of years and one of my duties was to look for passages of bad sex. Broadly speaking, I noticed — as I lurked in a corner of Waterstones, jack-knifed over the latest bestseller — that mistakes when writing about sex fell into three categories: gratuitous use of four-letter words; metaphors that aimed to be arresting but ended up absurd (steer clear of molluscs, oil rigs and pigs snuffling for truffles); and portentousness. Lawrence was guilty of all of the above, especially the last.

There's a moment in *Lady Chatterley* where he says that while having sex his heroine became aware of "a primordial tenderness, such as made the world in the beginning". Now I'm a sucker for impassioned prose, but even I can't help feeling that on this occasion the author got a little carried away.



AA Gill turned up in person to accept his award (Francesco Guidicini)

If Lawrence, an Englishman, was the first serious novelist to include graphic descriptions of sex in his serious novels, the Americans have subsequently been by far the worst offenders.

There was Henry Miller, for example, whose primary aim when writing *Tropic of Cancer* appears to have been to tell the reader how well endowed he was. There was Anaïs Nin, who was born in France but spent most of her life in the United States. Her diaries were mainly devoted to divulging how many great writers she had slept with (her list included Lawrence Durrell, John Steinbeck and Miller).

And let's not forget Norman Mailer, who won the 2007 bad sex award posthumously for his novel *The Castle in the Forest*, which included a passage of such awfulness that I can't resist quoting part of it: "So Klara turned head to foot, and put her most unmentionable part down on his hard-breathing nose and mouth, and took his old battering ram into her lips." A simple sentence that justifies more eloquently than I ever could the existence of the Literary Review award.

John Updike, who was honoured the following year with a special award for "lifetime achievement", did not turn up to receive it.

This is why the bad sex award's *raison d'être* is sometimes misidentified. The really big fish take themselves so seriously that they shun the event and so, for the sake of spectacle, the prize is given to someone less well known but with more of a sense of humour.

One exception, a big fish who took the bait, was AA Gill, who had spent so much of his time mocking others in print that he couldn't very well refuse to accept the prize in 1999 for his novel *Starcrossed*. He may not be much good at writing erotic prose, but for my money Gill is the finest prose stylist working in journalism. He can take a little flak.



Morrissey is the favourite from this year's shortlist (Jim Dyson)

Which brings us to Morrissey, the bookies' favourite for this year's prize. This is a man I revere as a songwriter (we were all teenagers once). But his awfulness as a novelist is so dire, so viscerally distressing, that one doesn't know what to do with oneself.

There is a passage in his book *The List of the Lost* that seems to have been written with the sole intention of winning the bad sex award. To give just one example, I was amazed by his decision to describe the erect penis of his hero as a "bulbous salutation".

I've no doubt Morrissey will refuse to put in an appearance on Tuesday. This saddens me, as I should have loved to offer him a bulbous salutation.

But I hope that one day some truly great novelist will have the sense of humour to smile and say: it's a fair cop. And I hope that the prize will long continue. It's still funny and still needed after all these years.

How to Sound Cultured: Master the 250 Names that Intellectuals Love to Drop, by Thomas W Hodgkinson and Hubert van den Bergh, is available from Icon Books, priced £12.99