

WHAT MAKES A HOT BOOK HOT

by *Lori Foster*

Recently, I've discovered a lot of misconceptions on what makes a book sizzle. With Harlequin Temptation starting their newest promotion, Temptation: BLAZE, the hotter Temptations, we have to assume that a great number of readers want steamy books, and Harlequin is filling a demand. My next book will be the first in the Blaze promotion, so I've received a lot of queries on what makes my stories different from other Temptations.

Many people seem to assume the number of love scenes or the "dirty" language involved makes a book hot. Nothing could be further from the truth. Dialogue standing on its own is meaningless. But dialogue that's part of well drawn characterization tells so much. It gives insight into the person, depicts feelings and insecurities and often, even background. So it isn't the language, but who's using the language -- and in what situation -- that is sensual.

And no matter how many love scenes you have between strangers, you won't find a high level of steamy sensuality. It could be sexual, yes, but there wouldn't be an emotional commitment, a building of acute tension, if you didn't know what the two involved characters had to lose, what their conflicts and needs were.

So if there is only one truly discernible element that makes a book more sensual than another, it would have to be the characters. But we make the characters, right? Sure we do. Which means we must chose to be very sensual. If we decide to depict a character who is by nature a sensualist, and we use good characterization, then we've created a "hot" book.

But rather than provide you with only my humble opinion, I decided to call on some of the experts, authors known for the level of sensuality in their books, and other new authors who are establishing themselves as sensual writers. I wanted to give different perspectives, to allow you to see the different angles of sensualities and how different authors go about building the sensual tension readers crave.

A personal favorite of mine, both as a wonderful person and a fabulous writer, Stella Cameron is well known for the sizzling sexual tension in her mainstream historicals and contemporaries. Her characters come alive as real people -- and that, Stella claims, is the key.

"What makes one writer's work more sensual than another's?" Stella asks. "Nothing that can be listed on a handout. From time to time we hear someone say, Don't take negative criticism of your work personally. It's what you've written that's being judged, not you. Garbage. Characters make our stories, and we make our characters. No, I don't believe they simply pop off and act alone -- with the aid of our nimble fingers -- and we have no control over them. Our characters come from us, from who we are as individuals. Bits and pieces of ourselves mixed with bits and pieces of a whole heap of people we've observed or known, come down on the paper in those characters.

"So the answer is that if our stories are more sensual than some others (and this has little or nothing to do with the success of a book) it's because, with the particular mix of characteristics we have personally, and use from experience with others, we are sensual on paper.

"Language (dialogue) has everything to do with voice, the writer's and the character's. Crude language is never sensual. It can certainly be sexual, but if I'm to address the way I use language, and this is the example I understand best, then my absolute rule is that each character has a unique voice, and that I don't waver from that voice. My tough guy ain't gonna say, Shucky darn fellas, I think I'm gonna have to pinch you if you won't be nice. For this medium, I won't write what he would say, but be assured that I'd have no compunction about putting him firmly in voice. The slick, misogynistic womanizer forcing an encounter with a woman doesn't say, You make me feel different. You make me feel I want to be all I can be -- for you. I want to make love to you in a thousand different ways and I'm not sure where I want to start. Kid, if I can't have you, I'm going to be in pain -- and I don't have to explain where.

"You might say, well, he's made some pretty direct comments. But he's a 1997 kind of guy and, for my book, he's hero material. But Mr. Misogynist is going to express his intentions and plans quite differently -- that's when the basic language may come in."

True to her word, Ms. Cameron's characters are all unique and alive and vital. Her dialogue is as real as it gets, and always suits not only the characters, but their time period and the situations they're in. Ultimately, her books are very sensual because her characters are very sensual -- and human.

I don't do historicals. I wish I could, but it's not a talent I possess. I write contemporary novels, and I live in a contemporary world. Language has changed, both formal and colloquial. What a man of today feels, and how he expresses those feelings, is what makes a book sensual. I don't use "dirty" language. Neither do my heroes. But when used in context to the situation, the speaker's frame of mind, and the time period, much of slang can be highly sensual. My heroes, especially in sexual situations, are not shy, reserved men. They're men who know what they want, and aren't afraid to ask for it -- or go after it.

But long before the heroine is aware of what the hero wants, the reader must know.

As Paula D'Etcheverry, who writes as Pamela Ingrahm puts it, "It's the emotional responses sparked in the hero and heroine that eventually translates into the physical. Just physical sex doesn't do it for me. I want mind sex before body sex."

It's up to the author to depict the characters' sexual tension, to maintain that tension by keeping the reader in the characters' thoughts, attuned to their feelings, and to let the reader know exactly how badly these people want and need each other. When the hero and heroine do come together, it should be a culmination -- each and every time -- not just a stepping-stone scene. Gratuitous sex is never sensual.

We, as writers, must also keep in mind that the hero is a hero, and therefore must be sensitive to the heroine's needs and desires. I'm currently working on a book where the heroine suffered a rape when she was much younger. Yes, the hero wants her, very much in fact, but he's forcing himself to go at her pace, to judge her reactions and anticipate her needs. He wants her enough that he's willing to hand over all sexual control, to literally put himself at her mercy, something he's never done before. But it reassures her, and works perfectly to build incredible sexual tension. This particular hero is very sensitive, especially to women's issues. It's part of his characterization, therefore a necessary part of the plot.

Deborah Camp emphasizes this idea. She says the sensuality is left up to her heroes. "He must know instinctively what my heroine needs and wants from him. If she is shy, he must know what to do to make her experience more freeing for her. If she needs to laugh, he provides the jibes and jests. If she doesn't need to talk, but only be shown how to love him, then he keeps quiet and lets his hands and mouth and other body parts do the talking. He also knows what to say to her before and after to put her at ease and make her understand that she's his one and only, that this union is as important and as cherished for him as it is for her."

Now, in an actual story, the hero may be showing the heroine all this, without even knowing it himself. By his actions, and through well placed introspection, we allow the reader to see the hero's emotions, until he can finally figure things out for himself. Knowing a hero is falling in love before he even knows it adds to the sexual tension. It's another climax for the reader to work toward, another reason to keep turning the pages. Which brings me to another topic that's often misunderstood. The number or placement of sex scenes.

Where do you put that first important sex scene to make the book more sensual? No, there are no hard fast rules. Deb Stover summed it up nicely. "We often hear comments about what point in a novel the first love scene should occur. Everyone has an opinion about this. Too early ruins the sexual tension. Too late leaves the reader frustrated. Wrong! There is only one rule a writer must remember, and it applies to all good fiction: Be true to character.

"The placement and explicitness of love scenes must be completely dependent on character. Forced adherence to non-existent rules and guidelines will make the intimacy seem forced and unsatisfying. If it's right for the characters to have hot sex early in the book and it's related to their conflict throughout, then go for it. If it works, it works. By the same token, some wonderful books don't have a love scene until near the end, or not at all. Not all books or characters are destined for sizzle and heavy breathing. That's okay, too!"

I also like to add that many very sensual books don't have a love scene until midway through the book, or even toward the end. The loves scenes themselves often aren't as important as building to the scene. A lot of really sexy, heated activity can go on -- and should go on -- before the actual intercourse. Building the need and desire between the hero and heroine is vital, so that the sensuality is then a part of them.

Lee Smith wrote, "I read somewhere that the hands-down most sensual scene in movies was Brett carrying Scarlet up those stairs. And then it was morning. It certainly was hot anyway."

The reason that scene was hot? Characterization. Brett and Scarlet behaved exactly how we hoped and expected they would. And without "seeing" what occurred, we knew, because we knew the characters. There had been a carefully developed "build-up" to the culmination. So the scene was satisfying, even without graphic inclusion.

So to sum up, you don't need a given number of sex scenes, or a certain type of language, to make a book steamy. There is no formula or description to a racier novel. All you need are sensual characters who remain in characters. Keep them true, and they'll do all the work for you.