

The Secrets of Good Sex

SHAHIDHA BARI: Hello and welcome to the Big Book Weekend and this event. Thank you for joining in the fun. This one is really going to be fun. In fact, I'm a bit worried how to reign things in! I'm Shahidha Bari, a BBC presenter, and I'm your host for this event which will last around 45 minutes. We are going to be talking about sex, so strap yourself in and get ready to take notes. We will be talking about sex, love and intimacy in books. This is not a discussion for the kids. It might be handy to be aware of that. To be honest, it is probably not a discussion for some grown-ups too but do stay with us because it might be an education. Sex scenes are notoriously tricky to write, but how do you write about the intricacies of physical and emotional relationships without lapsing into cliché or embarrassment? We've got three brilliant authors here to show us the ropes. They're Bolu Babalola, Naoise Dolan, and Kate Davies. Kate you are the writer of *In At The Deep End* which is a bold and funny and unabashed debut novel about a woman called Julia discovering how to be a lesbian and what lesbian life entails, with all its joys and lows. It's been celebrated for its frankness and funniness. It was the winner of last year's Polari overall Book Prize. Hello.

KATE DAVIES: Hi! It's *In At The Deep End*.

SHAHIDHA: *In At The Deep End*, oh I'm sorry did I not say that? *In At The Deep End*. And Naoise, you're the writer of *Exciting Times*, and it is an exciting time for you, since it is also your debut, and has just been long listed for the Women's Prize for Fiction this year. You tell the story of Ava, a 22-year-old woman who leaves Ireland to teach English as a foreign language in Hong Kong where she falls into a relationship with a wealthy banker called Julian and a woman called Edith. Hi there, Naoise.

NAOISE DOLAN: Hi, yeah really happy to be here.

SHAHIDHA: It's lovely to have you. And Bolu, you're the writer of *Love In Colour*, a short story collection that retells mythical tales from around the world vividly restaging them in a contemporary setting. You were shortlisted for the 4th Estate BAME Prize with your debut *Netflix and Chill* and you're also a self-proclaimed romcomoisser, so now we need to know what that is. What is a romcomoisser, Bolu?

BOLU BABALOLA: It's exactly what it is - an expert in romcom. I have anything that suits your taste. Whatever you are in the mood for I've probably got a suggestion for it!

SHAHIDHA: Do you have to go into training to be a romcomoisser? What do you have to do to be a romcomoisser? I know, Bolu, your line is quite tricky because I think you're talking to us live from Lagos. So, I think there might be a slight lag...I was just asking whether you have to undergo a rigorous training regime to become a romcomoisser? What do you have to do, what do you have to watch or read?

BOLU: Yeah, you do. It is years and years of watching 90's, 00's romcoms, watching misrepresentations of the media [inaudible]...wine and popcorn - not for the faint hearted!

SHAHIDHA: We've got you more or less, I think. I do apologise for the difficulty of the line if we keep cutting in and out. At least now there is an air of mystique about how one trains to be a romcomoisieur. Let me ask Naoise and Kate about this too. Are you all romcomoisieurs? I guess I mean by that question, do you have to be in love with love in order to write about it, or can you a bit more cynical? What do you think Kate?

KATE: I am a romcomoisieur as well, particularly if I have Nora Ephron, and the 90s rom-com's, *One Fine Day* is a great one. And I love the kind of, there are loads of great rom-coms on TV at the moment which have a bit of an edge, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, I love the kind of sideways look that takes upon love. That's how I approach it. I suppose love is part of life, and when I'm writing, I like to write about the realities of life, and the realities of love and relationships, so, I don't think you necessarily need to be in love with love, but it is part of hopefully most of our lives, and so it is important to write about it.

SHAHIDHA: Naoise, what do you think? In love with love or are you a little bit cynical?

NAOISE: I think I need to be a cynic about anything to write about it, because, for me, writing is such a heartless process where you're managing so many decisions, and, if I have too much emotional involvement or if I can't distance myself from it then I can't make those decisions properly, because I feel like I'm there in it. So, I think from my own work, it is always at a distance, but in my free time as a normal human being, yeah, I love romcoms. I don't have an encyclopaedic knowledge for a romcomoisieur as such but I'm a romcomoisieur aficionado, I suppose! I would not be your go-to person to tell you what to watch, but I would be there for anything that is recommended to me, that's for sure.

SHAHIDHA: That's okay because it sounds like Bolu is our expert. So, we might have to ask her more about that. I want to talk about the traditions of writing about sex. All of you to different degrees are very frank and candid about sex, sexuality, and sensuality. But who are the writers that you swipe right for, that get sex right, do you think? Kate, you go first.

KATE: Some of my favourites, Sarah Waters, is one of my absolute favourites. When I read *Tipping the Velvet* for the first time, I was like what is going on here? It's a big romp through Victorian London, and the main character has a lot of sex with a wide variety of people in a wide variety of ways. She writes sex scenes brilliantly. And they are often quite illicit sex scenes, and the tension builds up through her novel so by the time you get to them, you really want them to have sex which is always good. I think Candice Carty Williams writes really well about sex in *Queenie* particularly about bad sex or kind of abusive sex. The kind of sex that lots of people have where you don't really want to have it, but you are having it anyway. I really like honest sex scenes, and when I was at university, I loved Fanny Hill, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, which is a problematic novel, it's an eighteenth-century novel, written by a man. Apparently, he wrote it to get out of debt. He decided to write a pornographic novel to get out of debt, but it is basically pornography, but I couldn't believe I was allowed to study it and I read it about nine times. It's completely filthy.

SHAHIDHA: It is one of those books in the college library where every page, every corner is turned. What about you Naoise, who gets it right?

NAOISE: Yeah, I completely second Sarah Waters, and Emma Donoghue I think in a similar vein and I discovered in my teens that it is possible to have this intense literary writing about women in the past having sex. It just blew my mind. More recently, Paul Mendez, he's kind of like my book twin because when his came out, it was a debut at the same time, we did a podcast together, and we've been like following each other's process ever since.

SHAHIDHA: That's *Rainbow Milk* isn't it?

NAOISE: Yeah, yeah! He writes so well about sex in that. He has such a polyphonic style, but not in an unnecessary, over-elaborate way. He just does exactly what he needs to do the job, and Garth Greenwell. – oh my god he just writes divinely about everything! Like his novels are just this whole sensory experience and by cession the sex is amazing too!

SHAHIDHA: Yeah, that is a great recommendation too. I wish we could ask Bolu. I hope she is there. It might be that she's got a really hot date.

BOLU: I'm here!

SHAHIDHA: Yes! Who gets sex write for you, the writer that gets sex right?

BOLU: Recently, and it's really funny because I'm a romantic and it wasn't necessarily a romantic book, but Raven Leilani and *Luster* was so gorgeous in how she wrote about the vulnerability in sex, and ... how [sound cutting out] ...the internet without necessarily being romantic, and I think she writes about that gorgeously.

SHAHIDHA: We got a bit of it, but we heard you recommend Raven Leilani there, but I saw you nodding along too there Kate? Why was that?

KATE: I just agree. I think she writes brilliantly about sex.

SHAHIDHA: We have some great modern writers there as well as classic 18th centrists there as well. In the UK, we famously of course celebrate bad sex in fiction with a prize, so this is what I want to ask you: who gets it wrong, or, if you would rather not name and shame, how can a writer get it wrong? What is the thing that doesn't work when somebody writes sex scenes? Naoise, I wondered if you could have a go at that?

NAOISE: Yes, I suppose, I don't want to sound judgy about anyone else, but I know for myself, the aim is for it is to be integrated with how I write everything else. So, I think when I was trying to write as a teenager, not having had sex, I took an absurd approach to it which was completely out of line to the rest of the prose and I suddenly employed this florid style that just did not come naturally to me at all. And it just became very apparent that there was this one thing in this book that I have not done, as opposed to all the other things that I had! I think for me a sign of comfort with it, keeping it in line with all the other experiences and keeping it in line with the other stylistic choices that are there. It is bad to me if it jumps and is treated as something completely different in a novel that is meant to encapsulate one consciousness. So, at least one shared consciousness, I guess?

SHAHIDHA: That's a very diplomatic answer. I wonder if I can get Kate to name and shame somebody? No?

KATE: I'm not going to name and shame anybody in particular, but I did go to the Bad Sex Awards before I started writing this novel, and what really occurred to me was the people who had been shortlisted had written, there was a lot of very florid metaphors, a lot of metaphors that you should never have anywhere near a sex scene. So, there was one person who compared sex - a man entering a woman - to a lepidopterist pinning an insect to a board and another one was talking about burrowing like a rat through wet sand. I just think it's not sexy. So, I took from that, I don't put metaphors or similes anywhere near a sex scene. I'm very direct and just sort of say exactly what's happening. And I think that is a good way to go. And also, people who use too much euphemism, like in Fanny Hill, there is a lot of wonderful machines, and wombs, and things like that, which again I don't think that's the way to go.

SHAHIDHA: The overuse of metaphor maybe? I think we have Bolu back, but we are going to keep Bolu on audio so that we have a better line. Bolu, are you there?

BOLU: Yes, I am.

SHAHIDHA: Hello!

BOLU: Hi!

SHAHIDHA: I keep joking that you're on a hot date and want to skip out of this altogether! We are going to try to keep you here. We were just talking about bad sex. I was trying to persuade Kate and Naoise to name and shame someone, but you don't have to do that, you could just tell us how you can get it wrong, maybe?

BOLU: I mean I think Kate is absolutely right. When you use metaphors, you kind of take away the human connection of it all and how intimate it can be and by almost over glorifying sex. You detract from it, and you detract from its power. It is a very intimate thing, and by kind of decorating it too much, you take away from the connection that it can have, and even if it is not an emotional connection, just the physicality of it all, I think, it makes for weaker reading and it takes you out of it, and it kind of for me anyway makes me laugh at it, really. And often, when you're laughing at it, it is because they're taking it SO seriously and in a very self-aware way.

SHAHIDHA: I think we're getting really great tips about not over glorifying or not over embellishing. But I wonder at laughing at sex. Is there a place for laughing at sex?

BOLU: Yes, absolutely. You want to be laughing with them, and, you know, sex can be so embarrassing, and so vulnerable, and you're literally naked and sometimes emotionally naked, and the act can tell us so much about ourselves, and it can just be humiliating and ridiculous, but it should be a shared experience. You should be laughing with them, not kind of at them, especially when they're supposed to be taking themselves, the characters taking

themselves so seriously, that's when it is funny. But when it is characters - I really enjoy when characters have such a connection that they're laughing at the ridiculousness of what they're about to do. I love that, and I think that can be sexy as well, because it's part of so much about their connection.

SHAHIDHA: Yeah, that sounds to me a lot like your book actually. I can see some of the scenes that are precisely that. Kate, let me come to you, because I want to ask you more about *In At the Deep End*, and the character Julia, she's a kind of lesbian ingenue, she does not have a clue when she gets into the scene, which is itself quite funny. She has to go out and buy all the gear, the paraphernalia of being a lesbian, harnesses, and strap-ons, and latex gloves. It's a real education for those of us who aren't in the lesbian scene. I was quite wide-eyed and agog. But why was it important for you to tell us that?

KATE: Well, when I realised I was a lesbian, I realised I had no idea about lesbian sex, and I, in fact, borrowed, back in the day, so went to the library and borrowed a copy of *Diva*, instead of just going to buy it from a shop, don't know why I didn't. But anyway, I remembered flicking to the back to the sex pages, what are you supposed to do? And when I realised what I was supposed to do, I thought it was amazing, and I just wanted to kind of capture that and celebrate it and write about it. Sarah Waters writes about it, but I wanted to write about it in a contemporary novel and all the things you can do and how amazing it can be, really.

SHAHIDHA: You do get a sense of that wonder as well for Julia when she realises she is a lesbian, and she has her first encounter. You really convey that too, and it's quite beautiful and magnificent.

KATE: It's also my novel turns out to be about an abusive relationship, and I just wanted to kind of show the way that sex can play a part in abuse, and in people's attachment to each other. It can make it very hard to leave if it is amazing, and that is another reason why there so much of it in the book.

SHAHIDHA: Well, I was going to ask you about a part of that, seems to be one of the interesting things about the book is that you're also representing a lesbian community that isn't always good and kind and welcoming. And Julia's girlfriend, Sam, can I say it, is the villain of the piece, I get so angry at her in the book, but I wondered if it was a risk for you showing those flaws, showing that side to it?

KATE: Yeah, it was a bit. I think when I started writing it, I was a little bit more worried about it than I was towards the end. Now we've got, representation has got so much better, there's so much more of it, that we have room for all kinds of queer stories. Not everybody has to be a hero. It is also, you know, their relationship is kinky. It's not an anti-kink book in any way, and I hope nobody takes it like that, but that is a part of their relationship. And I think some people might see it like that because it isn't a lot of kink representation, but hopefully there will be more of it. But it's a really specific story about two characters. It's not a kind of metaphor for every lesbian there is.

SHAHIDHA: Yeah, that seems quite important to say too. Naoise, the sex scenes in *Exciting Times*, I would say they're not scenes, they don't feel staged. You tell those intimacies in a much more matter of fact way. Although certainly not without intimacy and certainly not without romance as there is a great deal of intimacy and romance there. There's tenderness. But also, it seems to be a kind of reserve, and I wonder if I'm right in saying that, and how you were thinking about that style of writing intimacy in sex?

NAOISE: Yeah, I think that is correct. I think it links with what I was saying before about not wanting to do something that is out of step with the general style. I think my prose is in general paired back about as far as I can go whilst still saying what I want to. And that's not to say that it's better or worse, it infuriates me when people write in reviews, like a spare prose style as if that's in and of itself a good thing, it is just a quality that one has or doesn't, and I just happen to have it, I suppose. I wanted it to be part of the interiority and for it not have a rupture between everything else in the novel I guess. But the interesting thing is I often get the feedback, especially of the gay sex scenes, that it is super explicit, which just highlights to me that we still have a way to go representation is a matter of fact thing of the basic mechanics of women having sex with women can still have that effect, but, I mean, like we're all saying, you have to write the novels if you want to write, even if the culture or context might mean it's received in weird ways sometimes.

SHAHIDHA: I wonder what you think about that Kate because you...

KATE: I think that's true, and I found that with my book that it was thought it was like erotica, and it is not erotica, it's a contemporary novel with quite a lot of sex in it, which is part of the story. I think I wonder if it had been sex between a man and a woman, it would have been viewed a different way - I'm not sure it would have done.

SHAHIDHA: Been overlooked, perhaps, yeah. Naoise, I want to come back to another aspect of your novel, which is that it moves slowly, the mechanics of the relationships, both of the relationships move slowly. They shift almost imperceptibly, and certainly the friendship between Edith and Ava it metamorphosises with great tenderness and slowness. And I wondered if you were trying to do something more real about the real time of romance rather than, you know, we're not always struck by a thunderbolt. It doesn't always happen overnight.

NAOISE: Yeah, I think so. Relationships are the entire plot of the novel. I didn't bother having anything outside, because I was thinking well this is what it important to me, and I will be writing stuff that is less important just for some conventional conception of what is an event, so I think when you then treat relationships as the whole event, inevitably, it slows things down a bit because the level of details of that necessitates to make it the whole book will draw out those details, I think. I think love at first sight in novels often comes when there is some external force that the plot is being balanced again, and so for pragmatic reasons aside from anything else to keep things moving at the requisite pace and get it all finished by the last page, you need to speed the love along, and that can sell it short I think so yes, I definitely wanted to take the time with this.

SHAHIDHA: Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it, because pace is something we might talk about in the mechanics of sex too, but it applies to the writing of sex as well, that's the way it seems to me. Bolu, in your collection we get these wonderful old and new myths from all sorts of cultures, and you restage them as it were. We get the *One Thousand and One Nights* recast with Sharia the king as an Iranian Professor of Politics and I thought this was delightful. Sharizard is his researcher, she's quite a feisty researcher but you still get the same status and equality and power struggles too, and the other example is of the Greek story of Psyche who falls in love with Eros but now you call her Si and she drinks non-fat soya lattes and works on a magazine called Olympus when Eros turns up. It's just, it's totally ingenious. But tell me why you did this, this restaging of old myths?

BOLU: For me, we are so used to seeing European fairy tales, and even though we don't automatically recognise them as fairy tales, the modern rom-com is based on stories like Cinderella or Snow White, they follow a trope. And these are ones that we are over exposed to and actually these tropes are of white women, like, including the patriarchy, it's white women, slim white woman. It's an archetype. And if we constantly see that, then what are we saying about who is deserving of romance, desire, and intimacy, and all of that stuff? So, for me, going around the world and exploring love stories within different cultures was about bringing these stories to the centre stage, and also showing the universality of sexuality and love and romance. Going deeper than that...layers are added. It is modernised, and it's kind of amended slightly, and that was kind of my version of doing that through these stories, modernizing them, remixing them, making them my own, yes, but paying homage to the roots, and in doing that, showing how love is everywhere.

SHAHIDHA: We - your line keeps cutting out, but it keeps making me think that the path of true love never did run smooth, so we have these obstacles preventing us talking but there will be a happy ending at the end. The thing I wanted to ask you about is the thing you started talking about, is the African myths, we get these amazing African gods – Osun and Erinle, I think - they were amazing, because they were gods but this time in your context, they're attending a selective academy for the gifted, and you make that relationship romantic and swooning. But I wondered how much licence did you feel you could take with these stories and myths?

BOLU: For me, it was about, because, again, these stories are ancient, and with all ancient stories, even with the European stories, they're mired in misogyny and patriarchy, and in the original story of Oshun it was a lot more violent, she convinces, Oba who is her love rival in the story but also the love rival in the original story to cut off her own ear and feed it to Shango and both his wives.

SHAHIDHA: The last thing I wanted to ask you, Bolu, you say that it is important to tell stories about consent, and love without suffering. I wondered if you could tell me about that, what you mean by that? Okay, I think we've lost Bolu for the moment. Hopefully, we will get her back to be able to talk about that. Let me ask you Naoise, instead about context. One of the interesting things you've observed in *Exciting Times*, you said it's set pre-Trump but post Hong Kong democracy protests and similarly Kate your lesbian characters are freely

gay often in a quite mainstream, modern gay culture. So, the question for me is how are our modern times shaping these stories and your sense of sex and sexuality? Naoise, do you want to have a go at that?

NAOISE: Yeah, so and with regard to the setting, I decided very early on, because it takes a long time to publish a novel that I was not going to try set it to be current in the year it came out. I mean I wasn't thinking about the year of publication at all, really, but to the extent I was, I thought I'm starting this in early 2017, so I will set it in 2016/17. So, those are precise the years, it's wedged between the last protests movement in Hong Kong and the current one and Trump. I think I ended up deleting a scene, he got elected but the scene was not necessary, although it says a lot about those characters, that it's not a seismic enough event to take up the whole book, I suppose. With regard to sex specifically, I don't know if that has a huge amount of impact, but it's really hard to say, because for me, it's such a holistic thing. I don't choose the time or place for one aspect of storytelling, it's more something that I decide very early, and then the whole things springs from it, so quite possibly there is a sensibility to have those characters related to each other, but I wouldn't be able to tell you so without like thinking about it just to answer that question.

SHAHIDHA: Yeah, Kate, what do you think?

KATE: Well, I started writing my novel - it takes me a long time to write novels - I started in 2011. And when I started writing it, I felt like it was too explicit to be published and it was also I felt too queer to be published. You know I was like this is never going to get published, it's too gay, it's too much, quite a bit of sex in it. But by the time it was finished, the pop culture had changed, and *Girls* had come out, and *Fleabag* had come out, and I felt like there was more and more stuff. And of course, now we've got *I May Destroy You* which is so brilliant about consent and different kinds of relationships. I feel like things have got a lot franker. Pop culture and literature in general has got a lot franker - especially looking at sex from a female point of view. So, I suppose that is what - I suppose my novel is part of that and probably all of our novels are part of that.

SHAHIDHA: I was just asking about how our contemporary contexts shapes the ways that we write about sex and sexuality, and you in particular have said that it is important to tell stories about consent and love without suffering. So, tell me what that means.

BOLU: Is that directed to me, Bolu, yeah?

SHAHIDHA: Yeah!

BOLU: Because I feel like so many, in a lot of the modern kind of romances, I feel like they've said, they've acted consensually like an adjunct to sexiness. It's just like this boring kind of admin that we have to get through before we get to the sexy bits. For me, consent is not that it should be sexy to be valid, but it's part of when I'm reading a story, and a man or a woman is asking what their partner enjoys, what they like and if they want to go ahead, for me, that is really hot because for me intimacy is about wanting to know your partner, especially in romance, wanting to know your partner and wanting to know what your

partner enjoys, and being part of that, and it's an interactive experience. And for me I think, in so many ways, saying consent isn't sexy, is like an antithesis. It is part of it. It's like by saying consent is sexy is almost saying it's like an adjunct, separate to sex, it's not, it's part of it, you know?

SHAHIDHA: I wonder if I could ask Naoise a little bit about this, because it's not so much about consent but between Edith and Ava, there is a growing understanding they're on the same page about their feelings for each other, and I wondered if you were thinking about that, how we understand that in a relationship?

NAOISE: I was definitely conscious that the experience of dating a man and a woman can be entirely different because of the social apparatus respectively surrounding those experiences. So, when the main character is with a man, there is a blueprint laid out for that, but even though those characters aren't emotionally available enough to follow fully will still colour how they're viewed externally and therefore, how they view each other and how they look together. But when she dates a woman, there is not that same external imposition, so they really have to make so many micro decisions for themselves how they're going to be together, both in terms of sex with self, and also just more broadly and how they carry out their relationship. I think what emerges then is something that is more opted into. That is not to doom heterosexuality, I'll let heterosexuals decide whether they want to do that, I suppose, but it is to say when you have to have fight for your understanding or something, educate yourself on it, and you don't have a set of procedures that are handed down, I think the result can be something that is more empowering and specific for those people.

SHAHIDHA: That is so interesting. Kate, I wondered what you think, that the dynamics of consent might be slightly different in that context?

KATE: I think that is true. I mean again this is the fault of the patriarchy. How sex, I suppose, talking about sex in kind of straight relationships, I suppose there is a lot of, you know, focus on the penis, and it kind of leads to a lack of imagination. I know that you were talking about relationships in general, but I think that is part of it is that there is a lack of imagination. It's about the man's pleasure, this is what we will do, and that is what sex is, and there are other things that are foreplay rather than sex themselves. I suppose that when there are two people of the same sex that, you get to be more creative and make new rules and it's true in relationships, you don't have to get married, and, if you do get married, you're reinventing what marriage is, which is exciting and fun.

SHAHIDHA: Yes. Talking of rules, can I mention something unmentionable, which is *Fifty Shades of Gray*. That was self-published ten years ago this year, and you don't have to tell me if you read, or love it, or don't, I remember people openly reading that book on trains, I remember even my friend Alice listening to it as an audio book as she walked her dog. Let's admit it, it's agony to read, and so many people read it and took pleasure in it. So, is it possible to say that is changed the culture of writing about sex? What do you think, Kate?

KATE: I don't know if it changed the culture of writing about sex, but it made it acceptable, it was acceptable to read that book in public and it made it acceptable to talk about sex, and kinky sex, with your friends, I suppose. As in people who might not otherwise have talked about it, it opened up conversations. So, I definitely think that is true. I suppose before we had *Jilly Cooper*, a lot of sex in *Jilly Cooper*, she was not the first groundbreaking book, but I do think it made, especially people in Britain more openly talking about the subject.

SHAHIDHA: Naoise? Any thoughts? Not a fan?

NAOISE: Well, I haven't read it, but I think often when something is portrayed and gains mainstream attention, it's less about the ins and outs of that portrayal than it is about the mainstream attention. So, I'm aware of criticisms within I suppose kinky communities on the kink in that book and whether it counts as kink, but I'm aware that because that book occasioned that discussion such that I someone outside those communities would hear about it and probably wouldn't have otherwise. So, I think things can become a cultural touchstone in that way and lead to discussions that can often be far removed from the thing itself. So yes, it changed the broader landscape of what I suppose in public discourse and the public mind.

SHAHIDHA: I think that might be right. I think there are sort of two counterpoints. *Fifty Shades* on the one hand which is a mass-market book, and something like *Fanny Hill*, that is regarded as literature very often. They used to talk about one-handed reading, books that were designed to arouse you. I wondered if there was a kind of difference here between that kind of stimulation and actually the kind of evocation of intimacy and the mechanics of relationships that your books are offering. Do you sense that difference, Naoise?

NAOISE: A difference between the intimacy in our books ...

SHAHIDHA: Yes, the base stimulation of a book like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Fanny Hill*, and the kind of evocation and intimacy that you and Kate and Bolu, that you engaged in? What do you think, Kate?

KATE: I would describe *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which I've read bits of but not the whole thing, it is erotica, and she wrote it as erotica, and *Fanny Hill* is erotica, and our books aren't. They just happen to have sex in them. That is the difference.

SHAHIDHA: Bolu, you've got an answer to this question?

BOLU: Because, yes, I did read *Fifty Shades of Grey* - I can't remember how old I was - but I remember reading it and not particularly feeling moved or shocked because I grew up reading Mills and Boon from my mother's bookshelf and for me, there was no romance in it. I just felt, yes, I wasn't a fan. And even I read BDSM books as well, and it just didn't really compare. I think it was shocking because, like Naoise said, it was a cultural touchstone and people thought they could be open with it, and because it was almost like somebody who had never read BDSM book wrote about BDSM, so it felt very extreme. But going back to what Kate mentioned something about foreplay and how that is never the focus of it, for

me, reading foreplay, or what is categorised as foreplay is so much sexier than reading like especially straight sex, like it is so much better, because the build-up, the anticipation, the enjoyment. It's about the pleasure, it is not about a destination, it's about enjoying the journey. I think *Fifty Shades of Grey* didn't really relay that much!

SHAHIDHA: Didn't press that button for you. Let me ask you I guess something technical about doing that kind of writing. How do you decide how explicit to be? How do you decide when something goes too far or not enough?

BOLU: I let my characters decide for me. Which is actually is really funny because in *Love In Colour*, with *Love In Colour* I go to schools and talk about *Love In Colour* so I really am like throwing a line, and sometimes my editor would be like, "you need to relax a bit", but for me, it was about creating an atmosphere of sensuality. So even if I'm not being overtly explicit, you feel the sexual tension, you feel that connection, even if there is just a kiss on the shoulder, that I made sure that that felt really hot, because it was a big build to their characters, and I wanted it to say something about the characters themselves. Like for one of my stories, Thea is an army Commander, and her lover, or her eventual lover, Maddy, is her second in command. When they finally kiss in their love scene, I made sure it was clear it was a sharing of power, and because she is always in control, she is allowing him to have some control over her pleasure, and that is really hot for her because in her daily life, she's always in control, she's always in command, and for her, it's a relaxing experience to be able to relinquish some of that, and in fact a very empowering experience. So, I think I let my characters decide for me and how their love is going to be, and what it is going to say about them, and their path to grow.

SHAHIDIHA: What about you, Kate?

KATE: Yeah, I agree. In *In At the Deep End*, there is a lot of sex, because that's how the relationship between the two main characters plays out. It's about the power dynamic of the two characters and how that plays out sexually. So, it was very important for me to show that, and to show it taking place in the sex scenes. I think again, also, I was quite like excited about lesbian sex, so I wrote quite deep sex scenes so yeah and again, I think I just kind of felt the rhythm of it as I was writing it, and my new book, there isn't as much sex because that's not what it's about. It's not about that dynamic. It is the context of what you're trying to convey with those scenes.

SHAHIDHA: I get the sense that it is fun writing about sex? Or is it cringy? Is it a challenge? Do you try not to think about your parents? What is it like writing about sex? Naoise, you have a go at that?

NAOISE: I think writing is just fundamentally a mortifying thing to do. Like you're always creating something that will appear dreadful to you, and if it doesn't appear dreadful, then you've gotten complacent, and then you're mortified about how complacent you've got.