The Venus Fix

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M. J. Rose’s The Venus Fix

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


Here we review a work of popular fiction, a murder mystery, as an index of the impact of the Internet. In this case it gives us yet another look at the topic of the Internet and "pornography," [1] discussed in several places in this issue of Interface.

M. J. Rose is more than qualified to discuss this issue. Her success as the best-selling author of nine works of fiction alone has depended to a large extent on the Internet. Her initial work, Lip Service, was self-published in 1998 after being turned down by hard copy publishers. [2] She packaged the manuscript as a downloadable e-book and it opened up a very successful career for her.

In addition to writing fiction, Rose has also worked in advertising and wrote with Angela Adair-Hoy How to Publish and Promote Online, and with Doug Clegg Buzz Your Book, both works instructing others on how best to use the Internet to sell books.

Not only does Rose have excellent credentials for discussing the Internet, but she might also be considered an expert in the issue of erotica. Most of her works have an overtly sexual theme. It has been said of Rose that she "... writes erotic better than just about anyone..."[3] However, at least The Venus Fix, the only one of her works I have read, is quite mild by contemporary standards. If I had to classify the book, it would probably be in the Romance genre rather than as erotica.

The novel proceeds in the first person voice of the protagonist, Dr. Morgan Snow, who is a sex therapist. She is drawn into a series of cases involving murders and attempted murders of women who make their
living by appearing on erotic Internet sites, live-action sexually themed video cams, or "sex cams".

_The Venus Fix_ is driven by an uncomfortable number of coincidences, though these are explained in such a fashion that no one of them seems overly objectionable. But the totality of them might tend to discomfit a reader concerned more with plot than with character development and dialogue. So far as the latter are concerned, the book unfolds in a lively and diverting fashion and by the end we do identify with the protagonist, though she seems to lead an awfully hectic life. We want to say to her not "Hey, get a life!" but rather "Hey, choose one life!"

In reviewing a novel, of course, we are constrained by the need to not give away any details critical to plot development or its denouement. But with Rose, as might be expected from her own experience with the Internet, we are drawn quickly into the complicated question of the Internet and pornography.

In working to uncover the murderer, Dr. Snow is able to proceed with police assistance, and can work from a list of those who have visited one or more of the victims' sites or have otherwise been added to the list of suspects. In following Dr. Snow's investigation, then, we meet a number of users of Internet pornography and are given various explanations for their behavior.

In some cases, we also meet the women, young and old, whose lives are impacted by the fact that the men (or boys) in their lives habitually view erotica on the Internet. The fact that the voice shifts rapidly and that many characters come and go rather quickly makes _The Venus Fix_ seem somewhat like a series of Internet pages rapidly loaded by a hyper-kinetic user.

It is this aspect of the book which makes it of value to us in trying to understand the link between the Internet and pornography. Rose shows us not any one version of the Internet, but rather a series of vignettes in which the Internet is little more than a tool. It is not, in and of itself, evil.
In this sense, the Internet, viewed from Rose's perspective, is somewhat different than the Internet presented in the other work reviewed in this issue, John Burdett's *Bangkok Haunts* (see review on pg. 190). Burdett's character, a Bangkok policeman, approaches the Internet as a Buddhist. To him, it is a typical manifestation of Western materialism, hence capable of doing great damage to those trying to live peaceful and ordinary lives. Conversely, Rose's protagonist approaches the Internet as a tool which can be misused, but possessing no inherent moral qualities for good or evil.

The many characters whose lives intersect with those who use the Internet can, however, be subject to what amounts to collateral damage. Because somebody in their lives spends a great deal of time and effort—erotic energy if you will—on the Internet, their own lives are damaged by the Internet.

This problem is presented as particularly acute for girls in their late adolescence, and for the young males in their lives because all are too inexperienced to see the women in the web cams as a well-constructed fantasy but rather confuse them with reality, with frequently devastating effects.

We emailed the author upon deciding to review *The Venus Fix* and asked her about the impact of the Internet upon erotic materials. She responded immediately and helpfully:

**The Story Behind the Novel:**

I was at a bookstore signing and a young teenage girl approached me to tell me how much she liked my work. We got to talking, and she told me about how she and all of her friends read the sexy parts in my novels. That led to her eventually telling me that she and her friends were having a hard time dealing with how deeply the guys at school were into Internet porn.

At that point, I was halfway through writing the second novel in the Dr. Morgan Snow series (*THE DELILAH COMPLEX*) and wasn't ready to
think about the third, but I knew I was hearing about something that mattered.

I actually started researching the next day doing research with women involved in the online sex industry and with dozens of teenagers, as well as several therapists, and adults addicted to Internet porn. I researched every group I wrote about in the book.

I've never written a novel before in which the research was as disturbing or as troublesome as it was this time. The implications of what I found out were far reaching, not in the least because no one seems to have any solutions other than to turn their backs and ignore the problem.

Access of Internet sex sites by adolescents are a problem without a seeming solution. Given the nature of the Internet, it is almost impossible to effectively monitor such sites; similarly, it is extremely difficult to restrict an adolescent from accessing them.

In my research, I found that the kids with the most involved parents had the fewest problems. I'm not talking about sitting in the room and not giving them freedom; I'm talking about spending real time with them and discussing what the dangers are out there --being part of their lives. Some of the most well-adjusted kids had parents who took them online, showed them the sex sites, and let them see what they were talking about.

My goal with every novel is to thrill my readers and keep them turning the pages. But my mission is to find the dark, disturbing subjects that pain us and shine some light on them.

I hope I've done both with this one. The subject matter deserves it.

Cheers,

M.J. [5]
As is evident in the above personal communication, as well as the treatment in *The Venus Fix*, Rose does not see the Internet as yielding to legal control. Her position, which strikes us as realistic, is that the genie is out of the bottle. Now we must learn to live with it, both for its strengths, and for its troubling weaknesses.

*The Venus Fix*, then, is far from the "viewing with alarm" sort of fiction work that threatens us with shadowy internet-enabled killers. The Internet is rather a tool which can, in the proper hands, facilitate good lives, even among young women who find that erotic acting on the web can be a useful employment at some point in their lives. It is extremely unlikely that John Burdett's Buddhist protagonist however, could possibly see such work as a form of "Right Livelihood," that is work of which the Buddha would approve, if only because such sex cam operations depend above all on sexual desire, ultimately the worst snare of all human drives.

The issue of pornography is also in Rose's view a highly nuanced one. This is not unexpected as doubtless there are many who would condemn *The Venus Fix* itself as pornographic by a broad definition. Sexual activity is portrayed though in a far from explicit manner, and in most cases viewed as not only normal but also positive.

On the other hand, Rose's protagonist treats a group of teen-age boys who "...were severely addicted to Internet porn..." (p. 75). Her killer, whose voice drives the narrative at critical points, while clearly portrayed as unhinged in the degree of hatred for young women who appear in sexual contexts on the Internet, nonetheless might speak for many who see such sites as pornographic by any definition when it is stated:

"No one, not therapists, not lawyers, not teachers, not parents, has the experience or the knowledge to deal with our troubled children because they are a mutation—the first generation who have been suckled by twenty-four hour, easily accessible and practically free instant gratification. Twenty-four hour poison." (p. 254)
It seems to us on balance that "pornography", in Rose's perspective, is defined not by what it is, but by what it does. If sexual content harms the viewer or others, it perhaps crosses over from eroticism into pornography.

[1] As in the rest of this issue, we place the term "pornography" in quotes here to signal its contested meaning. The author of the work under review might well have preferred that we use "erotica", or perhaps "adult material" to characterize her book. We use "pornography" because we are trying to discuss these materials as themselves socially contested; that is, part of America society believes that such materials should not be available to anyone, precisely because of the issues discussed in the two books we review here.


[5] At M. J.'s request we link these sites which related to references in the above review:

- M.J. Rose, Author (http://www.mjrose.com/);
- Author Buzz (http://www.authorbuzz.com/);
- Buzz, Balls & Hype (http://mjroseblog.typepad.com /buzz_balls_hype/)