

## HARRIET'S CRITIQUE

"This is not an official meeting so, at some time, in the future you can just say that we never met."

"We shouldn't even be having this conversation. I should even dignify this crap with my time."

"Why did you agree to meet me?"

"Because I wanted to put an end to this kind of thing. I pretended to myself that you might actually listen to reason."

"What are you telling me?"

"I'm not sure that I can really tell you much of anything. You have practically everything sewn up."

"Do you want me to go?"

"Don't you feel as if you have to unload? Or are you happy with yourself?"

"At least, I've been consistent."

"Have you now? Do you think that she really understood what was going on when you first encountered her? You didn't tell her; "Come over to my house. I want to ravage you." Instead, you fed her with this mish-mash of conflicting stories. And now, we're where we are."

"She needed some coaxing. She was afraid to explore her own abilities."

"So you pretty much robbed her of the ability to live out her years without fear."

"I gave her direction. Her mother was clueless. And her father had abandoned her."

"I didn't know that abuse qualified as charity work."

"Harriet, you are being too hard on me. I never hurt her intentionally. I simply applied the necessary force to help correct her occasional bad habits."

"Did you encourage her to be rebellious simply so that you would have an excuse to punish her. Was that something that you learned while you were a boy?"

"Harriet, quit trying to psychologize me. I know your tricks."

"Tricks? It's called seeing with my own eyes. I'm not as naive as she was. Or is that what you are depending on?"

Harriet, you can't save the world. Don't even try. You're just an academic. You love the conflict better than any real solution. Make the girl confused for the rest of her life."

"You did a pretty good job at it yourself."

"She learned from me."

"What did she learn? To keep away from guys like you in the future? What good is that going to do her now? You've screwed with her so badly that she can barely pick up the pieces."

"What pieces? Our experience is fragmentary to begin with. I taught her how to feel. I showed her what pleasure is."

"You robbed her of her ability to see. You ripped away her magic and made her forlorn. Is that a victory on your part?"

"I showed her the wonders of the flesh!"

"You're nothing but a common pervert who is trying to masquerade behind your supposed erudition. Have you ever published any of your ideas. Or are they all locked away in that little head of yours?"

"I am not a slavish imitator of the ideas of the dominant culture. I am my own man."

"Who's preying on little girls?"

"She's not that young!"

"She now feels old way beyond her years. She can thank you for that feat."

"I had a purpose. I was teaching her."

"Brian, really what are you afraid of? That I'm going to take you in a classroom with a whiteboard and make a few markings on the wall and you're going to realize that I know everything about you."

"Dr. Fleming, you really are impressed with your own intelligence."

"How does it feel to be hated by most people who come in contact with you?"

"Maybe they're just scared that I have a method for success."

"Always the smart ass with all the answers."

"I can show you a thing or two if that's what you're after."

"Is that why Steven set you loose on me? He wants to teach me a lesson?"

"I thought that was what you were all about with your magic marker and your glib commentary."

"Brian did you write her confession? Everything just seems so false."

"I had no part of it. I can't help it if she makes up stories."

"I have no idea what really happened, but I know that you were up to no good."

"Can't a fellow have a little fun?"

"How old was she?"

"A lot older than you think. There may have been other guys. When she was much younger. I only met her later in her life."

"You are good."

"Aren't I?"

"You should be the writer. You're the one who really is into revision."

"I do what I have to."

"Are you up to same old thing? Going after kids."

"It's not like that at all. I really had no idea who she was. I met her in a bar. She was drinking. She had a fake ID."

"You don't know when to stop."

"What does that mean?"

"You get turned on, and you just have to have your way."

"I'm not one of those!"

"A what?"

"A purvy!"

"So how do you do it? Do you work in a tandem? The first guy softens her up. The next one goes in for the kill."

"I can't help it. I like pretty girls. I never really do anything wrong."

"What do you do if they say no? They never so no in those dirty movies of yours."

"I'm not a movie guy. Why do people accuse me of watching porn?"

"Where do you get your ideas for all those scenes of yours? It can't all come out of your head. No one has the energy for all those exploits and also had time to put together all those

witty scenarios. You might as well be a comedian.”

“A lot of it is very spur of the moment. I am quite clever. Haven’t you noticed?”

“People have said that about the Marquis de Sade. Although he is not really my cup of tea.”

“What do you like Harriet? Bondage and domination. Or humiliation. Are you a naughty girl?”

“I really don’t do play-acting.”

“Honey, you are the best actress that I ever met.”

“What would Steven have to say about all this?”

“Funny, you should ask. I thought that it would be great to get the three of us in one room.”

“That was really my idea. I asked you here.”

“Where did Brian go, Steven?”

“I have no idea.”

“Probably his shame about Eve.”

“Who could really resist Brian. He had his fatal charm.”

“I don’t think that Chloe would have gone along.”

“You know her?”

“She stopped by to see me. But she was very strange. Is she OK?”

“Hell if I know. It’s not as if I can get in her head. Although I have tried.”

“I have tried too.”

“I know that you get a real kick out of trying to diagnose characters in books. But there are so many factors that a writer leaves out. And there you are with your casebook ready to fill in any symptoms that might be absent from his work. The worse part of it all is that critics like you have trained a whole generation of writers who are willing to line up for their session on the couch. It’s not good for writing.”

“I’d have to say that Brian is a fine creation on your part. Could you make him any less sympathetic? You advance his theories as if he’s a modern day Jean-Jacques Rousseau.”

“I have to explain the background of what happened.”

“You are giving this guy a free ride. Most of his ranting sounds like tender love poetry. Who are we kidding?”

“It’s more of a critique of romantic love. We live in a culture that advances ideas very similar to his.”

“You’re not interested in the culture. You love what he thinks. You’re just too afraid to admit it.”

“I don’t accept his attitude. But I do want explore how he shares a lot of the attitudes of the average person.”

“You grant him the licence to explore his perverse fantasies. Then you make a spectacle of the girl’s pain. This ends up justifying his actions.”

“I don’t want to excuse what he did. But I do need to be honest.”

“Don’t even get started. I know where your pop anthropology is headed. You’re trying to suggest that primitive man lusted over every woman in his view. That he never hesitated to act out his desires.”

“That’s not my way of thinking.”

“You just can’t sanction that attitude toward women.”

“You’re asking me to provide some kind of authoritative view of the whole thing.”

“Otherwise, you’re just giving in to his perversion.”

“It’s part of life.”

“It’s your slant. You have nothing else in the book.”

“What do you want me to do? I’m writing a novel, not a treatise on male behavior.”

“You’re making me sound hysterical so it makes it all OK on your part.”

“I’m doing my best to provide an accurate portrayal of Eve.”

“There is nothing positive here.” Eve only exists as a counterweight to your own sexual fantasies. Don’t tell me that you haven’t gratified your own desires in some way. Just by entertaining them longer than a second is enough. Do you have an image of Eve in your mind. Does it make you feel elated? Is that enough? She’s your goddess. And your supposedly pure intent for her makes you morally superior than Brian.”

I don’t have the same designs on her as he does. And heaven knows that I’ve never done anything like he’s done.”

“But you ache for your opportunity.”

“I think about her. She inspires me. That is where my interest ends.”

“You don’t deserve an iota of time in her brain. You are the one who is robbing her of her dignity.”

“You are condemning me for having a thought.”

“You are dwelling on her image. Then you are punishing yourself for even thinking about someone that young. Why are all your heroines these young women? Are you afraid of maturity?”

“That’s not completely accurate.”

“I don’t think that you’d paint me in heroic terms.”

“Dr. Fleming, that remains to be seen.”

“Are you gearing up to do a portrait? If you are, I feel that I should have some say in what it’s going to be like.”

“You’re looking at a self-portrait?”

“I just want you to be fair.”

“I could start the portrait now. I already have a lot that I could add from what we’ve been saying here and now.”

“I don’t want to give you that opportunity. You’ve been gearing up for it all through our conversation. You want the reader to sympathize with what you’re going through. This time, you’re going to have to stand on your own two feet.”

“Quite a macho image that you’re setting out for me. I’m as good as ready right now.”

“For you, intimacy is always a product of the male’s viewpoint. He creates an image of the woman for himself. Then he wants to fill in this image to correspond with his fantasy.”

“Isn’t that the human condition? Advertising depends upon that kind of behavior.”

“Women aren’t supposed to be commodities.”

“How are you different? You want security. You have a university job, a pension. You look for friends who share your same values. Maybe a guy who’s a little more successful.

Someone who you look up to.”

“Are you getting me ready for the oven, Mr. Fisher?”

“What do you mean?”

“You couldn’t do the job on Eve so I’m next.”

“That’s not my intention.”

“Then why are you trying to play me like a fiddle. I’m not your audience.”

“What are we doing?”

“I’m listening to you opinions, and I’m trying to analyze them in light of what you actually write in your novels.”

“What’s the big problem? I think that I do a pretty good job.”

“That is why people find fiction so frustrating. Novelists add all these details that seem to excuse bad behavior. Be honest!”

“I am, and you’re calling me a pervert.”

“You admire women who don’t have the will to say no.”

“Don’t confuse me with my characters.”

“You are one of your characters. And you still gratify your every whim. You’re clever about it. You make your opponent into a perfect foil. It’s all her doing. Instead of you being a voyeur, she’s an exhibitionist. Instead of you showing unwanted attention at work, she’s a co-worker who’s stalking you. Even your high school girls are all oversexed.”

“I’m much more restrained than most movies that I watch. I try to focus on intention and not actual manifestation. What makes her think this way? Could she change her course of action?”

“It’s intellectual striptease. You have this image in your mind, and you jerk off to it. Or you date an older woman and try to make her conform to this baby doll dream.”

“You’re the one who isn’t playing fair. You have your own agenda, but you are accusing me of psychological defensiveness. Is that what you do with guys that you meet. You never give them a chance because they’re always lying prone on the analyst’s couch.”

“What is this: foreplay on your part?”

“I’m trying to figure out why you are so riled up.”

“Why are you more fired up? Afraid that someone is going to find the skeletons in your closet.”

“I have nothing to hide.”

“Then why are you so defensive.”

“That’s your game. You accuse me of murder, and then you use my fervent denial as proof that I must be guilty.”

“I’m not that extreme. You’re portraying me as shrill so that your readers will think that I’m over the edge.”

“I don’t think what you’re doing is OK.”

“I’m examining your actual words. Are you afraid of criticism?”

“If I was, I would never publish anything. Go ahead, take your best shot.”

“A little macho on your part.”

“I’m ready for whatever you have.”

“Then you can tie me up and torture me.”

“If that’s what gets you off?”

“Really?”

“I’m trying to play along. Are you game?”

“You are always going to slip away. You use humor to make light of a serious situation.”

“Which situation? Yours?”

“Eve’s!”

“She’s a creation. It’s fiction.”

“You say these derisive things about women, and when I challenge you, you claim that it’s just fiction. That I can’t blame you for your fantasy. But you are nurturing those fantasies over and over again. You create the circumstances that make the fantasies permissible.”

“I need to be true to life.”

“That would allow you to pen a racist screed. What’s your real excuse? Is this how you really think?”

“I am observing a panorama of different attitudes.”

“But you are placing more emphasis on the bizarre. These aren’t stories about someone toiling in an auto-assembly plant. These aren’t migrant workers suffering the conditions in rural Georgia. It’s a privileged class who are indulging their worst excesses.”

“But it’s an accurate portrayal of our desires in everyday circumstances.”

“A guy who kidnaps a school girl.”

“That’s not exactly my story.”

“It might as well be. Why do these stories of women in distress interest you?”

“These are metaphors. We all live in distress. But we tolerate it because we are too close to it. I’m trying to create that kind of distance for every reader. That way she can highlight the pressures in her own experience.”

“We don’t need your writing to make hell worse.”

“But without a clear perspective, we often sweep things under the rug.”

“So what is Eve going to do? Is she going to analyze in depth what happened to her? No way. She’s going to find another situation that’s pretty much similar and repeat the same mistakes all over again.”

“Is this from my book, or are you making it up?”

“What difference does it make? It’s all part of your novelistic perspective.”

“I’m not advocating what happens.”

“But you’re lending credibility to his point of view. You’re saying that it’s OK for a guy to have these fantasies about a high school girl.”

“So you put one of these girls in a slinky dress to sell cosmetics, and that’s acceptable.”

“I’m not saying that either is acceptable. But your novel gives licence to those male fantasies.”

“I didn’t create the fantasies.”

“But you formulate them in a more credible fashion.”

“I want to show that even the deniers like you suffer from the same sort of identification with the dominant mainstream attitude. And you still haven’t proven me wrong.”

“Don’t you have anything better to offer?”

“One of your tepid love stories. The character are immersed in their own delusions.”

“You want your story to be sexy. You are looking for cute models. A seventeen year old Cleopatra who’s reciting Plato by heart.”

“Are you any different? Don’t you think of your students as the perfect examples of curiosity come to life? And you do your best to shape them in your likeness.”

“That really isn’t fair.”

“Where is your evidence that I can analyze with a clear eye?”

“I’m not trying to turn my students into a muse for a love poem.”

“Why? Because none of them measure up? But if one did, you’d be flabbergasted. You’d lose your composure.”

“I’m not that immature.”

“Experience taught you a dear lesson.”

“I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve.”

“So you’re a shill for more noble causes.”

“You can’t talk your way out of this one.”

“But you can.”

“You didn’t come here to talk about one of my articles. You have a great deal to answer for.”

“What is this: the Inquisition?”

“Does that give you the right to say anything that you want?”

“Everything must be said.”

“Including reprehensible things.”

“If we can’t talk about them, we can’t remedy them, Dr. Fleming.”

“You can’t start off trying to inflame the passions, and then tell your audience that you want a concerned dialogue.”

“Normal love is a lot more transgressive than we are willing to admit.”

“I find a real problem saying things like that.”

“Are you afraid of love? Have you ever been in love, Dr. Fleming?”

“My private life is not an issue here.”

“It will be.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You try to make an open book of my life, but if I do the same, you cry foul.”

“Your novels demonstrate your attitude about men and women. And your personal beliefs are prominent.”:

“Don’t tell me that you don’t have some kind of personal beef with me.”

“That’s not what this is about.”

“Am I allowed to question your sexual politics?”

“What are you implying?”

“You’re so intense about my portrayal of woman, but I bet that you defer to a man for the important decision in your life.”

“That is really sexist.”

“Not at all. You were probably a lot more militant when you were younger, but now you realize where your bread is buttered, so you much more of a defender of authority.”

“Without some kind of structure, there is anarchy!”

“Yeah, but what kind of structure. The authoritarian hierarchy that you have allied yourself with.”

“I’m not so doctrinaire. But you just can’t have men running around doing whatever they please.”

“That’s all well and good. Except that you apply your principles quite selectively.”

“How’s that?”

“You advocate this staid view of culture where we really don’t question the actual sources of power. You pick off violators on the periphery. And you congratulate yourself for doing a great job. You might as well be working for the DEA.”

“Huh?”

“You catch a few offenders, and you tell the rest of the world that society has finally been reformed for the better.”

“You are congratulating the abusers for getting away with it.”

“I’m not under the pretense that I’m leading a moral crusade. You don’t care who gets knocked down in the crossfire.”

“Eve was really hurt by that guy. And you’re telling him to do it again. You’re almost creating an instruction manual on how to get away with that kind of behavior.”

“I may be observing the same characteristics in other people, but I am coming straight out and saying that he’s a criminal.”

“Really. So why does Eve’s confessional reflect such a prurient interest on your part. It tells the reader that it’s all right to be a voyeur as long as the main culprit goes down. We might as well be watching *Scarface*.”

“You have to portray abuses in order to oppose them.”

“But you shouldn’t glorify the participants.”

“I’m not that crass.”

“You aren’t. The most sexually explicit passages read favorably for the perpetrator.”

“That’s his point of view.”

“What about your point of view?”

“I work to moderate his glee. I question his motives. And Eve sees through his *deviousness*.”

“Big deal. She still seems to reflect nostalgically on their encounter.”

“That’s a stretch.”

“Not at all. It is written like a love story.”

“That is what he tried to make her believe.”

“But it sounds as if you’re believing. And it seems to invalidate the experience of real love.”

“Is that what irks you so much? This is hitting you personally.”

“You’re such a guy. You can’t be reasoned with.”

“I’m stating it very clearly, and you are getting emotionally involved.”

“How can I help it? I’m a woman. And it’s a story of a rape.”

“Do you want to tell me something more.”

“That sounds like a cheap shot. You’re trying to challenge my point of view. Is that what you meant when you said that this was going to get personal. Your innuendo sounds pretty ugly.”



“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“I’m the one who usually plays the psychology mind games.”

“Nice observation. But I feel that you are looking for more honesty in our exchange. Do you have something more that you need to tell me?”

“I’m not going to get into my personal history. But you’re really not that sensitive.”

“How could I be any different? I need to confront the full character of his conspiracy. At the same time, I don’t want to endorse his way of life. I think that I struck a nice balance.”

“But after reading your book, a guy can’t help but look at a young girl and feel desire.”

“I also want some honesty. What really motivates us day to day?”

“You are using this pervert to measure your data.”

“His beliefs are a product of an apparently sane world. How did he turn out the way that he did?”

“Things that he did personally.”

“But he seemed to find corroboration for his view elsewhere in the culture. He was expressing the absolute that motivates romantic love.”

“You’re saying that it’s OK. It’s a tyrannical imposition of the male point of view

“That is exactly what it’s all about. He’s looking for that secret that would make it impossible for the girl to say no.”

“He has to use force to get her to go along with him.”

“That’s the whole point. Our culture is based on coercion. But it only become apparent when we resist. Otherwise, we are rewarded to the max.”

“Yeah, but he was mean even when she did everything that he wanted.”

“The state doesn’t want us to become complacent. So there are these random exercises of its power. It’s meant to throw off the citizens so that they can’t figure out the system and revolt against it.”

“But you are willing to reward people who screw up for no apparent reason.”

“It’s hard to see the big picture. People do whatever they can in their immediate environment.”

“This guy also had a total disregard for convention. He comes off as some kind of anti-hero.”

“Not at all. Even if tries to hide himself from the reader, I offer a lot of clues about his nastiness.”

“He just seems like a pleasant rebel.”

“He’s hurting the girl. You keep reminding me of that.”

“But the references are so occasional that he comes off as a good guy.”

“For whom.”

“For other pleasure seekers like himself. It just a rougher variation of the *Playboy Philosophy*. It’s all casual. It doesn’t matter who gets hurt. Just walk away and move on to the next thrill.”

“If you say so... Where did you go?”

“I’m here.”

“You’re not Steven.”

“Were you expecting the Ghost of Christmas Future?”

“Who are you supposed to be?”

“I’m the one with the keys to the kingdom. Where do you want to go?”

“I thought that I was done with you. Are you here for some more dirty work?”

“Maybe you didn’t learn your lesson. That’s why I’m leading you towards your future.”

“I smile at you once, and you think that I like you. Steven said that you were a weird sort. I hardly want to be locked in a room with you for all eternity.”

“I have my pluses.”

“That remains to be seen. What are you here to show me?”

“What your world would be like without love.”

“You’ve been hired for that job. That really is perverse.”

“I know what any woman needs to make her happy.”:

“What are you going to do—tie me down until I beg for mercy?”

“Don’t knock it until you try it.”

“I just start to make some headway with Steven, then he sends you back to torment me.”

“I’m not so bad.”

“OK, smart ass, you’re on. What does every woman want?”

“She wants to feel that some guy can’t take away what he’s just given her.”

“That’s why some women prefer other women. I didn’t think that you were so sensitive.”

“I didn’t think that I was. I was talking about dick. Big and hard.”

“I was talking more about the symbol. But I guess that can also be big and hard. At least, that is what a lot of guys have told me.”

“As you assigned ghost, I was sent here to tell you something.”

“And what is that?”

“Your future. You’ll be able to keep the symbolism, but you’ll never get to hold on to the real thing.”

“Wait one second.”

“What is that?”

“It’s my phone. I have to take this.”

“Is Elizabeth Yore there?”

“Sorry, she isn’t. You have the wrong number.”

“There’s no Elizabeth Yore there?”

“Brian, you don’t have a girl tied up in your car?”

“Are you making light of a serious situation, Harriet?”

“Sorry, there no one by that name here. Bye, bye, take care.”

“I heard some guy there with you. Who is he? Is he preventing you from answering correctly.”

“You have the wrong number.”

“Who is that, Harriet?”

“You’re not looking for a threesome, are you Brian? Or is that your lover on the phone, and she’s looking for you.”

“How could that be? It’s your phone.”

“I thought that ghosts have access to every number.”

“We only do land lines. So our work is a lot scarcer these days.”

“Every time that you’re about to come clean, you have another excuse. Back to the same old thing!”

“I thought that we could get through this without throwing insults at each other.”

“I’m not going to make love to you.”

“That wasn’t what I was asking for.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Are you and Steven the same person? I have yet to see the two of you together.”

“Steven doesn’t have my strength of character. I have a good idea in my head what I want. Steven just blows in the wind.”

“He’s a writer. He had to get a good sense of the weather.”

“He has to recognize that he’s making it all up anyway.”

“Why is he so into depravity?”

“You have to ask him.”

“Why are you so into cruelty?”

“I’m not. I just need something to help me remember things. I just take some time out of my busy day to leave some kind of trace of what I’m thinking?”

“Like your signature.”

“A good analogy. I feel like an artist.”

“So you are transforming the world to correspond with a view that you have in your head.”

“It works something like that.”

“You are an idealist.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So why do things always turn out so badly.”