

1. THE PERFECT READER

There is no one at reception to monitor my arrival. When I enter her office, she is on the phone. She holds her hand up to indicate that she will be right with me. Then she puts down the phone and looks up.

“I know you!”

She backs away from me as if I pose some kind of threat.

“No. I really know you. You’re the voice!”

There is no doubt about it. She is the voice that I hear all the time. That subdued monotone making safety announcements at airports. The voice on the phone telling me to hold until I reach my desired party. The voice at the supermarket directing me to the latest specials. Her clear articulation makes her the perfect representative for businesses. She is the English language.

I tell her who I am.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

At this point, I wonder why she has been so hesitant to deal with me.

“You didn’t recognize me?” I inquire.

“You were a little aggressive.”

She is still trying to size me up. As if I have come here for an evaluation.

“Why are you here?”

“I thought that you wanted to see me.”

I fumble around in my pockets looking around for the letter. I figure that I left it at home. I am going to have to deal with this unprepared. I have questions to ask her. My initial shock on hearing her voice still makes me hesitant.

“So you know who I am?”

I looked her in the eyes, “Yeah, you’re the voice.”

“I’m afraid that you are mistaken. I simply have a resemblance to that voice.”

I feel a little disappointed. I had thought that this was going to be special. Indeed, if she was the voice of fate, then she could have revealed to me something of real import. Oh damn!

“You’re not going to reveal to me the approaching hour of my death. Or how I can win a fortune.”

“Nothing like that.”

“Something more mundane. A tax audit.”

“Are you even earning that much money now?”

“Let’s just say that I’m surviving. So what are you here to tell me? That the sky is falling!”

“The sky is falling!”

“I knew that.”

Her sense of humor surprises me in contrast with her previously ominous tone. More than ever, I am sure that she is the voice. Quite frankly. I do want some kind of major pronouncement from her.

“You can sit down. I’ll be just be a second.”

She starts to work her way through the pile of papers on her desk.

“Is this a bad time?”

She motions to me, “This is your time. I just need to get things ready.”

She continues to shuffle the papers. She now sets them in three piles. She actually

straightens the edges so that they all align perfectly.

I sit there silently. What is she doing? Does this have anything whatsoever to do with me?

“You have no idea why you’re here.”

“This is the final judgment!”

“You’re still very much alive.”

“Really!”

A smile again washes over her steel exterior.

“I’m your reader.”

“I knew it. You’re going to read to me. What are you reading? My death sentence.”

“I’m your reader.”

“Reader for what.”

“For those books that you write. Do you think that anyone else cares? I am the only person who reads your shit.”

“Shit?” I am ready to jump up and leave.

“I don’t mean it that way. I really love your stuff. But I’m pretty sure that I am the only one who actually reads any of it. At least all the way through.”

“Why? Is it your job?”

I feel as if I have been thrust into a Kafka novel. My reader is my executioner!

“I have made some notes based on my reading. I wanted to go over them with you.”

“You could give them to me, and I could read them at home.”

“No! I need to talk to you. We have a lot to discuss.”

Why should I even care? Sure I want someone to read my books. And I had spent all that time to finish them. But she doesn’t seem all that receptive. This seems more like an inquisition. And I don’t need someone new to torment me.

“Why don’t you just tell me that you like it. Then I can just get up and leave.”

“You were brought here for a purpose. I’ve taken all this time to make notes. You could at least have the courtesy to listen to my criticisms.”

Where did she get off telling me how to write? I didn’t come here for lessons, especially from the Voice of America.

“Don’t you work better with a prepared script?”

“I have the script right here. You need to relax. You want some coffee.”

“Coffee doesn’t relax anyone, does it. I don’t really like coffee.”

“How about some juice, some water?”

“I didn’t really come here for a social visit. Tell me the bad news so that I can leave.”

“This isn’t bad news. I’m not with the IRS.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m your reader. That’s all that you need to know.”

Could this be some kind of governmental thing? What was the penalty that was waiting at the end of the ordeal?

“But are you my ideal reader.”

“There are no ideal readers. Only readers desperate to impose their points of view.”

“Like you?”

She smiles again.

“You have a nice smile.”

“You’re not here to flatter me!”

“Let’s get on with it! I’ve got place to go. People to see. A life to live!”

“The unexamined life is not worthy living!”

“I think that it works more the other way.”

“What is the other way?”

“You need to learn how to listen.”

“OK, you are the story teller. I am ready for story hour.”

“This is going to be a good one.”

Her voice is so soothing. I probably could get her to read the phone book and it would give a me a strange pleasure. She definitely has my number!

“I’ve never felt that your characters have sufficient motivation. It’s like they’re just bits of ideas. Phrases. Nothing more.”

“My literature isn’t meant to be entirely representative. I am working to illustrate the lives of words. How they have their own memories. And these memories all have a story to tell. Like a dream. Sometimes just a wash of color. The glimpse of a face.”

“That sounds like an excuse on your part not to develop your characters.”

“I develop my characters according to the circumstance.”

“But you simply give in to the associations of the moment. If you are influenced by the most backward of political ideologies, you will simply reproduce it in the text.”

“My works are dynamic and open. But they are never naive. If a feeling is of a exploitative nature, I work to explore it to its roots. To lay bare its foundation. Its link to other expressions that have become more or less acceptable. I want to show that the exploitation is manifest elsewhere in our culture. Simply rejecting its most obvious forms is never sufficient. Things that we take for granted may supply the very impetus for the most extreme types of political repression.”

“You’re telling me nothing new. You’re just making excuses for your own laziness. Or indulging your perversion. On the one hand, it’s just banal cliches such as greed creates poverty. Or pornography encourages sexism. On the other hand, you create these passages that are entirely too hard to follow. Just loosely connected free associations.”

“I’m never that simplistic. I take the familiar and combine it with something else that is less than familiar. I hope this gets the reader thinking about her surroundings.”

“I am the reader. Probably your only one. Some of these things I’d prefer not to think about.”

“But these images are a part of our lives.”

“Not the way that you present them. It’s as if you’re trying to torture me. “

I am debating how much I can trust her judgement. Should I even bother putting my faith in her? She is making such an effort to keep my attention. She only occasionally looks up from her notes to maintain contact.

“You let me down.”

How you can influence someone to feel the obligation?

“Are you a girl who really likes football, or are you simply someone who accedes to the

domination of men?"

"Who is asking this?"

"Someone with a clue?"

"I'm also someone with a clue."

"I am really impatient with modernism and all its progeny: post-modernism, urban primitivism, and all these other styles of techno-verbosity. Art that assumes form is more important than what is being said. Your mechanical laconicism is a particularly offensive example of the same sort of drivel. You refuse to develop your points. And you avoid any sense of grammatical necessity. Ideas are always incomplete and actions remain undone, a total embrace of intellectual paralysis. No wonder your characters can't develop the will to do anything."

"You suffer from the malaise of the contemporary culture: you assume a voracious desire to consume objects of delight is synonymous with being an artist. But you're a social climber without a ladder to ascend the heights. Where is the sweep of the epic novels of yore? You have nary an understanding of history and the social forces that propel it. In your works, the dynasties which are chronicled in our classics would be a loose collection of derisive gangs. The heroes of tragedy would have no greatness to compromise. And the unrivaled beauties of the past would be nothing but gossip queens in your tired lyrics."

"Hide behind tawdry attempts at experimentation! Huddle together with your coterie of avant-garde lunatics! Keep trying to shock the masses with your dirty mouth and exaggerated gore!"

"I am trying to be nice. But there is little to work with. You take your own limited range of feelings, and then you project them on to a limited repertoire of characters. There is little disguising your actual motive. It is like the frustrated office-worker who takes his meager tale of vengeance and tries to generalize into a world-class villain. It just doesn't work like that."

"A good novel requires nuance. There needs to be varied shades in portrayal of character. Not just a single idea. You can hand the terrible swift sword to one of your ninety-pound weaklings, but he will barely be able to drag its weight along the ground."

I am hardly immune from her arguments. But she seems to have missed the point. I'd love to pen dashing tales of knights on horseback. But none it really jives with the give and take of everyday. I don't feel that I'm giving in to the excesses of these vapid self-appointed mavens of the new social order. But I do have to stay on the pulse of the prematurely sclerotic.

"The idea that good literature has to focus on heroic characters went out over a century ago. Besides, many of our heroes have been exposed as scoundrels."

"You don't have to dwell on the outre just to get yourself an audience."

"That has never been my intention. I'm just writing a story."

"Good for you!"

"So you don't object."

"If you want to spend your time sweeping the gutter to discover some gem, that is your pathology. I have better things to do with my time."

"You've agreed to be my reader."

"And that I just what I'm doing. It doesn't mean that I have to love everything that I read."

“Of course not, I value your honesty!”

“Honesty is a good starting point. Anything to get you to admit where you have fault.”

“These stories are real! Often based on actual experiences of mine or of people that I know.”

“Some things are better left unsaid.”

“So be it!”

“If only I could dispense with such excess. Instead, I have to deal with every indulgence on your part.”

“So what?”

“You compensate for your weaknesses as a man by creating sexually-prolific protagonists, who use their own exploits as a way of denying their adulthood. They refuse to accept responsibility. In turn, there are these libidinally-charged females whose sleazy antics are the perfect excuse for the aforementioned male boorishness. Worst of all, you have these sexually precocious adolescents who give you the excuse to indulge a fascination for child porn.”

“That is a low blow.”

“No lower than your own worst escapades.”

“You have a dirty mind, and you are trying to make the excuse that you are some kind of social critic. Your only saving grace is that your sex scenes are so brittle that the majority of humankind is spared your self-promotion. If your own prowess was as formidable as your characters, someone would have to cage you.”

“You are a puritan.”

“Not quite. Your novels wouldn’t be so lacking in erotic appeal, if they weren’t so clumsy in describing the body.”

“You are a prude.”

“It would be better if you learned from actual experience. Not from watching second-rate porn films.”

“I wouldn’t mind a lesson.”

“You need more than a lesson. And I never play below my level.”

“I’m serious about learning the ropes.”

“I’ll give you a pass for the time being. So what are you trying to do with this obsession with the erotic?”

“If you had read the foreword, you’d understand that I am offering a portrait of the dissipated bon vivant.”

“A way that you wish you could be!”

“We’ve entered the circle again.”

“Circle of hell!”

“So what is your proposed punishment?”

“That you actually pass some time with one of those assignations of yours.”

“You really are confusing me with one of my characters.”

“I think that you are too. You claim that you were making fun of a libertine. Now, that is the only kind of character that you can create. Surely, that is hell!”

“So, I’m on the way out!”

“It is time for you to do your penance!”

“Some time in rehab!”

“They can work on your sex addiction.”

“Why do you keep confusing me with my characters?”

“Because you do such a terrible job at trying to succeed at imitation.”

“Is that the best of flattery that you can manage?”

“I’m just beginning to read!”

“I hope that you’re making notes so that you don’t lose your place.”

“This is about as exciting as an accounting problem.”

“Get your calculator ready. It’s as much excitement in numbers that you are ever going to know!”

“You’re even bitchier than I could ever be!”

“So you’re trying to use flattery on me too!”

“These are women who have become bored with their spouses.”

“So how do they deal with things?”

“They branch out on their own.”

“You love this portrayal of wayward women. It confirms your superior air. At the same time, it give you an excuse to catalogue their infidelities. It’s just another step in developing the earnest male protagonist.”

“It’s not quite the same thing. I am working from real stories. Dialogue that I overhear in a grocery store. Or at the gym.”

“It’s not as if your characters ever talk about the education of their children. Or more pressing political issues. There all randy vixens.”

“Many of them are well-to-do. They take their wealth for granted.”

“Your portraits are more driven by envy than any real insight into their condition.”

“It doesn’t quite work that way.”

“You are offering a social model where people progress by flattery and doing favors for each other.”

“Is it that different than a major corporation making deals with the banks?”

“In a way it is. You fawn over these people. You are suggesting that a more devious performance is the way to easy success.”

“But with it are all the attendant tribulations.”

“Like what?”

“No one gets happy through acquisition.”

“Not on the monetary level. But sexual prowess brings with it a level of monetary achievement. Your character seem stuck in such a world view.”

“If they are stuck, they suffer from such a realization.”

“You never show the opposite view. Someone who bears the brunt of the economic failings, but uses his knowledge to confront the dominant culture.”

“All my characters aren’t rich.”

“But they believe the dream. And all the little triumphs in their lives will provide access to a greater reward.”

“It never does! They give up on their dreams of happiness.”

“So they use their suffering to justify their ill-gotten gains. It is a fair recompense.”

“They recognize that the circumstances of work have marked them. It inhibits their abilities to communicate. And in turn, they become more frustrated.”

“They never say this.”

“Part of their condition is a sense of numbness.”

“Who is going to lead them out of that? Writers like yourself.”

“They can see the results of what is happening. But they read accounts in the press that contradict what they know. They need to sense that they are not isolated.”

“They are going to hit the streets in some great procession.”

“It will be a process of education. They will discover their voices in the material conditions of their work.”

“And what good will that do?”

“They have the power to make it different.”

“What about the imposition of militarism. The crushing of the citizen.”

“The citizen continues to have a voice. And he needs to exercise it before those things are real.”

“But he doesn’t. Not in your stories. He is looking for the perfect fuck.”

“If he feels that way, it is within the messages of his popular culture.”

“Except your characters always formulate that message in such a self-aggrandizing way. They become more impressive than the system at imposing their vision.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your libertines know how to get what they want!”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Like your characters, you try to take advantage of the situation. These dominant males prey on vulnerable females. It becomes a sport. Guys try to rack up conquests.”

“Not at all!”

“And the women contemplate what kind of image they need to effect to take advantage of this situation. They end up surrendering to the game.”

“There’s a lot more to it. It’s never so literally minded.”

“Of course not. Your women are psychically-troubled. And they want to see themselves as part of a larger social movement. In the end, they limit their expectations. They just play the game. But the gains are few and far between. The women retreat in the background as a younger, more agile model emerges. And the guys take more satisfaction in losing themselves in the chase.”

“Why are you so reductive?”

“I’ve got you down to a T. Every inflection. Every concern. Nothing more than a devotion to the same vision.”

“That is just the point.”

“You’re more interested in the division of spoils than a trenchant analysis of the social antagonism. This isn’t even as good as the movies of the thirties and forties. At least, the women had drive. They had purpose. Your female character are lost in illusion. They are victims of their desires for celebrity.”

“It never transpires like that.”

“Even if she acquires consciousness, it’s just an excuse so that she can become more

sexual. And you save that final conquest as a lesson to show her that she is nothing but servant to game.”

“Often, they quit the game!”

“Exactly. After they are used up. When do their aspiration result in an adult desire? Something that isn’t about sex.”

“I don’t understand. My characters have careers. They are artists.”

“But the art is just an excuse to help them unlock this world of sexual liberation. Think about it. No one thinks about having a family. This is the disease of modernism. Characters looking for their parentage. Adulthood is always a postponement of adulthood. And in the post-modern variation, the characters don’t even have a full-bodied nature to contemplate anything of substance. A trace can’t have a family. A glyph never deals with any of the dilemmas of the parent. Your characters remain perpetual adolescents. The only way out of the game is the only way in: eternal pleasure.”

“It’s better than the traditional novel where the characters accepted these conventional roles. Women aren’t just baby-factories.”

“But you give them no other option to escape. They can’t mature to the point that they desire to have a family. The family is simply the locus of their psychological dilemmas. So they have to escape its influence.”

“I don’t want some kind of neo-traditionalism. Where we forget what we have learned, and we become all sentimental about being emotional robots.”

“It doesn’t have to be so mechanical. A woman can express her love for a man. Or another woman. And she can face the hardship of work and how it shapes her character. We all can’t be trust fund babies.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The pleasure principle can’t explain everything!”

“Pleasure principle! That’s your idea to advance a simplistic moral view of society.”

“Characters who are driven by one overwhelming goal! Sound familiar?”

“Your ideal is no better. People who anesthetize themselves so that they will accept this narrow range of happiness.”

“You are the one who never portrays a family trying to deal with everyday economic circumstances. No one has to sacrifice in order to get their kids to the doctor.”

“I’m not telling that story. But if I was, I wouldn’t tell it in such a conventional way.”

“Go ahead. Get over this ideal of the intellectually aware sexual dynamo. Adolescence brings with it more nuance. Kids who have to leave school to support themselves at menial jobs. Adults who get sick without health care. Your characters offer no real empathy for these situation. They are too obsessed with finding the lover who is non-habit-forming.”

“Where is this leading?”

“You tell me. Isolated males playing the game of financial acquisition and hoping that their dreams will be blessed by the perfect little creature.”

“What?”

“Strippers who read Hegel!”

“The beginning of a revolution.”

“It’s too late for them. They are already caught in an economy of showing off!”

“What’s the point?”

“You exaggerate the importance of image. You work in a hospital or you’re a janitor. A pretty dress isn’t going to change things.”

“But you have your own dreams of glamor. They help you work out your workaday existence.”

“So what! That’s not the story that you tell.”

“I write about students. Or those who work in retail. People with false hopes that packaging will help transform the game. It’s all part of the overall picture. This is what I’m familiar with.”

“That is what you stay familiar with. You don’t broaden your horizons so that you can tell a different story. It’s just an update of the exploitation teen film. Except the characters have more advanced weaponry.”

“American politics.”

“Don’t get cute!”

“I’m not.”

“But politics is just another elite that has no real contact with real people who struggle everyday. These people make history with every gesture. Their struggle is a new dialogue.”

“You really don’t defend such people. It’s just your excuse to re-impose your vague family values. That is why you are really afraid of art. You attack modern art because you don’t want people to perceive the world in a new way. You have this very limited view of reality. And that’s how it’s going to stay!”

“What is art? Your wandering adolescent looking for the perfect dress!”

“What are you saying?”

“You can’t get over this equation where sex is work, and work is sex. It adds more veneer to your image of female vulnerability. As if she is searching for an artistic self. A new kind of being. But this is just someone who surrenders her whole self to sexual pleasure. And she is the perfect complement to your all-encompassing male fantasy. The eighteen year-old ingenue who is awakening to her sexual being.”

“That is gross.”

“But accurate!”

“Not at all!”

“It’s a tragic tale. The girl can gain sexual proficiency. She can get in touch with her cosmic sexuality. But she never has the words to express her liberation. She can never detach herself from her devotion to men. She is caught in her art!”

“Your reading only confirms what you’ve been saying all along. But you show no insight into what actually happens.”

“Drugs and alcohol free the inner spirit!”

“In another time, a girl’s destiny might be tied to the right marriage. She could ally her fortune with an ascendent dynasty. Now, that belief might still be inculcated in her. Like Cinderella, she is waiting for the Prince to sweep her off her feet. In her heart, she may understand the absurdity of her dream, but she takes occasional comfort from the lift that it offers her.”

“In the dream, the Prince’s kiss is worth much more than any mere physical contact. It is

the transport to a spiritual realm where all is in harmony. It wasn't as if she was surrendering herself to the world of the Prince. Her belief endowed the Prince with a purpose that may have lacked on his own. It was his duty to create the appropriate milieu where she could realize her heavenly nature!"

My examiner looks at me sternly, "You're not trying to sell me on the fact that your sex tales are of the same stuff as Cinderella."

"I want to explain the source of the objectification."

"I know all about the downside of romantic love. It is an even more severe form of objectification."

"This is all part of an effort to impose a personal view on the world. An instrumentalization. Everything becomes an object that you can experimentally affect."

"You are telling me that it is OK to act like this."

"Not at all. But it is part of an overall strategy about the world. The belief that to affect someone on a sexual level is tantamount to becoming involved with them personally."

"You believe this."

"No. But this instrumental view does explain a great deal how we act in relation to each other. If you ignore this kind of experience, you are simply idealizing human interaction."

"So if a guy just thinks of a girl as a fuck doll, that's OK."

"I'm not endorsing such an abusive viewpoint. But it is not a good idea to ignore sex as something that drives our actions."

"Pushes us to act in a certain way."

"Yes!"

"That's an excuse."

"You can resist the impulse, but it still influences you in a very deep way."

"What does that prove?"

"That we often accept the depersonalization in our lives. We recognize that we are motivated to act like consumers."

"This is OK."

"Not at all. You are the one who is more attentive to such conformity. On the other hand, I see it as the erosion of democracy. There is a history that is not available on Google. You can't discover on the internet. Because it hasn't been encoded."

"So how do you find out about it?"

"New experiences. Reading books. Talking to people."

"And this if your fascination for mechanical pleasure."

"No! But I do recognize that there is this impulse to explore different kinds of reality."

"How do you do that?"

"By giving in to these physical attractions."

"What?"

"You acknowledge that there is this power that seems to carry you along. And in the conventional world, we fixate on some object. Even a loved one. But in the supernatural realm, we dart from point to point. No one person can hold our attention for very long. At its most intense this feeling moves along without any restriction. It is frictionless. An infinite velocity. We just get carried along!"

“You are again giving credit to the libertine.”

“The opposite reaction is based on the same belief. That she is the most wonderful among all the other wonderful girls. You have to consider the others no matter how fleeting is your time of consideration. You try the glass slipper on the others.”

“She can answer the riddle?”

“You hope that she can. Part of you realizes that your belief is based on some matter. An unfulfilled variable that has nothing to do with her nature, and everything to do with what you expect for her.”

“And if you aren’t satisfied by these incredible expectation, you take it out on the world.”

“The reverse is no different. You curtail your incredible expectations to all yourself with the dominant culture. You accept an equally perverse overview of the universe.”

“Then what?”

“She will open the Seventh Seal!”

“Does she really know the equation?”

“Her body does!”

“To transform the world to fit my desire. The longer that I wait, the closer that I get to the favored resolution.”

She looks over at her friends, “I hate it here.”

I want to know why. What is it that attracts her to some ideal palace of entertainment? How is she so sure that such a place exists? I feed off her alienation.

“You don’t understand. This is not a profound form of alienation. She has simply forgotten to put the right clothes in her suitcase. When she was getting ready, she realized that they had made the mistake. She was upset for the rest of the night.”

“Who is she who thinks that she can succeed at a place like this?”