

## Issue 7, Summer 2005



*"Ontology on the go!"*

### Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Editorial  | <i>i</i>  |
| My Oily Life<br>Jesse Gotham                                       | <i>1</i>  |
| Slash Writing: Variations on a Theme<br>Kathryn L. Ramage          | <i>4</i>  |
| My Left Ear: An Inspiring Story<br>Russell Smith                   | <i>8</i>  |
| Menina e Moça: A Neglected Masterpiece<br>John Emerson             | <i>12</i> |
| John Drake-Moore Art Book<br>Ginger Mayerson                       | <i>17</i> |
| An Interview with Mike Nelson<br>Ginger Mayerson and Laurel Sutton | <i>22</i> |

This work is copyright © 2005 by The Journal of The Lincoln Heights Literary Society, PO Box 31513, Los Angeles, California 90031-0513. Copyrights for the individual articles are held by their respective author(s).

06 05 04 03 4 3 2 1

Editor in Chief - Ginger Mayerson; Editor Cache - Laurel Sutton; Art and Architecture Editor - Robin Austin; Business and Economics Editor - Ellen Bauerle; Gardening Editor - Lynn Loper; Politics Editor - James L. Capozzola; Religion Editor - Jane Seaton.

J LHLS is published three times a year on the web at [www.liheliso.com](http://www.liheliso.com).



## Editorial

Well, here we are at Issue 7, seems like only two years ago we were at Issue 1!

In Issue 7 many of our essays are from people with more than the usual insight on their subjects. We are delighted to have Jesse Gotham's essay on the culture of oil and petro-products dependency. Mr. Gotham's writing on the subject is knowledgeable, serious and entertaining, as well. Also in this issue, we have an essay on writing slash fanfiction by a real live slash fanfiction writer, our own Kathryn L. Ramage. Better known in slash circles as Kit Ramage, she has won numerous awards for her writing, including the coveted, reader-voted ASCEM awards.

Russell Smith is with us musing on the demise of Punk rock, concert going and tips on pre-mosh pit slam dancing. Ah! The good old days! John Emerson returns with an essay on the neglected and as yet to be translated into English masterpiece, *Menina e Moça*. Yours truly bumbles on and on about John Drake-Moore's paintings and the nude in art. And lastly, we finally officially publish the astonishing and, for many, alarming Mike Nelson interview.

Enjoy!

Ginger Mayerson  
Summer 2005



**Jesse Gotham**

## **My Oily Life**

It goes without saying that the United States energy situation appears very dire. With the prices at the pump going up and up and up, I finally reached a point where I had to start looking for serious alternatives.

I've done a fair amount of research on alternative fuels since my epiphany and while there are boatloads of promise on the alternative energy front, I would be a fool if I didn't realize that it would be impossible to maintain my current lifestyle without having affordable oil around. No matter how you stack our current menu of alternative energy choices, none of them exceed the usefulness and efficiency of plain, old oil.

So to prove just how entrenched we are in an oil economy, I took one hour out of my day, looked at everything I came across and asked myself, "Is oil responsible for this amenity?"

I started with the moment I woke up and started taking notes for an hour. While I tried to notice everything, I'm sure I missed a bunch. Anyways, I hope this serves as a warning to people that if energy costs rise to a point where they are no longer affordable for consumers or businesses, there are going to be some big lifestyle changes that you'll notice fairly quickly.

Here goes:

**BZZZZ!**

My plastic, electric alarm clock goes off at 6:30am. I reach over my girlfriend who is covered in the finest sheets that Target imported from China via gas-powered freighter (and then delivered to Buffalo via gas-powered transport) to hit the plastic snooze button.

The snooze button closes a switch for a second that sends an electronic signal through the series of capacitors, diodes and resistors that were soldered to a plastic circuit board. On the circuit board you will find ultra-thin wires and metals made possible by specialized machines that run on, you guessed it, oil and electricity.

The buzzing stops and I plop my head back down for a few more minutes of sleep.

**BZZZZ!**

This time I have to get up. The lightly-lit digital display reads 6:39am. I have to be to work by 7:30am and the 20 mile trek, made bearable by my gasoline-powered car, is usually pretty hectic.

So I roll out of bed and step on my synthetic fibered carpet. I walk over to the faux-wood doors of my closet and flick the switch on the light. The closet is pretty damn bare. Maybe it's time to throw some of my dirty stuff in the electric washer. Eh, it can wait a couple days longer.

I grab the cleanest set of cotton/synthetic fibered clothes I can find off the plastic hangers. The "Made in China" tags look clean enough. No ring around the collar here, folks!

So I take my threads to the bathroom and flick the lights on. Those 100-watt filaments sure bring out the redness in my eyes as I squint into the large glass mirror. I reach for my handy-dandy battery powered, plastic toothbrush, grab the plastic tube of toothpaste and squeeze a little of that pasty, chemical goo onto the plastic bristles. I wonder what goes into making this smooth, refreshing paste? I turn the plastic handle of the faucet and, what do you know, water comes right out! Just like yesterday and the day before that and the day before that...

I splash the brush under the water, press the plastic power button on my toothbrush and whisk away that nasty morning breath. Spit. Rinse.

Now it's kiln-fired, ceramic throne time. I like the cooshy plastic and foam seat that the landlord put on the toilet. It's a lot more comfortable than that old wooden one that my parents had. I grab a wad of T.P. featuring the finest "quilting" and well, you know. I hit the plastic flush button and WHOOSH! the remnants of last night's dinner are gone forever!

Shower time. I reach in the closet and grab the first imported-from-a-faraway-land towel that I see. I set it on the fake, plastic-marble sink. I push back the plastic shower curtain held by plastic rings on a manufactured steel rod. I reach in and turn the hot water on. I give it a few seconds as the gas-heated water takes a little time to make it up through the piping system.

Hot damn that water's hot! I turn the cold on a little bit and wait a few more seconds. Perfect. I step in the plastic tub and proceed to use shampoo out of a plastic bottle and a fancy bar of Zest soap.

Standing in the shower, I wonder what it takes to make a bar of soap. Is there a big oil-burning factory that pumps out the bars? I wonder how many trees that get cut down using gas-powered chainsaws go into making that 12-pack of toilet paper wrapped in plastic packaging? Rinse, rinse, rinse. The shower is done.

I turn off the water and grab my towel. I dry off and put my fresh clothes on. I go grab my stylin' plastic, G-Shock watch and put it on. Man, I love this watch. I wonder how those little parts inside it are made? I wonder how they stay still and don't break when I drop my watch on the ground... Crap. It's 7:00am and I have to get rolling!

I go back into the bathroom and grab the plastic deodorant holder. I pop the top and wipe this mystery substance all over my armpits. Smells pretty damn good if I must say so. Smells like.. a Pacific Surge! Whatever the hell that is...

I call the dog and I go and grab his synthetic fiber collar. I put it on him and then grab his plastic retractable leash. Better grab a plastic bag because you never know when he's going to do the biz on the yard. I walk him outside and he does his business. He always takes so long to find just the right spot. This is the worst part: reaching down and hoping there isn't a tear in that

plastic bag when you pick up the stuff. I get lucky yet again and my hands are clean. I take the doggy back inside.

Now it's really time to go. I grab my machine-ground keys, kiss the girlfriend and head out the fake wood door. 7:15am! Oh shit!

I hop in my car, grip the plastic steering wheel and fire up the gasoline-powered engine. I grip the plastic shifter and throw it in reverse. I pop the same goddamn plastic tape that I've been listening to for 3 months into the plastic tape deck. I grab my plastic-coated box of smokes from the plastic center console and pop one in my mouth. I reach in my pocket for my butane-filled plastic lighter and spark it up. I roll down my Plexiglas window and blow the smoke out.

I'm in desperate need of some grub so I take a little detour and stop at Manhattan Bagel. I get an gas-cooked egg and cheese bagel to go with a big Styrofoam cup of coffee. While waiting for the food to be done, I look in the back and see all this big bagel making machinery and big ovens. I'd hate to see their utility bill. I grab my grub and hop back in the car.

Why the hell do they wrap my sandwich up in all this plastic crap if I'm just going to take it off? Just more junk for the shit-vortex on my car's floor. I hop on the four-lane, interstate tar road and hit the plastic accelerator. Man, ten dollars in gas just doesn't get you that far anymore. I think I can make it to the city, though.

Wouldn't you know it, though, I hit a traffic jam. The car ahead of me smells funny. Looks like I'll be late to work again.

So there it is. Just one hour of the day and can you count the number of things that were made possible by cheap energy? Or, better yet, what things didn't require fossil fuels to be made, or to be made affordably?

It's a hard task, I know. It just goes to show you how much we take fossil fuel for granted. Everything from the mundane (shower curtain) up to the very complex (an automobile) has been made possible by the power that oil contains.

Now imagine a world where oil is in short supply. It's a scary thought and I don't blame people for not wanting to think about it but it's a reality that someday, sooner than later, we're going to have to deal with the end of cheap fuel and, in turn, cheap products.

*Jesse is an undergraduate at the University of Buffalo and is studying Civil Engineering. If you're lucky, you'll catch him blogging at <http://civillivic.blogspot.com>.*



**Kathryn L. Ramage**

## **Slash Writing: Variations on a Theme**

*Slash: homoerotic fan-fiction featuring paired characters, frequently fictional, usually both male. The term 'slash' refers to the piece of punctuation known as a virgule (/), which is used to denote a specific pairing, i.e., Kirk/Spock, Starsky/Hutch, Legolas/Aragorn.*

Articles about slash generally fall into two categories: One is the sort that takes an amused and condescending look at those weird, wacky women who like the idea of two men sexually involved with each other (Curiously, such 'aren't they weird?' comments never seem to arise over men who like watching two women together; lesbian erotica is an accepted and standard practice in the men's porn industry). The other is the scholarly study that talks about feminist paradigms and sexual rebellion in reversing gender roles.

This is neither. Such articles are views of slash that peek in from the outside. What I'd like to do is present an insider's view and, as a writer of slash, look at this particular style of fan writing as a creative process.

I've been writing slash stories for more than 25 years, since I was 16, years before I ever heard the term 'slash', or knew that other women wrote these kinds of stories too. Once I discovered slash online and began to interact with other writers, I was primarily struck by the wonderful sense of community; these were people who had the same type of fantasies and wanted to share them. Readers and writers form internet groups, meet at slash conventions with seminar discussions, and publish and distribute print magazines. I was also fascinated to learn how widespread the desire to write slash is -- that we do not simply like to imagine two attractive male characters being sexually involved with each other, but we evolve such fantasies into elaborate storytelling forms.

Slash stories can sometimes be very complicated and plot-driven, epic-length works; the sexual aspects may be secondary to the story itself, but the homoerotic elements are always there. While there is also a large body of real-person slash being written, my focus will be on fan-fiction that uses already existing fictional characters rather than real people. A writer may develop background stories for their chosen characters, family history beyond the canon, and a complex interior life. As my friend (and our beloved editor) Ginger wrote me when we were discussing this subject:

"It makes me think how [slash writers] add depth and detail to existing characters: as naturally as breathing, we breath new life into them. In writing these characters, whose original creation is not ours, are we extending them from what the original creator gave us to work with or from what's inside us or from some other place?"

This is nothing new; television and film characters already have multiple creators. Individual screenplay writers each working on separate episodes of a TV series will have different takes on the characters. Actors, also, have their own interpretations of the characters they play, which often develop and become more personal the longer they remain with the role. Fan-fiction

authors add their own layers to the characters according to their own needs and understanding, and may change them from one story to the next as need arises.

It's my belief that we begin by building on what we find in the "canon" -- fanspeak for officially sanctioned, professionally published or broadcast media, like series episodes, movies, or novels - - but use our own experiences, fantasies, and the shared ideas of other writers who work with the same pairings to take it beyond anything the original creators may have intended or even dreamed of.

Slash at its best becomes a sort of group fantasy with a ready audience, eager to read all the stories they can find about their favorite pairings and to provide feedback. A writer can also work on a one-on-one basis with 'betas,' who not only act as proofreaders and editors, but provide critical comments on how a story can be improved before it is released to a wider audience. From these group ideas, a fan-fiction canon often develops. For example, before the introduction of Julian Bashir's canonical father in the fifth season of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, the generally accepted concept among fan-fiction authors of Bashir Sr. was an overbearing diplomat or ambassador who had a neglectful or abusive relationship with his son. Such fathers can be seen in Yavanna's *Ghosts* and *The Secrets That We Keep*, and my own *Inlaws/Outlaws*.

Fan-fiction interpretations of character can be fluid. I can't speak for the creative processes of others, but when I write, I think in terms of 'possible scenarios' and 'character parameters.' For me, these are the two key variables that define the type of stories that can be done with a chosen pairing, and set the limits on how far can I take my pair while still keeping them identifiable as those characters and making what they do in a story seem plausible.

Some slash authors are interested in proving that their chosen pairing are actually lovers within the context of the canon, and will search a book, film, or TV series for any evidence of it. When I'm working on a story, however, I am indifferent to the original creator's intent; I'm not seeking to write a dissertation on Homoerotic Subtext in *Star Trek* or *The Lord of the Rings*, or whatever. I don't care what J.R.R. Tolkien intended by all those scenes of hobbits cuddling -- I only know that I like them. A slash story is not meant to be a doctoral thesis; it's a sex fantasy.

It's here that the concept of possible scenarios enters: writing a story, I will look for whatever opportunities I can find in a given source to base my ideas on, but I'm not trying to produce incontrovertible textual proof that two chosen characters are sexually involved with each other. The question is *When can it possibly happen?* not *Did it actually happen?* After all, if *Are they lovers?* were a Yes or No question with only one possible answer, then there would only be one story to write about how the chosen pairing gets together, and where's the fun in that? For me, the appeal of writing slash stories is looking at the problem of how to bring together the characters I find attractive and interesting, and looking for ways to create scenarios to tell how it could conceivably occur. Canon is used as a point of departure; speculation follows. A slash writer might ask herself (as this writer has):

- What if Crichton and D'Argo somehow remembered what Rygel and Chiana did with their bodies when everybody switched bodies in the *Farscape* episode "Out of Their Minds"?
- What if something more happened on one of those occasions when Captain Picard woke up in bed next to Q on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*?

- What kind of kinky games could Mulder and Skinner get up to with Krychek after they handcuffed him out on the balcony in the *X Files* episode "Tunguska"?
- What might have happened after Miles O'Brien and Julian Bashir got falling-down drunk in the *DS9* episode "Explorers" when Miles very nearly told Julian he loved him?
- How might Sam Gamgee resolve his feelings of being "torn in two" between Frodo and Rosie when he returned home after the quest in the final chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*?
- When G'kar accompanies Londo Mollari as his bodyguard to Centauri Prime in the final season of *Babylon 5*, can these two long-standing enemies finally achieve some resolution in their relationship after all their years of mutual antagonism -- particularly now that they share a bedroom?

In each answer lies a potential story. The same point of departure can lead to multiple story ideas, by tweaking the possibilities of *What if...?* The more opportunities to base story ideas on, the better. Some canon sources -- including some of the ones I've mentioned above -- are much more fruitful than others, hence their broad appeal to those viewers and readers with slashy tastes.

The other variable to be considered is the characters' parameters. What I do when working on a slash story is closely study the characters I've decided to write about, consider the aspects of their personalities as presented in the canon, then turn those aspects through a variety of facets to determine what is plausibly in character for them. I ask myself, *How might this person behave in a given hypothetical situation?* and then see what works from there.

This establishing of character parameters applies to any kind of fan-fiction, but in a slash story, the hypotheticals are usually concerned with idea along the lines of *What would it take for this person to admit to romantic feelings for the other half of the pairing?* or *How can these two be brought together without seeming wildly out of character?* It's a matter of seeing what you can get away with without moving the characterizations too far from their basic elements. If I can't see it happening, I can't make them do it.

Karmen Ghia's Garak/Bashir story, *Rishi Baba*, demonstrates some wide variations in its main character's parameters within one tale. This is a hypertext story, where the reader makes choices to follow different story lines, but throughout the entire story is an overlying theme that each option is an alternate reality that somehow relates to the others. The focal point of these alternative narratives is Garak, Deep Space Nine's tailor, Cardassian outcast, and sometime spy. In some alternate realities, nothing more occurs than a romantic evening between two lovers; in others, Garak commits acts of betrayal against Bashir and the whole space station. And yet all these possibilities are plausible for Garak; his character is presented as so ambiguous, even within the *DS9* canon, that neither the viewer nor Bashir is ever entirely certain of how far he can be trusted. In that ambiguity lies a trove of story possibilities -- and I suspect part of the reason for the character's appeal to slash writers.

Other, less ambiguously presented characters can also offer a range of plausible possibilities. Regardless of the characters chosen, the trick of good slash writing is to maintain those characters as recognizable, and not let the story become a generic piece of homoerotic fiction in which the two men featured might just as well be an anonymous Joe and Bob. The most

gratifying compliment I feel I can receive as a writer is "I can hear their voices speaking your dialogue," or "I can see them doing just what you've written." It tells me I've hit the mark.

The two variables I've discussed are the tools I use to achieve this -- to "set the stage," so to speak, by placing the characters in a setting, starting them off in the narrative direction I want them to go, and seeing if I can get them to an ending with at least a kiss... or a little bit more. That what all the writing is for.

**Notes:**

Yavanna's stories can be found at <http://yavanna.slashcity.net/ds9.htm>

Karmen Ghia's *Rishi Baba* is online at <http://www.memory-prime.de/LostSites/RishiBaba/index.htm>

My *Inlaws/Outlaws* is at <http://www.strangefits.com/kit/stories/INLAWS.TXT>

*Kathryn L. Ramage lives in Maryland with her cats, Austen and Lucia. She is an award-winning author of over 80 slash stories, mostly Garak/Bashir, although she has lately been devoting her attention to writing mildly homoerotic hobbit murder mysteries.*



**Russell Smith**

## **My Left Ear: An Inspiring Story**

Yes, I was one of *those* people in the mid-1980's. I couldn't let go. Punk was dead. It had its brief, extremely brief, moment under the moon and then it was no more. Unlike the hippie era, which didn't even really end until the advent of the bar code, punk exploded like a crow someone had shot with a .22 caliber bullet. Nothing left but a few scattered feathers. My friends and I were the few scattered feathers, I guess. We were still dying our hair fucked up colors. We wore makeup and took the most damaging drugs we could get our hands on. We went out dancing, or in my case, posing, nearly every night of the week.

I saw Johnny Rotten when he wasn't Johnny Rotten anymore. I went to see bands, night after night. Someone will mention a long-forgotten band, and I'll say, "Oh, I saw them!" I used to save the ticket stubs, but they got stolen out of my car during a brief living-on-other-people's-couches phase of my life. The funny thing is, I rarely remember the show. I might recall the venue, what they looked like, but for the most part I was too high to really know what was going on. I saw Nina Haagen once, and can only remember how a boy belched into her microphone. She introduced him as her 15-year-old husband.

Siouxsie and the Banshees were coming to town! What with her bout of hepatitis (wonder how she got that?) and getting beat up by a fan, she'd sort of faded out of the scene. Hope sprang when she released Hyena, but Steve Smith from the Cure was on the album, which was a bit of a taint, and there was no U.S. tour. The English, with their perpetual dole system, dreary weather and a Queen to revile were the luckiest people on Earth. We Americans, with our vast continent of a nation, full of resources, natural beauty and wealth, were blighted.

But now something worth living for was happening. Siouxsie Sioux was coming back! Her new recording, Tenderbox was released. It actually had a hit -- Cities in Dust. Could this be true? To Hell with Bauhaus and all the rest, Siouxsie was back! My friends and I bought the record and played it over and over, forcing ourselves into the double-think that makes you say and believe, "Every song is brilliant!" We bought the EP singles and listened to the B-sides. Most importantly, however, we memorized the concert dates as soon as they were released.

Living in D.C., I figured that I would start my pilgrimage of concerts there. Of course, I'd miss her New York debut, but money was tight and for the first leg of the tour, I decided I'd let Mohamed come to the mountain. She played the National Theater -- a perfect venue with its neo-classical design. My closest friend, David (now dead) worked for a florist across the street from the theater. Before the show, we snorted coke, smoked pot and debated what the opening song would be. I won the argument. She opened with Cities in Dust.

Oh, the rush! I'll never forget when she came on stage in full makeup. Despite the assigned seating, the crowd immediately rushed the stage, climbing over chairs and other people. At the time, I weighed 190 pounds and I'm still 6 foot, 2 inches tall. I was able to push myself front and center. What a show! I'll never forget it. I felt as though Souixsie was looking right at me throughout the concert and that every song was dedicated to me. She rolled around on the stage,

pulled her hair, howled mightily into the microphone and exhibited herself with pagan abandon. It was a performance of a lifetime.

Interestingly, I met my first lover at this concert. That's another story for another day, but needless to say, he was a Siouxsie freak like me. His name was Charlie and he was totally on board with the Siouxsie train that would follow her to the next show. Our group at this point included David and I, Charlie and two girls: Ashley and Jennifer. Jennifer had slept with the guitar player after an earlier show, so she was great to have in our group. (Pretty girls make *entrée* backstage so much easier.)

The next show was in Virginia Beach. That's in Virginia. It's about a 6 hour drive from D.C. to Virginia Beach. The day of the show we got up at the hairy crack of dawn and drove down in two cars. First stop was to see my sister, who lived in V.B. at the time. She and her husband and 5 year old step-daughter were bemused, shall we say, at our crew in paisley shorts, black hair and liquid eyeliner. Did I mention they were (and still are) Southern Baptists? It was a brief visit and then we were off to the beach for some pre-show surf and turf.

It was a beautiful summer day. How we played in the sun with youthful abandon. We acted as obnoxious as possible, cursing, tossing star fish at each other. Played rough. Simulated sex on the sand. Anything for attention. We had a fever. We were frantic waiting for the show and all that coke we were snorting didn't help calm our nerves.

The name of the venue was the Boat House. Not an auspicious name. It hinted of rednecks with crab mallets. Not to be deterred, we found the place and listened to the band from outside practicing for the show. We discussed backstage access strategies. We predicted the play list. Would it be the same as the last show? Was that a different song from the previous date emanating from the Boat House?

The Boat House had general admission, which of course pleased Charlie and me. He was even bigger than me and with our leather jackets, we made an invincible juggernaut to the front of the stage. We had our places before Siouxsie even came out. (How did we tolerate the mediocre opening acts back in those days? I guess the drugs really helped get through those ordeals.)

Now long before the phrase moshing was coined, we had a term called slam dancing. It's the same thing. Because of all those pesky seats nailed down to the floor of the National Theater, there was no room for slamming. Here at the Boat House, the entire floor was clear. It didn't take too long after the show commenced for the slamming to begin. Charlie, David and I were too busy drinking in every sight and sound of Siouxsie to worry about any activity that might be taking place behind us. Ashley and Jennifer were dispensable until after the show and it was time to wiggle our way around security guards and roadies in order to secure an audience with the Great One.

The three of us took indiscrete bumps of coke throughout the beginning of the show. With no weed to take the edge off, my brain began to feel like a steam engine and the music began to act on my body like a lubricant on a giant piston. It was during the song "Monitor," that I looked behind me and realized that a mob of dozens of people were slam dancing in earnest. People

weren't trying to push past me to see the Great Goddess. How dare they not worship her in the same manner as I? Go see Black Flag and bash into each other! My outrage was such that I jumped into the mix and began slamming with all my might into anyone who came near.

How does one describe the total abandon of slam dancing? I had no shirt on because the Boat House was more like a steam house. The shirt that I'd worn into the joint was lost on the floor somewhere. Who cared? I was like an asteroid, bouncing against other asteroids, except these asteroids had body fluids: spit, sweat, blood. Better analogy. We were like excited molecules darting about and the globules of our excretions were like electrons forming a cloud above us. The concrete floor was slick. My mind was gone.

It all happened so quickly. The treads of my shit kicker Doc Martins failed me. Someone bigger than me broad-sided me. I was on the ground in an instant. I remember hearing above the din of the mind-numbing speakers the sound of my head as it hit the concrete. What to do? Luckily, my reptile brain kicked in and I began to struggle back to my feet. Someone stepped on my hand. No big deal. Someone kicked me in the head. No big deal. I got back on my feet and staggered back to the stage where Charlie and David were still ensconced.

As I jostled between Charlie and David, they both turned to look at me. Their expressions said it all. I was pretty jacked up. That wasn't just sweat and spit and snot all over me. Copious amounts of blood were also included in the recipe. Charlie, who had been guarding my leather jacket, threw it over me. "You're all scratched up!" he shouted in my ear. "Your nose is bleeding!" I was very proud. Very proud indeed. I was butch. I was a rough cut. I could slam with the best of them. The aches and pains would come later. Siouxsie had given me all she had to give and I had returned the favor. I don't remember much more of the show.

My memory of the drive home is a blur. We didn't get back stage. Jennifer and Ashley managed to use their charms to get themselves into the inner sanctum, but strangely enough, they never came back to get us. We left them and their car behind. Us three boys drove all night back to D.C. I remember pulling over on the highway for a brief snooze at one point, but we returned home shortly after dawn.

Charlie's comedown from the coke was pretty rough. He did a lot of screaming. It seemed to bother David a lot, but I wasn't disturbed. What was he screaming about? Oh, I was grinding the gears. I was driving on the wrong side of the road. Why did he have to be so emotional?

David and I shared an apartment. The three of us staggered in about 8 o'clock in the morning. I got first dibs on the shower. The hot water and soap did sting my flesh. And I loved it. My ears rang from the residual damage caused, no doubt, by the volume of the loudspeakers at the show.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Charlie and David were screaming at each other, but it was like cotton stuffed in my ears, so I was able to nestle into my bed in the dining room of our little apartment. I began to dig into my ears with some Q-tips. The right one just contained the usual disgusting wax, but the left ear yielded up a surprise. Blood! How lovely! I showed it to Charlie and David, who took a break from their screaming match. They were impressed and that pleased me.

It was time to call in sick at my place of employment, where I worked as a photocopier. Through the ringing in my ears, and over the sound of Charlie and David arguing, I managed to hear the news that I was no longer employed as a photocopier. I found out that I couldn't just show up at work whenever I felt like it. That was a drag. But I knew I'd get over it.

As the days and weeks passed, Charlie and David grew ever more acrimonious to one another. I eventually moved out of David's apartment and Charlie and I set up house in a basement apartment situated in the heart of D.C.'s heroin district. The ringing in my right ear went away after a few days. My left ear still rings, twenty years later.

Next column: My Stabbing: a gruesome tale

*Russell Smith is a recent ex-smoker and currently undergoing electroshock treatment.*



**John Emerson**

## **Menina e Moça: A Neglected Masterpiece**

*"I shall soon be quite dead in spite of all. Perhaps next month."*

(Samuel Beckett, Malone Dies)

*"Die Welt der Glücklichen ist eine andere als die der Unglücklichen."*

(Wittgenstein, Tractatus 6:43)

*Many thanks to Cecile Lombard for her encouragement and support.*

It's a scandal that, after 500 years, the astonishing Portuguese fiction *Menina e Moça* has still not been translated into English.

This dark, beautifully-written book describes an unhappy world ruled by constant change. The characters' lives are driven by blind compulsion and unknown forces -- fate, curses, haunts, and omens. The story takes place in an unknown land, and all of the characters are exiles whose pasts are unknown. The narrator has been doubly exiled -- first from her childhood home for unknown reasons, and later from her new home because of abandonment by her lover, whose whereabouts is unknown.

*A girl and a child, I was taken from my mother's house to distant lands; as for why I was taken away .... I was little, I didn't understand....*

*For my peace of mind (if such a thing there might be, together with such sadness and regret) I chose to live near this mountain, where both the place and the lack of human company are right for my feelings -- for it would have been a great mistake, after witnessing so many troubles with these eyes of mine, still to venture to hope for that peace from the world, which it never gives to anyone. ...long sought, and sought forever. It was a great misfortune which had made me sad -- and perhaps what had made me happy, as well. But after I had seen so many things changed into others, and happiness turned into intense pain, such emotions came over me that the good that I had had pained me more than the evils that still were with me.*

She has come to a deserted place to live as an recluse and wait for death to come. The world she sees is one of constant change, almost always for the worse: only sorrow, it seems, is eternal. The narrator is at the limit of her strength, and might be thought to be suffering from clinical depression or delusion. In the book, however, she has been doomed by an evil fate and is being tormented by dark forces; we should not psychologize prematurely. It is a credit to the sharpness of the writing and observation that the psychological interpretation is quite possible, though not necessary.

*Thus it came to seem to me that I had already been looking for these transformations in which I saw myself here, when I had been more pleased by this land where it took place*

*than by any other, and chose it to finish the few days of life that I thought remained to me....*

*And being here alone, so far from all others, and farther still from myself -- where I never see anything but the hills on one side, which never change, and on the other the waters of the sea, which are never still -- I thought that finally I would escape from ill fortune, since first my ill fortune and then I myself, with all the power that either of us had, had made sure to leave no place in me where new griefs might lodge....*

*For up until now I have gone about amazed at myself at how long sorrow can last after the cause of it is gone, and at how time does not destroy it the way it does all the other things that exist....*

*But it seems that misfortune can transform itself into new misfortune, whereas something good does not become a new good....*

*The more so since in the unfinished parts there will be nothing new for me; for when have I ever seen happiness fulfilled, or trouble that came to an end?....*

*But there is nothing secure; for change rules everything....*

The narrator's life has never been under her control, but has been ruled by fate and curses. Even the choices she makes herself seem doomed to self-destructiveness and failure. Finally she decides to write down her story, she knows not why.

*Now I can only believe that I was already meant to be, then, what I later came to be.....*

*I then came to understand that the pity I felt for others, I should have felt just as much for myself, if I had not been much more in love with my misery than the one who was the cause of it seems to have been with me; but so great was the logic of my sadness, that no trouble ever came to me but that I would have gone myself to search for it.*

*But in this, as in many other things, I deceived myself. Now it has already been two years that I have been here, and I still do not know when my last hour awaits me -- it cannot be far. This made me doubt whether to write down the things I had seen and heard. But afterwards, thinking to myself, I said to myself that the fear of not finishing the writing what I had seen was no reason not to do it, since I had no one to write for, except for myself alone...*

*I well knew that I was not ready for this task which I now wanted to begin, for to write anything requires tranquility -- and me, my troubles draw me now to one side, and now to the other; they compel me so, that I am forced to take the words that they give me. I am not driven to serve art, so much as my own sorrow. Many flaws will be found in my little book, but they came from my fate. But who is it that asks me to look for flaws, or for excuses? The book will be what is comes to be written in it. Of unhappy things it is not possible to write in an orderly way, since their occurrence is so disorderly.*

The narrator tells us little of her own story, nor does she tell us of things she has seen herself. Instead she retells stories told by a mysterious Lady of Ancient Time, who appears on the scene from a place unknown. The Lady, too talks little about her past, but she is also living as a recluse, in mourning for her son. The stories she tells are those she has been told by her father, who in turn had heard them from others -- we are drawn into a culture of embedded storytelling reminiscent of Cervantes or Jan Potocki.

It seems possible that the Lady herself and many of the things she tells about are hallucinatory projections of the first narrator, and equally that the Lady and many of the things she tells about are ghosts and hauntings, the visible expressions of the dark forces.

*And it so happened that, in a strange way, I was transported to a place where my own pain was reenacted before my eyes in others' lives; and my ears did not escape their own share of woe.*

The Lady's stories are feminist transformations of the storytelling she remembers from her childhood:

*When I was young in my father's house, during the long evenings of the fearful winter nights with the other women of the house, some spinning and the others weaving, we decided that in order to distract ourselves from the work one of us should tell stories, so that the evening would not seem so long. A woman of the house, who was already old and had seen and heard many things, would claim that as the oldest, that office was hers, and she would tell us stories of knights-errant. And truly the outrages and great adventures that she described them undergoing in the service of their ladies made me feel sorry for them.*

The Lady speaks of the haunted valley where they find themselves:

*To you, tears should not be unfamiliar, since it pleased you to find solitary places like this one where we find ourselves, which once in a different time, it is said, were peopled with noble knights and lovely ladies. And yet to day in places around here, shepherdesses find pieces of armor and jewels of great price, which makes the shades of this valley seem sadder than others. No one knows where the disorder of this world will stop: at one time, these valleys were well-populated which are now desert; gentlefolk used to go, where there are now only wild beasts; the former abandoned what the latter then took. Why were there such transformations in this sole land? But it seems that the very land was transformed, like the things on it; and this is because the time for happiness had passed, and the time had come for being sad.*

The feminism of the book is explicit, and involves the complete rejection not only of the conventions of courtly romance, but also of the whole male culture of valor. It is women who have no control over their lives, not men.

*This is enough for the sadness of women, who do not have the remedies for trouble that men do; for in the little time that I have lived, I have learned that there is no sadness*

*among men; only women are sad; for when troubles see that men are always moving this way and that and, as is often true, with the continual changes things sometimes are scattered and sometimes lost, and that these various activities obstruct them most of the time, they turn toward the poor women, either because they are wearied by the changes, or because the women have nowhere to hide....*

*For I believed that a knight, stoutly armed on his splendid steed and passing through the laughing countryside by a riverbank, could live as sadly as a frail damsel in a lofty apartment, reclining on her bench, walled-in, alone, surrounded by high walls, and guarded with such force for such a weak creature -- great precautions being made to take away her freedom, but to keep distress from reaching her, very few. But knights have ways to make themselves seem sadder than they really are; and damsels, few to show that they are really sadder than they seem....*

The narrator speaks of the sadness of her book:

*Anyone who is sad can read it; but there will be no men among them, since mercy is to be found in women; women, because men are all heartless. But it was not for those women that I made this, for since their own trouble is so great, and they cannot respond to that of others except by becoming even sadder, it would be wrong for me to want them to read it; but instead I beg them to flee from it and from all sad things, since even so the days are few in which they will be able to be joyful; for thus was it ordained by the misfortune of their birth.*

The unhappy world of *Menina e Moça* is not medieval or even Renaissance, despite the style. This is the paranoid early-modern world of Descartes' lying God (or Don Quixote's enchanters), and there are many hints of the neo-Platonist or Manichaeic belief that human souls are trapped in an evil world of matter ruled by Heraclitean struggle and continuous malign change. Even inanimate objects seem to be fighting one another. Sitting by the river watching a rock in the current, the narrator reflects:

*I had raised my eyes to look there, and began to think about the way that even things without consciousness cause trouble for one another, and thus I learned to take some comfort in the midst of my own distress. The boulder was troubling the current which wanted to go its way, just as earlier my own ill fortune had been doing with everything I most desired -- though now I no longer desired anything.*

In the world of the lying God, we cannot even trust our own minds:

*Our fates fit us with some kind of blinders, so that we cannot see the things right before our eyes. Everything is switched around, so that we cannot understand it; and so we are overcome by our troubles when we are least aware, so that we mourn at once both the good that we lost, and the harm that we afterwards received.*

In one passage, a shepherd expresses ideas about good and even reminiscent of those of the Manichaeic Cathars, who had still survived (especially among itinerants such as shepherds) at least as late as 1318 (about two centuries before the book was written):

*"The earth is well supplied with pasture, and just as good springs up, so does evil. And once I heard speak a great man who attended to things of the other world, who said of the peopling of this land (which, though you see it in many places gone to brush, is in many places populated with herdsmen) that this is one of the marvels of nature, that from a single land could be born two things so opposed to one another. And this is true not only of animals, but of men also: for there is no evil except where there is good, and there are no thieves except where there is something to steal.*

Ribeiro's book was first published by Portuguese Jewish publishing houses in exile in Italy and Germany, and there are also other reasons to believe that Ribeiro (or the authoress) might have been from a *converso* family of dubious orthodoxy, and that in the first half of the sixteenth century he had been forced by the Inquisition to leave Portugal. Helder Macedo's book argues all this in detail, showing us that the cultural world of Ribeiro's time was exceptionally rich and also exceptionally confused. It seems quite possible that if an exiled and distressed Jewish/Christian poet, male or female, who had received neo-Platonist, humanist, evangelical, mystical, and/or Manichaeic influences, had written a book, *Menina e Moça* might be that book. Without committing to any specific theory either about Ribeiro's original beliefs or about the disaster which I think that we can assume that he suffered, I think that in *Menina e Moça* we can see a response by a man (or woman) from the rich pre-modern tradition responding to the cruelties of the early modern period, such as the Inquisition.

My hope is that someone seeing this essay, after coming to appreciate the power and interest of the book, will commission and publish a translation so that everyone can experience its strange and beautiful darkness.

Notes:

Ribeiro and his book (<http://www.idiocentrism.com/menina3.htm>)

The *Menina e Moca* Project: translation project, sources, links  
(<http://www.idiocentrism.com/ribeiro2.htm>)

Portuguese texts of some of this page (transcribed by me)  
(<http://www.idiocentrism.com/meninatx.htm>)

*Born in rural Minnesota in 1946, in 2002 John J. Emerson took early retirement from an undistinguished career in the medical field to devote himself to writing and study. He graduated from Portland State University in 1980 after having attended Reed College. He lived in Taiwan for a year in 1983 and loved it. He is divorced, separated, or single with a grown son who is a musician, and lives in poverty in Portland, Oregon. Please visit his site, Idiocentrism (<http://www.idiocentrism.com>), for more of his essays.*



**Ginger Mayerson**

## **John Drake-Moore Art Book**

Since the rise of the Catholic Church in the West, nudes in painting have been a subversive mode of expression. In the past, the only way for painters to transgress the mores of their day and have a nude in their work was to feature it in religious or allegorical subjects. Painting miles of flesh -- rendering the most sensual of the tactile delights in paint -- in the context of the denial of flesh was the only way to go for much of Western art history. Most of Western society has moved beyond the shock value of the naked human form, moved even beyond the fidelity of its rendering and into its abstraction. Nowadays, the transgression is not the nude, but the message; the nude is merely the messenger. Whether this is a promotion or demotion for the nude in art is debatable, but in a recent book by John Drake-Moore collecting his figurative paintings, mostly nudes, the whole subject gets a run for its money.

Mr. Moore has spent his life in art. He was art director on three epic films in the 1960s: *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Fifty-Five Days at Peking*, and *El Cid*. He was nominated for an Academy Award in 1962 for his art direction on *El Cid*. He also has an extensive background as an art director in television, theater, opera, and ballet. During a lifetime of working with beauty - looking, examining, arranging, evaluating, and creating for large-scale, public spectacles -- Mr. Moore has over the course of his career turned his highly refined eye on history, society, and nature and rendered them more privately in his own paintings. Twenty-seven of these paintings are collected in his new book, *John Drake-Moore*.

As if to bring the tradition of the nude in art full circle, Mr. Moore's chosen medium is tempera. Egg tempera was used by the ancient Egyptians and Greeks and perfected by the icon painters during the last 100 years of the Byzantine Empire. Egg tempera was the predominant painting medium up to the 16th century, when oil painting replaced it as the technique of choice. There was a revival of tempera technique in the 19th and 20th centuries with Christina Herringham, Thomas Hart Benton, and Andrew Wyeth choosing tempera as their medium of expression.

It is impossible to "fling paint on the canvas" using egg tempera. Because it is a time-consuming technique, it causes the painter to spend more time than usual with his materials, and leads to a depth of color not usually attained in other media. The artist must manufacture the paints himself by mixing finely ground pigment, water, and diluted egg yolk in exact proportions. In addition to making the paint, the artist must also prepare the ground on which to paint. This is a painstaking process of building up enough layers of a specially prepared glue-like substance and then sanding them to a glassy smooth surface without exposing the wood or canvas backing. The paint is then applied to the ground by building up thin layers of color from dark to light and using cross-hatching and spattering from the bristles of a paint or tooth brush to attain each area of color, thus achieving the unique surface of an egg tempera painting. The amount of preparation for painting alone are is staggering. The almost ceremonial preparation and application of paint in Mr. Moore's technique have, I believe, contributed greatly to the clarity of color, form and the sense of calm in his finished paintings.

Looking at the paintings as collected in *John Drake-Moore* is like looking into a moonlit pool. The enticing and luminous surface belies the depths within. These are paintings not just for looking at, but also for thinking about.

Only five of the twenty-seven paintings are objects: *Sea Anemone*, *Clockwork Orange*, *Melograno*, *Nestegg*, and *Reliquary*. The first four of this list are plays upon nature; however, these natural objects are rendered with armor plating. Although the viewer is given a look at the tempting insides of *Clockwork Orange* and *Melograno* (pomegranate), these spheres give the impression that any approach, let alone assault, would be efficiently repelled. *Sea Anemone* and *Nestegg* are fully armored and, though their glossy curves cry out for a caress, are even more forbidding than their fellow orchard-dwelling subjects. *Reliquary* presents two jeweled and steel filigreed gloves and gauntlets containing a small, windowed compartment for what look like a leg and thigh bone from a chicken. Why these bones require a resting place that looks capable of withstanding an anti-tank missile assault is not obvious in this painting.

Thus these inanimate objects all share the dubious virtue of being impenetrable. Nature's vulnerability and ability to feed, clothe, shelter, and generally prosper mankind has worked in humanity's favor for eons. Possibly humans have overstepped nature's generosity and these paintings make a humorous play on what might otherwise be a cautionary tale. Self-protection is a basic human reflex, but taken to an extreme can lead to things like armored tanks. And is an armored melograno really that much more absurd than an armored tank?

The remaining paintings in Mr. Moore's book are of humans, real or imagined, rendered in vivid color and clean round lines, vaguely reminiscent of Rousseau, Modigliani, and Henry Moore, but with a hint of cartoonishness to make them less immediately disturbing. In the majority of these paintings the subject is engaging the viewer with large, luminous, beautiful eyes and unflinching gaze. The eyes might not be the first thing one notices, but it is what has stayed with this particular viewer. And, in the spirit of full disclosure, the first thing this viewer did notice about these paintings were the curves and mounds of creamy flesh in all their glossy, full-color glory.

The paintings of humans fall into roughly four categories: Mythology, Socio-Political, Historical, and Religious.

There is the usual mythology crowd -- Persephone, Eros, the Graces -- and they are rendered in Mr. Moore's style as elegantly as all his other subjects. Persephone and the Graces are from an earlier period in Mr. Moore's work and have a slightly different look: longer lines, smaller features, mottled backgrounds, and they are not staring out of the canvas at the viewer in a disturbing manner. In fact, the Graces are so engrossed in each other that they are completely ignoring the viewer: the viewer can admire and then ignore them too. *Eros Amor* is contorting himself into a hopeful and obviously erotic stance (however off-putting his glassy stare might be) as he gazes out of the frame over an open pomegranate. The pomegranate makes another and crucial appearance in *Persephone*, who is staring blandly out of the canvas and eating the fateful six seeds from the pomegranate lodged in her vagina. The idea that Persephone's sexual desire imprisoned her in the underworld for most of the year is an intriguing one. The possibility that a weakening of resolve in favor of pleasure resulted in captivity is tantalizing. Persephone's bland gaze, making her seem almost resigned to her fate, transforms her into more of a voluptuous and

sybaritic character, rather than a victim of Hades. It's as if at any moment she might say, "I'm human and I need to get laid". Well, hey, why not?

The Socio-Political paintings are as straightforward as anything in this collection. They are of strippers and lesbians looking at the viewer while dancing. There are no challenges in these three paintings as there is nothing to challenge; these women are what they are and there is no visible conflict in them. I found the *Skinhead Stripper* the most amusing, with the swastika on her ass and her lace stockings and garter belt. Politics is everywhere, even in stripping; but in a fascist world order, how or where would a stripper, however politically pure, self-actualized, and/or self-possessed, really fit in?

There are many fine examples of historical subjects, too many to mention all of them here. However, *Cleopatra*, with her blue skin and golden nipples, and *The Queen of Sheba*, with her warm brown eyes and skinny arms, stand out as beautiful paintings of beautiful women. Mr. Moore's version of their beauty does not at all diminish their power and presence. From what we know about Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba, these women were capable rulers of their nations and were respected for that in their time. These could be court paintings, if time travel were possible or Velazquez had studied with Matisse.

Sex, death, and religion seem to go hand in hand in many of the religious paintings. In *Cardinal Who*, a skeleton looks out at the viewer from behind a pair of jet-black shades. Clothed in a red cloak decorated with scenes from the Kama Sutra (I assume), a Mickey Mouse watch on his bony wrist and rings on every fleshless finger, this representation of authority and destruction strikes the viewer as more a protest of the abuse of power than any meaningful exploration of it.

Another religious subject is *Judith and Holofernes*. The story goes that the Jewish widow, Judith, seduced Holofernes, an enemy General, and cut off his head to save her community. The actual moment of decapitation has been depicted countless times, most famously by Caravaggio and Gentileschi. Mr. Moore presents the viewer with the decapitation as an accomplished fact: Judith, holding Holofernes' head, gazes out of the canvas. She is grimly victorious, resolute, and bare-breasted. She defies the viewer to find fault or even question her actions. This display of female power, however lethal and disturbing, brings the viewer into contact, and possibly conflict, with the eroticism and anti-eroticism of violence in this collection of paintings.

There is in Mr. Moore's work an almost boomerang form of eroticism. To illustrate this, let us look at the reverse eroticism of, oh, say, Bibendum, the Michelin Man. At first glance, there's nothing erotic or alluring about the embodiment of Michelin tires. But a longer look sparks the possibilities of all those layers and textures, well, that's why humans have creative imaginations, isn't it?

The inverse is true of Mr. Moore's nudes; the initial reaction is SEXY NUDES! But after spending time looking at and thinking about them, the simple forms in their uniformity are not so much for lurid titillation, but a lure for deeper ontological contemplation. For example: Desdemona being strangled and penetrated by Othello while they both gaze blandly from the canvas, as if daring the viewer to object, let alone intervene. This is indeed erotic in a homicidal way; however, there is more than merely snuff titillation being conveyed.

Thinking through this painting slowly, the following ideas flow from it: It is possible that husbands do strangle their wives while copulating with them. It is possible that this occurs between interracial couples as often as it occurs between monoracial couples. It is possible that they are both naked while this is happening. It is possible that in many cases the strangulation is not fatal, merely auto-erotic. This was not the case for the fictional Othello and Desdemona. In the context of this painting, it is possible to find it erotic at first blush and then perhaps even afterwards, but the underlying act of murder -- uxoricide during sex -- and the undeniable horror and wrongness of it, takes the bloom off the arousal. However, if the viewer is not drawn to the eroticism of this particular painting and thereby seduced into looking beyond its outward forms, the viewer would never see the underlying message. Of course, it is possible to miss the point of this painting entirely, but there is always another painting to drive the same or similar message home.

Such a one is *Salome and John the Baptist*. There is a decapitation theme in these paintings: in addition to Salome holding John the Baptist's head, Judith (as mentioned above) is holding Holofernes' and *Bloody Mary* seems to be holding her own (and wearing a very nice chastity belt while she's at it, too). Whereas Judith and Mary are merely holding their respective heads, Salome seems to be having sex with John the Baptist's head. As usual, they are both staring out of the canvas, as if daring anyone to find anything unusual in it.

While the viewer might reasonably examine Salome's breasts, pudendum, hair, jewelry, etc., it is finally the relentless, bland stare of Salome's insanity that one is left with. That her frustrated lust for John led to a sexual obsession that became a homicidal passion that, in this painting, ultimately led to necrophilia is all there, right in front of everyone.

There are many paintings of Salome with John the Baptist's head and she usually looks crazier than a loon in them. In Mr. Moore's depiction, Salome looks bored; just bored that her toy is not as amusing as she thought it was going to be. It is left to the viewer to cognize the horror and the madness of the scene from the elements of the scene itself. This is not difficult, once the viewer gets past the eyes, the jewels, the genitalia, and notices the greenish cast of John's head and the blood on Salome's hands. At bottom, Salome -- in opera, paint, film, or any medium -- has never been a pretty story, and Mr. Moore does not sugar-coat it here. He has rendered the subject in this painting as a sharp blow to the solar plexus, which is perhaps how it should always be.

In many ways, the West has sensationalized sex, violence, and sexual violence to the point that they have little meaning for desensitized viewers of them. Victimization has become merely another spectacle for mass consumption. In Mr. Moore's paintings, the true impact of the violent imagery, however well-rendered or nearly cartoonish, is not that the viewer is seduced into examining what appears to be a harmless representation of a well-known story, but that the comfort and detachment from the subject depicted can't be maintained and the full horror of what the viewer is examining eventually hits home. As Jesus said, the truth shall set you free, only in his case, it got him nailed up on a cross by the Romans. However, we are modern people and in the same way we can look at nudes in art without requiring an officially sanctioned context, we can take the truth straight, no chaser. Or so it is hoped.

The book itself is a pleasure to look at and even to hold in the hands. Its dimensions are 8.5" by 8.5" and each painting has, in addition to its own page on the right, a name page on the left, so the viewer's contemplation of the image is not diluted in any way. For myself, I would have liked this book to have included a list of titles, dimensions of the original canvases, dates of creation, and in what collection the painting now resides. The more interested I became in these paintings, the more I wanted to know about them in the physical world. Also, information on where the book was printed, paper content, production process, etc., would have been interesting to me because the book is extremely well made. However, the lack of such data does not detract from the pleasures of this book.

Mr. Moore is a direct descendant of the great English sea captain, Sir Francis Drake, as well as a diverse line that includes brigand chiefs and pirates. Genetics aside, he hardly needs the approval of his ancestors to look life and all its manifestations directly in the eye and paint it. He does, and leaves the rest to the viewer.

*Mr. Moore used to have a webpage with all the paintings on it at [www.johndrakemoore.com](http://www.johndrakemoore.com), but it seems to be no more. The three images in this review were salvaged from Sequential Tart ([http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/nov04/cv\\_1104\\_4.shtml](http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/nov04/cv_1104_4.shtml)) when this essay originally appeared there in November 2004.*

*Ginger Mayerson ([www.gingermayerson.com](http://www.gingermayerson.com)) is an editor and contributor at the Journal of the Lincoln Heights Literary Society.*



## Ginger Mayerson and Laurel Sutton

### An Interview with Mike Nelson

*"Mike Nelson is one of the country's premier comedy writers. A critic's favorite as long time host and head writer for the legendary Mystery Science Theater 3000, Mike led the writing staff to three Emmy nominations, four Cable ACE nominations, and received the prestigious Peabody Award for Excellence in Broadcasting. The show was also honored with a special induction into the Museum of Television and Radio." From his webpage (<http://www.michaeljnelson.com/home/>) Mr. Nelson gave this interview to editors Mayerson and Sutton in February of 2004.*

**Laurel Sutton:** Many of your pieces are about everyday life and things going on in the media. What do you read or watch to keep up with current affairs? Daily newspapers, online columnists, magazines? Do you read any comic strips daily?

**Mike Nelson:** I get the analog version of The Wall Street Journal and USA Today (I know, I know. It's for the Sports section and the fact that my eldest son loves the national weather map.) Also, almost every morning I peruse many, many online papers including "The Washington Post," "The Washington Times," and "The New York Times." Occasionally "The Jerusalem Post."

**LS:** What fiction are you currently reading?

**MN:** I'm one of those unfocused people who has eight books going at once. I'm finishing a very large work of non-fiction by the almost supernaturally brilliant Paul Johnson called *Modern Times*, a history of the world since WWI. I've also started working through the one volume Martin Gilbert biography of Churchill. That leaves little room for fiction, but I'm a few chapters into *Washington Square*, and part of the way through Wodehouse's *Spring Fever*. Don't think for a minute I make my way very speedily through any of them, however.

**LS:** Do you consider yourself a writer or a journalist? What's the distinction?

**MN:** I'm most certainly a writer. I have no journalistic training and no interest in getting any. I think the distinction is accountability, and frankly, I don't want to have any. What I mean is, I want to serve the laugh first, and sometimes that means being sloppy with facts.

**LS:** Which writers should be required reading for other writers? Which humor writers set the standard?

**MN:** Wodehouse is absolutely the gold standard. It's almost unfair how good he was, how long he wrote, and how easy, generous and agreeable his prose is. I also love Benchley, a lot of S.J. Perelman, Mark Twain, Peter DeVries, and, yes, even A.A. Milne. Of course, you have to read *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis.

**LS:** Your writing shows a wonderful attention to detail - it's obvious how much care you put into choosing the correct word or turn of phrase, and what a keen eye you have for the writing you

parody (*Young Master Chillingshead*, for example). Why is there so much bad and sloppy writing getting published? Is it really worse now, or are we just more aware of it?

**MN:** You're very kind to say it, and yes, I do agonize over the prose. Here's my high-handed and probably completely misguided theory as to why sloppy writing is so popular: I believe that Americans have a terrible fear of being seen as Bourgeois in any way, consequently, we tend to admire those about whose work we can say, "Hey, I could do that." It's true in art and music, too. If Beethoven produced his ninth symphony today, we'd say, "Who does that guy think he is, getting all above himself? Get him!" Then they'd tear him apart like a baked chicken. (Okay, perhaps not.)

**LS:** Is there a connection between your musical training and your writing? Are there lessons or habits you learned as a musician that carry over into being a writer?

**MN:** Maybe I'm forcing this one, but in really studying music, you can almost feel the thrill that the composer must have felt when he gets on to something exciting. I've felt that in writing at various times (admittedly, quite rarely), where I'm just happy to have discovered something that I'm pretty sure will bring joy to people. I hope that doesn't come across as arrogant, because I'm not trying to elevate myself. I'm just trying to express the thrill of the dialogue of writing, where you can feel that connection with the reader, however remote.

**LS:** In an interview, you said you were trying to raise your children in a Christian household. What does that mean to you? How do you try to live a Christian life?

**MN:** Well, it's difficult, especially in this day and age, to talk about it in public without either embarrassing a lot of people or coming across like a weirdo, but it's the very centerpiece of our lives. We're heavily involved in our church, my wife works with youth groups and churches as her profession, and almost every career and life decision I make depends upon it.

Incidentally, I do a great deal of reading and study of Christian Ethics and Apologetics, especially J.P. Moreland, Norman Geisler, Greg Koukl, Francis Beckwith and William Lane Craig. And, on a different level, there's always the warm embrace of C.S. Lewis.

**LS:** What place does religion have in our lives? Can you be moral without belief in God?

**MN:** Well, as a Judeo-Christian nation, there's obviously a great tradition of religion, but I do think there now seems to be a phobia about speaking of it in the public sphere. It's too bad, because it closes off a gigantic, well-developed and thorough intellectual discipline. (And I happen to believe there's that whole "saving your soul" issue, that I wouldn't want people to lose sight of.) As the apologist Greg Koukl is fond of pointing out, Christianity is well-equipped to compete in the marketplace of ideas.

And obviously, you can be a wonderful, completely moral, thoroughly beautiful human being without a belief in God (I think it's much more difficult, and you'd be pulling it off in spite of your beliefs, not because of them.) But on the intellectual plane, many Atheist thinkers have tried to construct a framework for morality and all of them have been unconvincing. To my thinking,

"morality" is meaningless unless you talk about "absolute morality." And you can't do that without bringing God into it.

**LS:** Kevin Murphy described you as "perhaps the funniest person alive". Do you agree with this assessment? If it's not you, who is the funniest person alive?

**MN:** I think Kevin meant to say that about Carrot Top. But, no, I don't agree. At various times, I think certain friends of mine are the funniest people alive.

**LS:** What did you have for breakfast this morning?

**MN:** My own home-roasted coffee.

### **Political**

Ginger Mayerson: Do you have any idea what GW Bush's appeal is?

**MN:** Clarity, I think. And his shoes.

**LS:** Is John Ashcroft really Caligula?

**MN:** Did he say that? 'Cause that's a bad slogan for himself. His people should have caught that.

**GM:** If John Ashcroft could be Caligula for a day, what's the first thing he'd do?

**MN:** Well, clearly he'd [unprintable].

**LS:** Do you agree with GB Shaw that "Democracy is a device that insures we shall be governed no better than we deserve"? Do we deserve the current administration?

**MN:** It sounds good, but like lots of those clever sayings, it probably bottoms out in practice. And yes, I think approximately 48.25% of us deserve the current administration.

**GM:** As a musician, how do you feel about the whole Music Industry vs. the Music Lovers Downloading mp3 scene? Is the RIAA really Caligula? Or are they just Luddites trying to twist a few more dollars out of the decaying carcass of the old technology model for pop music?

**MN:** Well, let me put it this way, I'm no fan of the behemoth retailer Circuit City, but I certainly don't feel that entitles me to walk in and help myself to one of their DVD players.

And I'm one of those nervous types who worries that compression just might not be giving us every bit of the music. (It's because I'm a classical nut. What can I say?)

**LS:** Who will win the next presidential election? Who should win the next presidential election?

**MN:** I think it will be very close, but I'll say Bush. And if it isn't clear by now, I think Bush should win. Especially after hearing Howard Dean's infamous scream at the Iowa caucus. (Great, now almost half the people in the country hate me.)

**LS:** Do you, as a Minnesotan, now feel superior to those of us doomed to live in California due to the extreme ridiculousness of our governor?

**MN:** I'm so happy it happened, because it takes the heat off of us. At least your governor has never been photographed wearing woman-y sunglasses and a feather boa.

## **Cultural**

**LS:** What's your favorite movie pre-1970 and why?

**MN:** It's probably "Casablanca." I'd love to say it was some little known foreign film instead of this rather pedestrian answer, but there it is. Come on, it's just a beautiful film.

**LS:** Which side are you on in the nature vs. nurture debate? What makes some people grow up to be SUV-driving inconsiderate jackasses? What steps have you taken to insure this doesn't happen to your own children?

**MN:** Well, it's both nature and nurture. I can't believe that God would create Larry King all on His own.

And SUV-driving inconsiderate jackasses are somewhat tolerable until they get those phones in their hands. Well, phones and sandwiches. And domed drink cups.

**LS:** What happened to the Vikings this year? Are they on the road to becoming the Raiders, finding new and baroque ways to lose?

**MN:** I'm not a football fan so I'm ill-equipped to answer, but let me just say that there's a feeling around here that the Vikings will never win. Ever. Never again. No matter how much talent they have.

**GM:** Leaving aside that this interview is being conducted via email, do you like the internet or are you just tolerating it because it will not go away?

**MN:** It's both very good and very, very bad. The fact that creepy, evil people can share creepy, evil things with each other without ever having to walk out into the sunlight is somewhat disheartening. On the other hand, I can buy green coffee beans online!

**GM:** If you had to be stranded on a desert island with only the complete Beatles or the complete Stones to listen to, which one would you chose and why?

**MN:** Another window into my extreme plain-ness: I'd easily choose the Beatles. I'm not much of a Stones fan at all. (Although I have to say, I've been softening a little on them lately.)

**GM:** As a pianist, what era and composer of the repertoire do you enjoy playing the most?

**MN:** Beethoven. His later piano sonatas seem to have dropped out of heaven. When you look at the Hammerklavier and realize how far he brought composition, it's almost incomprehensible.

**LS:** How many books do you own?

**MN:** Well, my wife just cleared house on a whole load of paperbacks, so I would guess about 200 fewer than yesterday.

**GM:** Who are your favorite pianists and why is that? Would you please recommend some titles? I could use some new stuff to listen to and I don't get out much.

**MN:** Rudolph Firkusny for Dvorak, Richard Goode for Beethoven, Jorge Bolet for Liszt, Horowitz for almost anything, but especially the Russians, Alicia de Larrocha for Schumann.

Get de Larrocha's version of Schumann's "Carnaval" or Jorge Bolet plays Liszt (on London, I believe). Or if you want gorgeous chamber music, try Schubert's "Trout" Quintet (on Telarc, with John O'Connor on piano.) For whatever reason, I'm unmoved by Glenn Gould's playing, if that helps you to calibrate my tastes to yours.

### **Lightning Round**

Guinness or Glenmorangie?

**MN:** Guinness and Glenmorangie double-wood.

The Replacements or The Clash?

**MN:** The 'Mats, easily. Especially "Tim."

Hunter Thompson or Tom Wolfe?

**MN:** Tom Wolfe.

Bob and Ray or Jean Shepherd?

**MN:** Boy, that's tough, but Bob and Ray.

Marx Brothers or Monty Python?

**MN:** Another tough one, but I have to go with the Marx Bros.

Carter or Reagan?

**MN:** Easily Reagan.

**Extra bonus super-geek Tolkien question**

**LS:** Just what the hell does Celeborn mean at the end of Return of the King when he says to Aragorn, "May your doom be other than mine"? Consensus here is that it's something like "Be careful, boy, or you'll end up like me - Celeborn the Wise, and does anyone ask me for advice or listen to what I have to say? No, they just want to talk to my wife. Mr. Galadriel, that's what they call me in Lorien." But that could just be me.

**MN:** It's something all elf-y and abstruse. If you think about it too hard, your ears will begin to sharpen.

**GM:** ...?

**LS and GM:** Thank you, Mr. Nelson.

\*\*\*

