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Robin Lee Mozer

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What We Really Think When You Read the Awkward Sex Scene from Your New Novel Aloud

Abstract

You are reading tonight and we have come to listen.

We have left our kitchens with dishes crowding the sink, and our living rooms with half-done loads of laundry scattered on the floor to come here and listen to your New Novel, the one you've been working on since the last one, because you do not read often and we know you and we like you and we want to be supportive. We arrive promptly at 7:00, or maybe just ever so late, but it's widely understood that readings that are advertised for 7:00 will always start at 7:30, so at 7:30 we politely seat ourselves near the makeshift stage at the intimate wine bar, or the lectern in the library auditorium, or the music stand in the student recital hall -- close enough to seem interested, but not *too* close -- and you step up to your stage or your lectern or your music stand and you begin. You are reading for us who have come to listen, for us who may or may not have forgotten to feed the cat, and you seem to know that we are thinking of our cat and not your New Novel because suddenly you are reading about sex.

Keywords

awkward, juxtaposition, readings, sex



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October 21, 2011

What We Really Think When You Read the Awkward Sex Scene from Your New Novel Aloud

by Robin Lee Mozer

You are reading tonight and we have come to listen.

We have left our kitchens with dishes crowding the sink, and our living rooms with half-done loads of laundry scattered on the floor to come here and listen to your New Novel, the one you've been working on since the last one, because you do not read often and we know you and we like you and we want to be supportive. We arrive promptly at 7:00, or maybe just ever so late, but it's widely understood that readings that are advertised for 7:00 will always start at 7:30, so at 7:30 we politely seat ourselves near the makeshift stage at the intimate wine bar, or the lectern in the library auditorium, or the music stand in the student recital hall—close enough to seem interested, but not *too* close—and you step up to your stage or your lectern or your music stand and you begin. You are reading for we who have come to listen, for we who may or may not have forgotten to feed the cat, and you seem to know that we are thinking of our cat and not your New Novel because suddenly you are reading about sex.

Reading about the first time *after* sex.

Reading about how *beads of semen fell and shone like pearls on the black towel she had spread on the bed before she first spread her legs for his engorged member* and that's what you call it, there, in your prose, *engorged member*, as though somehow this makes it more literary and thus worthy of a public reading here at this local English department reading series.

We know about sex and public spaces and women. We have taken classes about porn in grad school—Women and the Media, Feminist Theory and the Media, Gender Studies and the Media—and felt very intellectual, sitting in the classroom with the audiovisual capability and the drop-down projector screen dissecting the cultural significance of *Deep Throat* or the cultural subversion of Annie Sprinkle's "Public Cervix Announcements" with the Tenured Professor who wrote her entire dissertation on porn and who dresses in short skirts and fishnets even in winter and who we sometimes struggle to take seriously even though she is a Known Name in the Field. And we have felt quite superior because we have *not* written our final research papers on obvious topics like what the hardcore porn industry has done to empower women, but have instead focused on erotica or representations of mothers having sex or the effect of sexual subcultures on modern films like *Secretary*, because we *could* have written our final papers on hardcore porn. We could have but we didn't and so we achieved some Small Victory by avoiding the obvious but now we are here, with you, and you are reading about sex like this at this small press poetry festival in this on-campus art museum gallery because you have never achieved a Small Victory over a Tenured Professor whose entire career is based on porn.

But you're only thinking of the Public.

You're only thinking that this may be your best work, your most controversial work, your most seminal work and yes it involves *pearls of semen* and *engorged members*, but we have left our dishes and cats and have come to hear you read and don't we deserve your best? Or if not your best, your most recent and recently you have been writing of sex, breaking it down into its many parts, carefully describing black towels, *faded and frayed*, and quivering penises, *engorged*, and vaginas like yawning mouths, only you call them *cunts* or *slits* or *her open wound* because all of that seems more literary and lately you have been listening to too much Ani DiFranco.

And you are so involved in your reading that you do not notice us as we shift in our seats, like moviegoers surprised by a suddenly graphic and abrupt sex scene—a scene that we have all heard about but did not believe would be as graphic or abrupt as that one reviewer said until we are watching it in the dark of the theatre and the actor's cock is just there—just *there*, standing eight feet tall in a close up so close we can count pores and we didn't know that penises even *had* pores and it is pink and hard and waving like some king's standard in the breeze of our collective gasps because we have come to this movie with *Our Mothers*. *Our Mothers!* *Our Mothers* who had heard that it was graphic and abrupt but who also heard from a friend of a friend who is a chaired professor in film studies that this movie was Significant. That this movie was Not-To-Be-Missed. Not even by *Mothers*. And suddenly we are watching the closest thing to porn that we will ever watch in the *Company of Our Mothers*. We squirm. We chuckle and the sound dies in our throats as we realize we should not be laughing. We try to look away but then we are looking at *Our Mothers* and so we look down at our laps where we twist our fingers together and cut off all the circulation in our left hands and even though we are Not Looking, we can still Hear Things. We hear moaning. We hear whining bedsprings. We hear rhythmic thumping and soft, wet noises that turn our stomachs. We hear, but we have paid \$30 for tickets and popcorn and cherry Coke so we can take *Our Mothers* to this movie that is Not-To-Be-Missed, not even by *Mothers*, and so we sit and twist and wait for *These Sounds* that we never, ever wanted to hear in the *Company of Our Mothers* to stop.

And this feeling—this seat-shifting, rising blend of just wishing it could all be over and dreaming up excuses never to speak to *Our Mothers* again, this feeling wherein the unspoken adult truth about *These Sounds* has lain dormant for years in a purposefully ignored place between us and *Our Mothers*—is the same feeling between us and *Our Students*. Between us and *Our Colleagues*. Between us and *Our Department Chairs*. And we are sitting here in this independent bookstore reading area in metal folding chairs surrounded by *Our Students*, *Our Colleagues*, *Our Department Chairs*, listening to you read about the way *the wasted condom slipped from his limp member*—and why is it always a *member*? As though a penis pays dues to belong to the male genitalia. Like joining the Y. Like pledging a fraternity. You are reading about slipping. You are cleverly eliding sibilant essences and talking in softened dental stops and somehow guttural noises about the after, about the *dripping, shimmering semen running down your*

leg, or your character's leg, but we all know that it was really your leg and that you thought about semen as something that shimmers like 80s eyeshadow or like those luminescent jellyfish falling away from large boats in waves of cascading neon, and you are reading this in public. You are reading this sex scene from your New Novel aloud and you are clever, you are creative, because this is art and your publicist says you have an uncanny gift for language and so you are sounding it out with Word Choice. Your Word Choice is sounding it out and we are listening to your Words, listening next to Our Students, Our Colleagues, and Our Department Chairs, for God's sake, who might as well be Our Mothers with their houses and their gardens and their glasses that slide perpetually down their noses as they look right through us when we stand inside their office doors presenting our funding requests, our sabbatical applications, our committee reports, and now These Sounds are there with us. Standing there with us. These Sounds that we never wanted to hear in the Company of Our Department Chairs or more importantly, more to the point, that they never wanted to hear in the company of us.

Whole relationships have been built on not acknowledging These Sounds.

Whole empires.

Whole military coups.

But here they sprawl, yawning open like the cunt you're reading about in this impressive university library foyer with the vaulted ceiling and the plush chairs someone's dragged from the reading room because the foyer is marbled and because a reading in the library foyer would be unexpected and would offer wonderful acoustics. Wonderful acoustics for your sibilant essses slipping *like spent members from latexssss*. And you are reading about it emphatically. You are *emphatically* reading about sex. You are reading about it with meaningful pauses. You are reading about it with that stilted inflection that must be a prerequisite for admittance into every MFA program, like a codeword or a secret handshake. You read it like:

After.

When he came into her.

Shaking.

After he fell onto his back.

Panting like-a-dog-like-a-tiger-like-a-wild-boar, his dark hair plastered and.

Slicked with too much.

Product.

Again.

After, with his penis.

There.

Limp and glistening in the moonlight.

Limp against his inner.

Right.

Thigh.

We are listening to you read this, *like* this—reading about sex *that* way—and in between not looking at Our Students, Our Colleagues, Our Department Chairs, and contemplating the pattern made by the legs of the stackable cushioned chairs on the conference hotel's carpeted ballroom floor, in between we are wondering about punctuation. We are trying to discern whether you've purposefully placed a period after every *penis* or if you have simply paused. If you are lingering there, on that image, for some greater reason, and if by lingering you realize that you are forcing us to linger with you in some memory that seemed poignant when you were 19 or when your character was 19, but you are not 19, and we are not 19, and we are held captive, here, listening to you read about sex from the pages of your New Novel and we still cannot remember if we forgot to feed the cat.

And the real problem—the real problem we have, the real thing we cannot shake as we sit here waiting for it all to end, wondering if we should get up to get another glass of pinot, wondering what lie we should tell when we walk over to congratulate you after the reading (And of course we will congratulate you. We have to congratulate you. We are people who attend readings and we know that congratulating you is simply what people who attend readings do)—the real problem skulks in the background, and in the darkness of its shadow these small, uncomfortable worries dwindle, consumed by the lurking thought that shades the edges of everything we do.

The real problem is, we are not having sex.

We are in relationships with people we met 8, 10, 12 years ago and we do not have children because we are Not the Kind of People Who Have Children—of *course* we are Not the Kind of People Who Have Children because the Kind of People Who Have Children do not attend public

readings by rising talents like you, they instead attend book clubs or 5th grade piano recitals—we are the Kind of People that, when asked whether or not we have children, say that we do not have children *yet* and then steer the conversation to their children because we know that the Kind of People Who Have Children will always talk about their children and while they talk about their children we will refill our plastic cups with that Yellow Tail that someone brought and we will go home Rather Drunk and Not Have Sex but instead pass out on our respective sides of the bed and one of us will snore and one of us will eventually go sleep on the couch and we will wake in the morning with headaches and stomachaches and wonder how in the world we ever did this in college. And somewhere along the way, we have acquired pets and we like to talk about our pets to other people with similar pets and we talk about our pets like they *are* children, or at least like they are Amusing Roommates—we say “Oh, listen to what Jerry did the other day” and to anyone who does not know us they think that Jerry is a person but really Jerry is a parrot—and we like for other people to be amused by our pets and we ourselves are amused by them and so instead of having sex we sit watching reruns of *Law and Order* and talking about our amusing pets until we are both so tired we go to bed again and really, sex would just be a problem because we have to get up in the morning and do Very Busy Things and we need a full night’s sleep.

But we are not sleeping.

We are lying awake, listening to each other’s Not Sleeping Sounds and thinking about how maybe we should be having sex—how maybe Other People with no children or maybe even Other People *with* children might be making all of Those Sounds that we refuse to acknowledge the existence of when in the presence of Our Mothers or Our Department Chairs—but we hesitate. We think of the effort. We consider the possibility of rejection. And so we sigh and we turn over and tonight when this happens, later, we will think of you and of this reading and it’s not like we don’t read about sex. Of course we read about sex. How stupid to stand there and think that we are judging you because we somehow do not read about sex. We read literary discussions and accounts of sex and they are deep and meaningful and we reflect thoughtfully on them for days, weeks, and you know this, you must know this, and perhaps it is for this reason that you think we will want to hear about what it felt like *to have his hands, his thick hands with sausage fingers tracing invisible lines on the skin beneath your underwear* but you are reading this aloud, here, in this third story bar with the open

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balcony above the family restaurant and in the background someone's child is screaming and the next time we're in bed Not Sleeping with our partner, our lover, our latest one-night stand, we will have no choice but to think of this, to think of these things juxtaposed against the smell of cheese sticks and the drone of that football game playing on the TVs below as you read them in that stilted voice: we think *engorged member*. We think *pearls*.

But the kind of sex you are reading about—*that* kind of sex—that raw, urgent, penetrating sex that sets every stringing nerve in every sinew of 19-year-old flesh to humming so that no one within a 50 mile radius could possibly think straight—that heady tonic of skin and teeth and nails against supple nipples or lips or Other Supple Things that we will not say because we do not say words like *scrotum* or *vulva* in public or polite company if we can help it except maybe if they were answers in some sort of trivia game, and then we might say them because we are competitive and can take anyone in a trivia game, but the kinds of trivia games we play in those sports bars or sometimes when we're flying Delta only ask questions like "Which long-time Red Sox Hall of Fame pitcher hails from a small town in Alaska?" and so we never have to say *scrotum* in polite company or public because the answer is *Kurt Schilling*—that kind of sex happened so long ago that when you bring it up here in this place, with so many of us squirming in varying degrees of plutonic monogamy, some part of us, some small part of each of us, wants to punch you.

Or hug you.

Or cry.

Or walk out.

Robin Lee Mozer loves the Red Sox, tiramisu, and the number 12. She hates LeSueur peas, motorcycles that sound like weed whackers, and men with insincere hair. She goes to Public Readings in Louisville, Kentucky, where she lives with her husband and daughter.



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