
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Everything is Lewd

Cynthia Ferrell · Tuesday, August 4th, 2020

Smut's on my mind. A chunk of that I blame on Covid-19's shelter-in-place. What on earth to do? Read *Love in the Time of Cholera*? Watch *Schitt's Creek*? Pull up a song by Tom Lehrer?

The latter, obviously.

A second slice of blame I tag to playwright Donald Freed. Saturdays I hang online with the PEN prize-winner's international writers group, and lately he's been helping two women tiptoe the minefield of sex scenes: what's literature, what's porn, what's boring. One woman Zooms in from Berkley, the other from Hollywood. Add writers from Italy, England, France – the meetup's a concerto of accents and time zones, and smut unites attention like the boom of a bass drum. Locking down sex scene structure is universally tricky, after all, given erotica's fuzzy boundaries.

"I know it when I see it," Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote in 1964's *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, and when Freed asks what the rest of us see, *Game of Thrones*' close-ups jump into my head – bare butts on the brain.

My mailbox, though, I blame most. Of standard size and bland shape, it stands on a 45-inch pole down at the curb, under a messy oak. Prone to ant invasions and spackled daily by crows, the white-painted receptacle with creaky door has held Victoria Secret catalogs (how would that dress look buttoned?), and GNC postcards of ripped abs and thumbs dragging waistbands to yes-I-wax levels.

But oh, the latest arrivals: The first, a pale envelope stuffed so fat the glue holding it shut cracks open with a tap. Lewdness degrading America arrives hand-delivered.

I can't help myself – I open the flap.

Inside, language geared to scare the bejesus out of me runs like flop sweat. The mailer begs me to arm myself now! to defeat before it's too late the gun grabbers! the wall haters! the marching army of immigrants shielded by traitors who did not vote for Mr. Trump.

It's professional fear-mongering and those who crafted the piece liked what they wrote. Other writers can tell. The hired guns had fun orchestrating words for maximum shock and the result is smutty to the root.

I mention the mailer to Freed. A longtime civil rights activist, he nods, the equivalent of "What'd

you expect?”

SMUT – From the German smutten: debase, defile

Freed’s an intellectual Forrest Gump, crisscrossing history and landing in the damnedest places at their damnedest times. 2003 I met him at the University of Southern California’s Professional Writing Program. Shelley Berman, James Ragan, Gina Nahai, Syd Field, Gay Talese – the instructional roster sparkled and hair-on-fire student talent roiled.

For Freed, though, those days must have bored him to the marrow. This was after J. Edgar Hoover slapped him onto Nixon’s enemies list. After Freed decamped from Jonestown a heartbeat ahead of the massacre. After his investigative team unmasked Patty Hearst kidnapper “Cinque” as a police double agent. After his political plays and films starred Jack Lemon, Julie Harris, Edward Asner, Faye Dunaway; after Robert Altman and Harold Pinter directed.

Past all this, he asked for play scripts, saying only, “Who’s working?” People who weren’t, he had no interest in. He said nurturing creativity pays a “debt of honor” and that payback can be ferocious: Words are too powerful to be random. Use conveys choice. Disagree and duck – Freed’s seen too much of the world.

Now for envelope number two. A Stay Well card? or – a June 12, 2020 Daniel Horowitz op ed printed from The Blaze, titled The New Panic Lie: Increased coronavirus hospitalizations and cases across the southwest.

The health “experts” and the media propagating viral panic porn think people like us don’t understand arithmetic. They think they can manipulate headline stories...

Horowitz and I both sing Lehrer. Unfortunately, I’m in Flagstaff, Arizona. The Navajo Reservation, twenty miles east and big as West Virginia, boasts four hospitals. Grocery stores there run so scarce the U.S. Department of Agriculture classifies all the Navajo Nation a food desert. Shelter-in-place means starve, so infections clock seven times above Arizona’s. The infected stagger to the border towns in – yes – panic.

Many writers skip Freed-style boots-on-the-ground research, time being money. And some citizens cheer Horowitz on: Blaze readers, roll the dice on lethal pneumonia. Take off your masks, and take hydroxychloroquine while you’re at it. Two, three, five doses a day. Just sign this binding “Do not transport, do not treat.”

Some communications must trigger Freed’s Jonestown nightmares. This one didn’t come via mailbox, but who could have missed it? Such interesting, intentional words:

President Trump Re. COVID-19, April 23, 2020

And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in one minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning...

Trump’s not Jim Jones. He’s not commanding followers to ingest poison – that would decimate his electoral votes. He’s posing, cheerleader and sage. Just weeks prior, he’d declared gut instinct beat the World Health Organization’s math on global fatality rates.

“I think the 3.4 percent is really a false number,” he told Sean Hannity March 4, 2020. “Now, this

is just my hunch...Personally, I would say, the number is way under 1 percent.”

Rates that month hovered at 7 percent, but breezy confidence charms his base.

Red hat, blue hat – Trump could play to any gallery. He’s good at it. He knows that moral communication is entertaining as dishwater. And if things massively go to hell, as on May 25 with a knee on George Floyd’s neck, there’s always the bad ass tact.

President Trump Re. Police Brutality Protesters at White House, May 29, 2020

They would have been greeted with the most vicious dogs, and most ominous weapons, I have ever seen.

LEWD – From Middle English, belonging to the common people, vulgar, and later, worthless, vile, evil

The President is not imbecilic. He sells word porn of virility, domination, conquest, and freedom. Rich-guy charisma and menacing masculinity titillates, and his seduced direct-mail scribes feel no debt of honor.

OBSCENE – From the Latin obscenus: offensive to morality or decency, depraved; earlier boding ill, of unknown origin

And now, shabby mailbox, you’re usurped. A different white container tops my list of porn-catching hollows. It swings, jewel-like between Ivanka Trump’s fingers as she marches to St. John’s Church between riot officers. Cut from buttery leather, with fourteen decorative seams and galvanized metal details, the handbag’s a steal from Max Mara at \$1540, with or without scent of flash grenades.

Nobody quotes the purse’s Bible, stories of torture and erotica. No, the depravity in the bag is the manicured hand that stows the book and hauls it out as prop, knowing violence cleared the path to a photo op.

President Trump Re. June 2, 2020 Chemical-Spray Enabled Publicity Shoot
I think it was a beautiful picture.

That choice bodes ill.

“When correctly viewed, everything is lewd,” goes Lehrer’s song, so I’ll lean into my computer screen Saturday. It’s good to be reminded that smut is catching. A couple of de-fuzzed lines are in order.

Photo by Tito Texidor III on Unsplash

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