

Tucson Festival of Books 2010

Taxing the Imagination:

Creating Characters of Persuasions Other than Your Own

by Fenton Johnson

In a novel I recently completed a Trappist monk, without understanding what is happening to him, falls in love with a renegade Vietnam vet marijuana grower. (You have to read the book.) When the monk finds out the grower is a regular churchgoer he expresses surprise, to which the grower responds by saying, "I always like it when people trip themselves up. They think they got somebody pegged and they aint got a clue."

In the course of writing that novel I decided I needed to do some research into dressing in drag (you have to read the book). What did I know about drag? having never been more than a bemused spectator. So I flew my first cousin once removed to San Francisco to make me up in drag for Halloween.

Now, my first cousin once removed is a Memphis drag queen -- he prefers the term "gender illusionist" -- who moonlights doing makeup on the corpses in his father's funeral home in Dyersburg, Tennessee. (File under: "Only in the South.") As a makeup artist and gender illusionist, he taught me more about writing fiction than I ever learned in graduate school. He told me that his goal in life was "to occupy as seamlessly as possible the space between male and female." I asked him if he'd considered a sex-change operation. "I've thought about that a lot," he said. "But if I became a woman then I'd just be a woman, and where's the theater in that?" While he was making me up I said, "Before we go out you'll have to show me how to act." With not so much as a

tremble of the eyeliner pencil he said, "If you don't know how to act, I will have failed."

And he was right: He created a character into which I had no choice but to step --

Dolores Heitz, if you must know, and if you're familiar with the hills of San Francisco you'll get the joke.

My fictional marijuana grower and my real-life first cousin once-removed are philosophers, each in his different way acting out a philosophy I've long held close to heart. Life is a drag, as surely most of us sooner or later figure out. It's not a question of whether to go out in drag but which drag you choose.

The fiction writer has all the pleasure and responsibilities of the stay-at-home drag queen -- or gender illusionist, to use the term preferred by my first-cousin-once-removed -- putting on one character or another as the moment demands. Nothing could be more restrictive or just plain killjoy than to place off-limits some ensembles of the infinite closets of the heart. A quite famous and politically correct writer once told me that she allowed herself to people her books with characters from all races and genders but that she would only write from the points of view that she had personally experienced. In her case, that meant writing from the point of view of straight women. I was recently pleased, then, to read her latest book and see that she'd taken up writing from the point of view of a gay man. I was not at all surprised by her choice. Borders and boundaries are always the most interesting places, and people with unconventional gender identities occupy the borders -- as my philosophizing first cousin would have it, "the space between male and female."

From the first I have found writing from the point of view of women to be entirely organic, possibly because, youngest of nine children and four brothers, I was largely

raised by my four sisters. My first published short story was from the point of view of a woman -- to embellish the point, a woman who is on her way to transgression, a Kentuckian beginning an affair with a man from "across the river," from the northern Yankee lands.

Since then I have written from the points of view of straight men and straight women, a woman from Bengal transplanted to the U.S., a renegade marijuana grower. It's one of the comforting illusions of our age that writing from a point of view of someone of another gender or race is an impossible undertaking. In fact I find it harder to write from the point of view of the law, i.e., those who don't find pleasure in transgression, who prefer the letter of the law over its spirit. I find it harder to write from the point of view of someone born to wealth and power. I find it harder to write from the point of view of someone who doesn't revel in the created universe independent of the shaping hands of humans. I find it harder to write from the point of view of someone who believes that life is supposed to make sense -- that the desire can be categorized and weighed and calibrated. I found it hardest of all to write from the point of view of an HIV-positive man at a time when being HIV-positive was a sentence to an ugly and agonized death. The greatest gap in the human condition, it struck me then and I still feel now, is not between nations or genders or races or sexualities but between the healthy and the sick.

To this end I recommend Richard Howard's recently-published translation of Guy de Maupassant's last novel *Alien Hearts*, not because the arabesques of point of view are fantastically manipulated (though they are) but because the impassioned tone of the novel speaks to me of a man who was writing under the gun. Maupassant had syphilis and had

watched his brother die in an agony of insanity. More than once he tried to kill himself so as to avoid his brother's fate. Shortly after finishing *Alien Hearts* he was committed to an asylum where he died eighteen months later. It is well for men to remind ourselves that sex has always been dangerous, that there has never been such a thing as "safe sex," as women have always known.

The vice president for marketing at a major New York house told me some years back that no novel written from the point of view of a gay character, male or female, had sold more than ten thousand copies in hardcover. I found that fact worth pondering, since I take as a truism comedienne Franny Leibowitz's famous comment that if you removed Jews and gays and minorities from American culture all you'd have left is "Let's Make a Deal." Why is it that white, heterosexual, mainstream readers have taken on the cultures of African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, but so steadfastly resist reading books by and about gay culture?

I think it has to do with sex, a topic which renders the American soul as uncomfortable now as in the days of Cotton Mather. Let me acknowledge up front that a generation of lesbian and (especially) gay writers didn't help this situation. In our efforts to shake ourselves free of hundreds of years of oppression, we conveyed the notion that gay culture was only or primarily about sex, a misperception that tight-assed fundamentalists were only too happy to reinforce. In fact gay and lesbian culture is about theater -- the theater of life and, as its subset and portable stage, the theater of fiction, which brings us to my reasons for this particular riff on writing.

And so maybe the resistance of mainstream readers to what I'll call a queer sensibility has to do with issues of certainty. America is a nation born of empiricists and we like our

facts straight, so to speak. Facing what we saw as wilderness, we saw the imposition of order on chaos as our God-given calling, and we have never liked much dwelling in the space between anything, most particularly not the space between male and female. For if we cannot be certain of this basic “fact” -- the “fact” of gender -- what lesson does that teach about the rest of our carefully constructed illusions?

In writing this I realize that the law itself is a kind of drag, the imposition of a tailored suit over the crazy, tumbling, free-for-all chaos of life -- and I should make clear that by “the law” I mean not only that body of precedent and power embodied in statute but the laws formulated by Aristotle and Newton and Darwin and Einstein and Richard Dawkins. “For those of us who believe in physics,” Einstein wrote, “this distinction between past, present, and future is an illusion, however tenacious.” It’s the fiction writer’s job to trouble that tenacity, to enable the reader, through this tenderest of devices, to penetrate the veil of what the Hindus call *maya* and see through to the truth of matter, which is the fundamental unity and fellowship of all creation.

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